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## IMPACT OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT ON ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT IN NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING IN ZIMBABWE

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**Abstract:** *This paper is a presentation of findings of a research carried out to explore the impact of employee engagement on organisational commitment among workers at national higher education institutes (HEI) in Zimbabwe. The research methodology employed an explanatory-descriptive survey design. The respondents were drawn from a stratified random sample of 142 employees from three universities. Employee engagement was measured using the Gallup Worker Audit (GWA) while organisational commitment was measured using the Organisational Commitment Questionnaire. Data were analysed statistically and correlations made between employee engagement and organisational commitment. Results of the study revealed that only 33.8% of the employees were actively engaged while the remaining 66.2 % showed low levels of engagement. The findings also indicated that there is a positive correlation ( $r = .607$ ,  $p < .05$ ) between employee engagement and organisational commitment.*

**Key words:** *Employee engagement, organizational commitment, impact, higher education*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper presents findings of a research that was carried out to investigate the impact of employee engagement on organisational commitment in national institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. The study is carried out against a backdrop of dwindling financial resources and economic hardships and brain drain. The results show that there is a direct correlation between employee engagement and organizational commitment and that employee engagement at state universities in Zimbabwe is low.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

It is commonly acknowledged that human resources are the most important asset in any organization. In a turbulent economic environment characterised by high staff turnover and brain drain human resources practitioners' major challenge is to find ways of attracting and retaining creative and dedicated staff committed to the organization and to determine which working conditions stimulate employees to give their best, to be engaged, to go beyond what is expected and persist in the face of difficulties. In modern organizations employees are expected to be proactive and show initiative, collaborate smoothly with others and be committed to high quality performance standards and to be responsible for their own professional development (Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008). Organizations need employees who feel energetic and dedicated, and who are absorbed by their work. In other words, organizations need engaged workers.

In Zimbabwe, however Nguwi (2012) states that the importance of employee engagement is amplified in the Zimbabwean context because of increased competition, dwindling profit margins and shrinking demand. A national survey of 5222 employees carried out by an industrial psychologist in Zimbabwe showed that 40.79 % of the employees are aligned sceptics (Nguwi, 2012). The study defined aligned sceptics as employees that know exactly what needs to be done for organizational success, but are reluctant to push the initiative to accomplish these goals.

According to Ortiz, Cernaz, Lau and Qin (2013) it is imperative to nurture the concept of employee engagement because disengagement, or alienation, erodes enthusiasm and commitment of employees to the organization. As a result of low engagement levels the survey also showed that employees were no longer committed to the companies they were currently working for. Fifty two (52.55) % of the respondents surveyed indicated that they



were actively looking for employment elsewhere and 45.75 % said that they would not refer their close associates and relations to their current employers. This means that approximately half of the employees surveyed were not committed to the organizations which they worked for. Schroeder- Saulnier (2010) makes reference to a research they did in North America which showed that 60% of employees had planned to pursue new job opportunities if the economy improved in 2010. This is analogous to the situation of the Zimbabwean HEIs in the sense that employees are disengaged and they are only staying because there is uncertainty of alternative employment elsewhere. This warrants one to say that affective and normative commitment has eroded in the organization.

### **HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (HEIS) IN ZIMBABWE**

Higher education sector in Zimbabwe has undergone massive expansion since 1980 (Gurira 2011) The number of universities increased from one public university at independence to 18 universities and student enrolment rose from around 3000 at independence to over 50 000 in 2013 (ZIMCHE 2013). The increased enrolments have a direct bearing on the quality of education. A big challenge for HEIs in Zimbabwe is that of providing quality education in the context of increased student numbers against a backdrop of limited and dwindling funding from government. Under the given circumstances employee engagement becomes a major challenge. Despite the fact that managers or organizations realize the importance of engaged employees there is no evidence that it is receiving due attention, which explains why the subject matter is still rather vague especially in the Zimbabwean context.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The theory of employee engagement was first developed by Kahn (1990) who described engaged employees as workers that are fully emotionally, cognitively and physically connected with their work roles. (Bakker, 2011) echoes this definition when he says that engagement refers to focused energy that is fixed toward organizational goals.

Although, some employee turnover is regarded as normal it is however noted that if an organization truly engages its workforce, the chances of sudden unexpected loss of motivated, experienced and skilled quality workforce are minimised (Kahn 1990; Rich et al., 2010; Christian et al., 2011). People who have a high degree of engagement personally identify themselves with their job and work is a source of motivation to them. They are inclined to work hard and more productively than others and are more likely to produce



what their customers and organization wants. This definition also echoes that of Little and Little (2006 cited in Armstrong, 2012) who define employee engagement as the employee's eagerness and proficiency to help the company succeed, which is witnessed through employee's discretionary effort on a sustainable basis.

In addition 'employee engagement' is a relatively new term in Human Resources literature. The subject rose to prominence in 2000 onwards hence most organizations are not aware of this new phenomenon. Worldwide surveys done in different countries have proven that employee engagement is amongst the top five factors most challenging for management (Bates, 2004; Robinson et al., 2004). Research indicates that studies are there which show that low EE does not only impact on performance but also increases employee turnover, reduces customer service gratification and raises absenteeism rate (Cataldo, 2011). Ram and Prabhakar (2011) states that EE in recent years has become the most discussed topic in the popular business press and among business consultant firms. It can however be noted that employee engagement is an under-researched subject in academic literature in Zimbabwe.

With growing opportunities abroad and greater flow of information through the internet, employees today want to be in the best of workplaces, handling the best responsibilities for which they are suited and enjoying greater autonomy. In support of this opinion, Hewitt (2013) postulated that the ability of companies to find, understand, and manage talent hinges upon getting a powerful, differentiated and engaging employment contract.

The global recession has taken its toll on employees as pay freezes, benefit cuts, and layoffs permeate the workforce, making it more difficult to maintain high levels of engagement (Hewitt, 2012). Against this backdrop, it is more important than ever before for businesses to develop and maintain a highly engaged labour force.

Failure to effectively engage employees can result in wasted resources, suboptimal organizational performance, high labour turnover and deteriorating employee morale. On the other hand, successfully engaging and committing employees can result in higher levels of organizational performance as well as higher levels of job satisfaction, both of which are much needed in today's environment (Mangundjaya, 2012).

Siddhanta et al. (2010) state that a well-functioning organization results from employees that are healthy, motivated and committed, that is employees that are engaged.



Engagement occurs when employees are tied and committed to their job that is when they are interested indeed about their daily occupational activities and it encompasses loyalty, pride and faith in the organization a preparedness to publicly support the organization and above all a marked feeling of personal responsibility.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

National institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe have shown signs of disengagement among them high labour turn over, low staff morale, social loafing and lack of innovation and initiatives among employees.

The national HEIs have not been operating at full capacity for years, depriving millions of students of their right to quality education. The Parliamentary Committee on Education reported in 2012 that universities countrywide were suffering a severe shortage of both academic and non-academic staff as a result of the brain drain and science departments have been the most heavily affected such that some programmes are no longer on offer.

Social loafing is shown by analysing the network traffic log of most HEIs' networks. Many employees have been recorded to have visited and spent most of their time on social websites such as Face book during working hours.

Through observations in national HEIs, regular public domain memos are always circulated reminding the employees to be early for work because most of them are always late for work and they leave the workplace earlier than the stipulated time. Recently in February 2014 a public administrative circular has been sent by the Registrar's office in one of the institutions cautioning University employees to always dress formally during working days. Under normal circumstances, how can such a reminder are made to employees who belong to such an important and crucial institution with high minded staff members in administration? Low staff morale has resulted in customer care being undermined to the extent that clients complain of the way they are treated by HEI employees in cases of for example poor phone etiquette. The above mentioned are indicative of a high level of disengagement among HEIs employees. There is a lack of innovation and initiative which could be attributed to under-investment and detachment of employees from their work roles.



## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study sought to establish whether there is a correlation between employee engagement of workers and organizational commitment at national institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

A self-administered structured questionnaire was designed to measure employee engagement and organizational commitment and the relationship between the two. Employee engagement was measured using the Gallup Worker Audit focusing on 12 questions (Q12). The reliability and validity of using this instrument stems from the fact that the Q12 provides a substantial benchmark of employee engagement, making it the most widely used engagement instrument to measure employee engagement (Harter et al 2009). The respondents were drawn from a stratified random sample of 142 employees from three state universities in Zimbabwe.

The following variables were used to measure levels employee engagement:

1. the extent to which employee's needs are met;
2. the extent to which employee opinions count in the organization
3. employee understanding of what is expected of them by the organization
4. employee fit to the organization and
5. employee opportunity for self-development

Participants rated their levels of employee engagement using these variables on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

Organisational commitment was measured using the Organisational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) originally developed by Allen and Meyer (1990). Questions measuring levels of organizational commitment were grouped under affective, continuance and normative commitment questions. Participants rated their levels of commitment on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

A pilot study was first conducted to test the instrument for internal consistency.

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21 for Windows was used to analyse the data.

Permission to carry out the study was sought from the responsible authorities in all the three universities. The questionnaire was self-administered. Active consent was sought from



the participants at the time of survey administration and they were informed that they have a right not to participate in the study.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

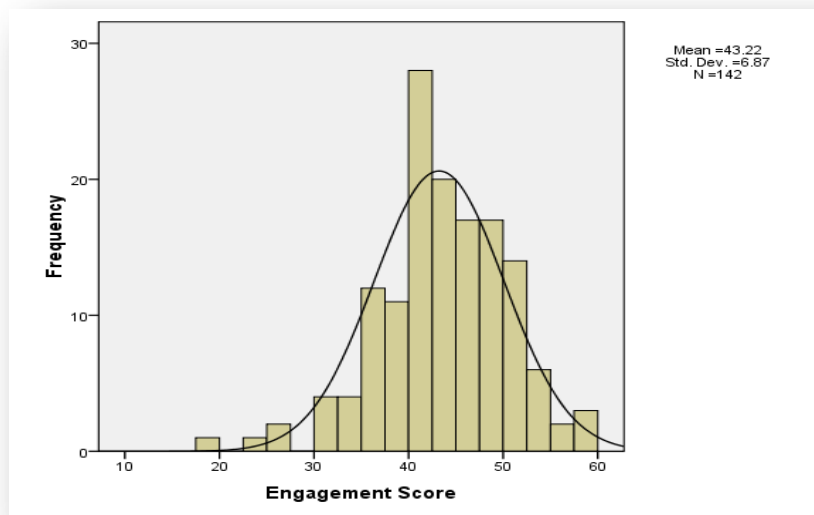
What follows is a discussion of findings on the relationship between engagement and organizational employee engagement.

### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND ORGANISATIONAL COMMITMENT

To assess whether there is a relationship between employee engagement and organizational commitment, the Pearson product-moment correlation was run on the data. Figure 1 shows the normal probability plot.

The normal probability plot indicates that the distribution of employee engagement score is relatively normal which does not violate key assumption for correlation analysis.

#### Normality



**Figure 1: Normal probability Plot**

Figure 2 depicts heteroscedasticity. The scatter plot indicates that the pairs of readings are scattered randomly on the scatter-gram, but do form a consistent pattern with very few outliers. This does not violate the assumptions of correlation analysis.



Table 1 reflects descriptive. The mean engagement score was 43.22 with a standard deviation of 6.870 while the mean commitment score was 81.77 with as standard deviation of 11.906.

### Heteroscedasticity

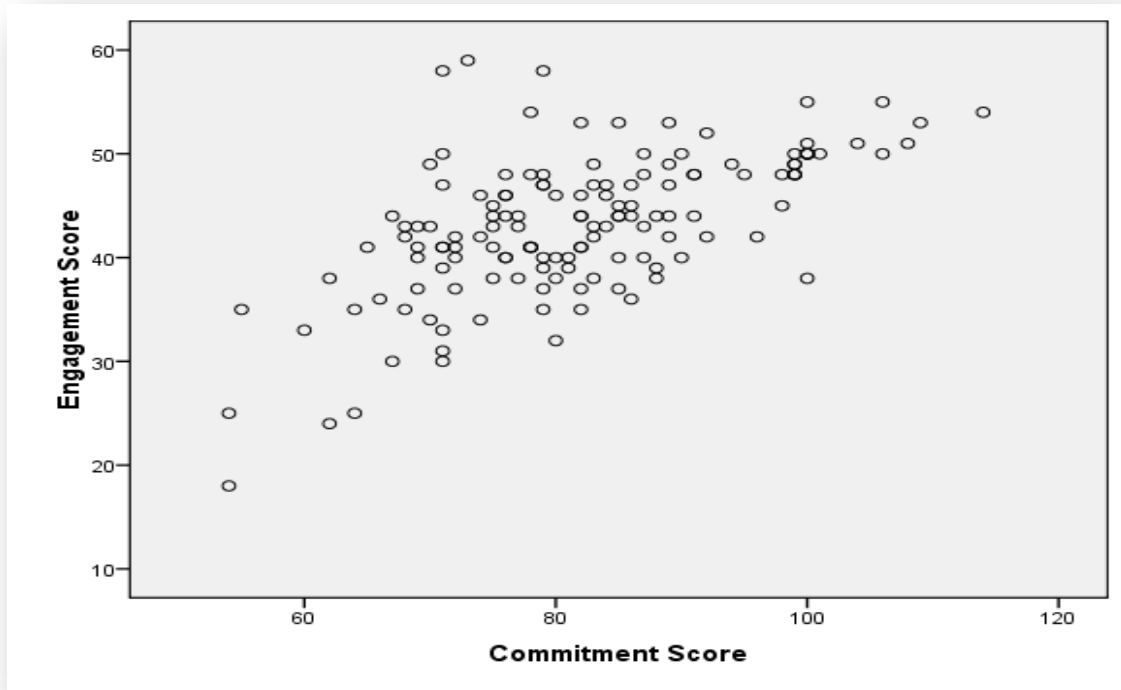


Figure 2: Scatter Plot

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Descriptives

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Engagement Score	43.22	6.870	142
Commitment Score	81.77	11.906	142

### Correlation Results

Table 2: Correlations

		Engagement Score	Commitment Score
Engagement Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.607**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	142	142





Commitment Score	Pearson Correlation	.607**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	142	142

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The relationship between employee engagement and organizational commitment was investigated with Pearson’s product moment correlation coefficient. There were no violations of normality or heteroscedasticity in the analysed data. The two sets of score correlated moderately and positively  $r = .607$ ,  $p < .05$ . The correlation coefficient itself is a measure of effect size. According to Cohen (1988), an effect size of .5 is large. Therefore there is a significant positive relationship between employee engagement and organizational commitment. Thus employees with high engagement scores tend to have high levels of organizational commitment (and the converse is equally true).

### Reliability Analysis

To measure the reliability of the engagement scale used for the study, a reliability analysis test was run giving a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.744. Field (2005) states that the generally accepted range of the Cronbach’s alpha measure is 0.7 to 0.8. Values substantially lower indicate an unreliable scale. The alpha level of 0.744 for this research is therefore worthwhile. All items of the engagement scale were included because they provided meaningful data to this research.

Table 3: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.744	12

### CONCLUSIONS FROM THE STUDY

The following conclusions on employee engagement at national HEIs were made from the study.

- Findings indicated that the levels of employee engagement among national HEI employees are low.
- Regular performance feedback was the strongest employee engagement driver followed by recognition and praise, training and development opportunities, Co-workers, work material, sense of accomplishment, clarity of job expectations,



employee perceptions of job importance, opportunities to excel, encouragement, immediate supervisor support, and having a best friend at work.

- Job posting proved to have no association with the levels of employee engagement.
- Engagement is positively related to organizational commitment.

#### Relationship between employee engagement and organisational commitment

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the study As regards employee engagement and organizational commitment.

- The results indicate that there is a significant positive relationship between employee engagement and organisational commitment. This means that employees with high engagement scores tend to have high levels of organisational commitment (and the converse is equally true). Employees who are actively engaged in their organisations may have a feeling of obligation to respond and repay the organisation in some form. One way for the employees to repay their organisation is to increase commitment to the organisation according to Agyemang and Ofei (2013). Hence an employee with high level of engagement is likely to be committed to the organisation that provides him/her with necessary resources to complete tasks. This gives evidence enough that employee engagement is an antecedent to organisational commitment. This finding is consistent with other studies (Swarnalatha and Prasanna, 2013, and Geldenhuys et al., 2014).

#### **Employee engagement versus Normative Commitment**

Findings from this study indicate the following:

- The levels of engagement in national HEI are at critically low. The results suggest that there is a positive correlation between engagement and normative commitment. This implies that the levels of normative commitment are also low. Therefore the findings suggest that lack of employee engagement of employees in the national HEIs has impacted on the sense of loyalty and obligation that employees feel towards the organisation. According to Meyer and Allen (1997) normative commitment is a state where employees are obligated to stay because they feel that they owe the organization. It can be concluded that national HEIs are doing little to fulfil the expectations of employees in terms of both monetary and monetary rewards thereby eroding their sense of loyalty and obligation to stay with the



organizations. A fully engaged employee is intellectually and emotionally bound with the organisation, gives hundred percent efforts, feels passionate about its goals and is committed to live by its values.

### **Employee engagement versus Continuance commitment**

The following conclusions are made from the study:

- The outcomes of the research indicated that the levels of engagement are low. This therefore implies that the levels of continuance commitment are also low given that it is a positive correlation. However employees stay on in the organization to which they are not committed because they are not ready to lose the accumulated side benefits such as pension, pay, seniority benefits and social networks that they would have acquired (Allen and Meyer (1993).
- Studies by Hewitt (2013) indicated that pay has become an influential factor in determining engagement. However, because senior management is reluctant to provide substantial compensation packages employees have no feelings to continue their employment with their organization. This explains why the tertiary education sector has since 2007 been experiencing high levels of staff turnover which has resulted in some programmes especially at post-graduate level being discontinued (ZIMCHE, 2013).

### **Employee engagement versus Affective commitment**

Affective commitment is a component that is concerned with the manner employees are emotionally attached to the organization. The following conclusions are made from the study:

- Low engagement levels among HEIs indicate that employees' affective commitment has also reached low levels. According to Armstrong (2012) one of the basic tenets of employee engagement is employee voice. Employees feel valued when they are able to make contributions to things that are beneficial to the organization. Ironically national HEIs have low levels of affective commitment yet by nature university employees are expected to bring meaningful contributions and new inventions to the organization. This has contributed to the low levels of affective engagement. As a result this has affected employee's emotional attachment to their organizations. This



implies that national HEIs consists of employees that no longer care about the well-being of the organization.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study sought to assess the levels of engagement and its impact on organizational commitment. The results indicate that the levels of engagement are low among employees in national HEIs are low. It was also observed that there is a positive relationship between employee engagement and organizational commitment. Organizational commitment can be improved if organizations become creative about identifying which drivers of employee engagement, not necessarily monetary, are possible within the Zimbabwean economic context and capitalize on those.

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