'An Investigation into the Key Drivers of Employee Engagement among Trainee Accountants in an Accountancy Firm in Ireland'

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the area of employee engagement and determine if the key drivers in the literature have any relevance among trainee accountants. After review of the literature 7 key drivers of engagement were identified, these include: relationship with leaders, work-life balance, training and career development, compensation, work environment, relationship with co-workers, and organisational policies and procedures.

The research study adopted a qualitative research method and conducted 9 semi structured in-depth interviews to gain a deep understanding of the topic. Out of the 9 participants, 7 identified themselves as engaged and 2 as disengaged. The research method adopted and the small sample of trainees presented limitations that will be discussed in the study. Analysis of the findings showed a direct correlation between the key drivers in the literature and the drivers the participants felt impacted on their engagement.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter will introduce the reader to the research and the background and justification for the research. This chapter will additionally outline the aims and objectives for the study and the significance of the research. It will then give the reader an overview and structure of the research.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the drivers of employee engagement among trainees within accounting firms in Ireland. While there has been plenty of research on Employee Engagement and its drivers there has been very little into the specific role of trainees in large corporations, specifically accounting firms.

Employee engagement sounds great in theory but unless an organisation can actually define it and measure it, they cannot possibly improve it, let alone know whether their efforts to improve engagement are actually working. The purpose of this research is to gain a greater insight into what drives engagement among trainee accountants and make recommendations on how they can improve engagement.

1.1 Background and Context

The company was chosen by the researcher due to a personal connection to the organisation and a keen interest in the engagement levels of trainees. The researcher has a number of friends and acquaintances working as trainees in the industry and they spoke about being over worked, poor work life balance, high stress levels and low recognition for their work. The organisation also appeared on the Great places to work list a number of years ago and hasn't made the list since. The researcher felt it was the correct time to investigate if there was any connection to the drivers among trainees in this organisation compared to those found in the literature.

1.2 Research Rationale and Justification

The researcher felt that investigating the key drivers of employee engagement among trainees in this private sector company was worth researching as they hadn't come across anything in the literature specific to research on a large group of trainees. The researcher also felt that the accuracy of findings would be quite high given for a lot of the trainees this was their first professional job and they would have no other companies to compare their experience to. The researcher felt when answering the

questions the participants would be drawing from very recent experiences and as such their answers would be more accurate.

1.3 Research Aim

The primary aim of this research was to investigate the key drivers of employee engagement among trainee accountants in a top accountancy firm in Ireland. The researcher is keen to see if the most common drivers found in the literature have relevance in this company. The researchers aim is to also investigate if the trainee accounts feel there are other engagement drivers that they feel impact on their own personal engagement in the company.

1.4 Research Objectives

The researcher aimed to investigate the theory with the following objectives:

- Objective 1: To investigate the various theories, definitions & models of employee engagement.
- Objective 2: To determine the most common key drivers of employee engagement in the recent literature.
- Objective 3: To determine if those drivers impact on the engagement levels of the selected sample.
- Objective 4: To determine if there are any additional drivers impacting employees that was not found in the literature.

1.5 Significance of the Research

The researcher sought that this research would add value to the body of knowledge currently available on employee engagement and the gap in the literature would be filled.

1.6 Overview and structure of the research project

1.6.1 Chapter 1 - Introduction

This chapter consists of a brief introduction into the chosen topic of research. Gaps in the literature are briefly identified as justification for the chosen topic. This chapter will also outline the over all aim of the study.

1.6.2 Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter provides a thorough insight into the current literature surrounding the research topic. As the research is based on an investigation into the drivers of employee engagement, all areas and models of employee engagement will be addressed. It will include varying definitions and models of employee engagement, the concepts of disengagement and burnout, the most common drivers of engagement, the consequences an engaged workforce can have on organisations, and a look at current levels of engagement globally and in Ireland.

1.6.3 Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter will provide a comprehensive insight into the researchers aims and objectives for the research study and all methods considered and chosen for the collection of the primary research. The chapter will also outline details on the chosen sample, and how the primary research was conducted. Ethical considerations, the chosen method of data analysis, and research limitations will also be outlined.

1.6.4 Chapter 4 - Findings

This chapter will present all findings from the primary research. The findings will be based on thematic analysis that was used to identify themes and significant points, which are relevant to the overall research objective.

1.6.5 Chapter 5 – Discussion

The chapter will consist of an in-depth comparison between the findings in chapter 4 to the research outlined in the existing literature.

1.6.6 Chapter 6 - Conclusion and Recommendations

The final chapter will conclude on what was discovered from the research and establish whether the aims and objectives of the study were achieved. Recommendations will also be made for improvements the organisations can make and for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this section is to outline the most up to date literature on the phenomenon that is employee engagement and identify where gaps lie in the literature and surrounding research. The researcher will outline the varying definitions of employee engagement and disengagement. The factors influencing engagement will then be discussed followed by the consequences of having an engaged workforce. The author will then outline the current state of employee engagement globally and on an Irish scale.

2.1 Opening remarks on Employee Engagement

More than ever before organisations are seeing that it is their employees that make the critical difference when it comes to organisational performance, competiveness, innovation and ultimately the success of the business. Modern organisations are starting to focus more on the development of their human capital and the many advantages an engaged workforce can add to the business rather, than focusing on the more traditional structures like management control and economic principles (Bakker and Schaufeli 2008). Organisations expect their employees to show initiative and be proactive, to be committed to a high quality of performance, cooperate efficiently with their colleagues and take responsibility for their own professional development. These employees need to be enthusiastic and energetic, dedicated to the organisation and absorbed by their work. In other words, these organisations need engaged workers.

2.2 Definitions of employment engagement

Employee Engagement has become a widely recognised and popular term in recent years. Although a prevalent and widely used term there is surprisingly little academic and empirical research done on the topic (Robinson et al., 2004). As a result Saks (2006) believes the term has the appearance of being 'faddish', or an existing concept put forward as though it were a new idea. According to Robinson et al (2004), engagement has clear overlaps with the concepts of commitment and organisational behaviour, but there are also differences.

Credit for inventing the term 'employee engagement' is often accredited to the American Physcologist W.A. Kahn (1990, p.694) who defines personal engagement

as, 'the harnessing of organisation members selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances.' Emotional engagement refers to a situation in employees have developed strong emotional ties to their managers, they feel that their opinions are important and that their manager have an interest in their development (Torrington, Hall, Taylor and Atkinson, 2014). Cognitive engagement is a situation in which employees understand what is expected of them, they understand their purpose and mission and are given the opportunity to excel and grow in their role, they are also given information on how to improve their progress in the organisation (Torrington et al, 2014). The physical aspect of employee engagement refers to the physical energy used by workers to accomplish their roles. Therefore according to Kahn (1990) engagement means to be both physically and psychologically present when performing an organisational role.

Bakker, Demerouti and Brummelhuis (2012) defines work engagement as 'a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption.' Vigour refers to high levels of energy while working. Dedication refers to being involved in ones own work and have a sense of significance, challenge, and enthusiasm. Absorption refers to being fully concentrated and happily and willingly engrossed in ones work.

'Engagement is a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context, and works with colleagues to improve performance with the job for the benefit of the organisation. The organisation must work to nurture, maintain, and grow engagement, which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee.' (Robinson et al, 2004, p.9) They believe that engagement overlaps with organisational citizenship behaviour and commitment, but is one step up from commitment. This is one of the most important of the definitions as it outlines that, although it is the employee that is capable of being engaged, it is also the responsibility of the organisation to provide the employee with the ability to become engaged. It is a two-way relationship.

2.3 Disengagement

In contrast to engagement is the concept of disengagement. Khan (1990) describes a disengaged employee as being uncoupled from their work roles. When disengaged, an employee withdraws themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally from their role. According to Gallup (2002) there are three types of people within an organisation, engaged employees, disengaged employees, and actively disengaged employees. Engaged employees are those employees who strive for excellence at every thing they do within their roles. They are consistent high performers. Disengaged employees are those employees who don't look at the big picture; they focus on the tasks in front of them and not at the overall goals of the organisation. They do what they are told and nothing more. Actively disengaged employees are those who not only do not perform well but also have a negative effect on those engaged employees in the organisation. Employees who are actively disengaged are extremely dangerous in an organisation (Gallup, 2002). To put it in monetary terms according to Gallup's (2002) research, actively disengaged employees cost the American economy up to $350 billion a year in lost productivity.

2.4 Models of Engagement

There are many reasons why companies should invest in employee engagement. Employee engagement is significantly linked with important business objectives and outcomes (Markos and Sridevi, 2010). Many studies have found that there is a positive relationship between high levels of employee engagement and high organisational performance.

2.4.1 Penna's Hierarchy of Engagement Model

Penna's (2007) model of employee engagement (See Figure 1.1) incorporates the theory behind Maslows' hierarchy of needs. The theory behind Maslow's well-known model is that people are motivated to achieve certain needs. The needs at the bottom of the hierarchy, the 'basic needs', must be satisfied before the person is motivated to fulfil the next ones above. Similar to Maslow's model Penna's (2007) 'basic needs' are pay, working hours and conditions. These needs must be fulfilled before the employee can move up the hierarchy to learning and development, promotion opportunities, and leadership and trust. Once all these levels of needs have been

satisfied the employee will then look for meaning in the job. With every level that is satisfied the employee will have a higher level of engagement.
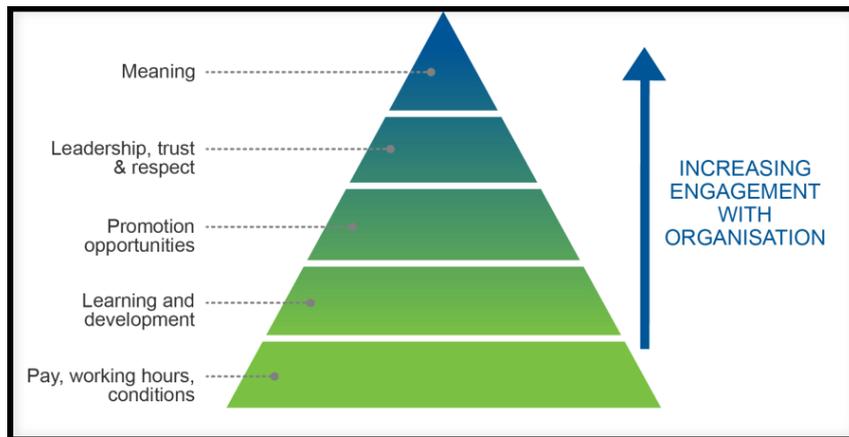
Figure 1.1 Hierarchy of Engagement Model (Penna, 2007)

2.4.2 'Burnout' Literature

Similar to the concept of disengagement is 'burnout' literature. The burnout literature describes job engagement as the direct opposite of burnout, and that burnout entails the wearing away of engagement in ones job (Maslach et al 2001). According to Maslach et al (2001), there are six aspects of the working life that lead to either engagement or burnout: rewards and recognition, control, workload, perceived fairness and values and control.

2.4.3 'Say, Stay, Strive' Model

The 'Say, Stay, Strive' Model is a model coined by Hewitt associates to describe the behaviours that engaged employee's display.

In this model, Aon Hewitt (2013) outline three attributes:

- 'Say' is the extent to which the employee speaks positively about the organisations to their colleagues, customers, and potential employees.
- 'Stay' is the extent to which the employee has a deep sense of belonging in the organisation and a desire to stay long-term.
- 'Strive' is the extent to which the employee is motivated and exerts extra effort towards success in their job and the success of the business as a whole.

According to Aon Hewitt (2013), employees need to exert all three of these attributes in order to be considered engaged. For example, one could not consider an employee

engaged if they strongly desire to stay in an organisation but fail to go above and beyond their role.
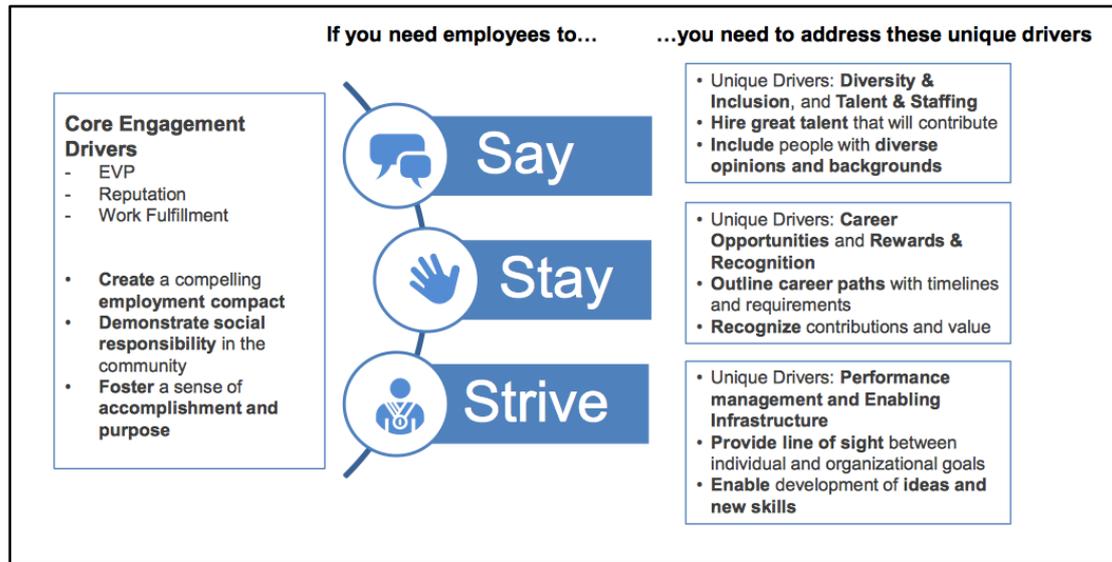
Figure 1.2 Say, Stay, Strive Model (Aon Hewitt, 2013)

According to Sundaray (2011) the outcomes of employee engagement are thought to be exactly what organisations are seeking from their employees. These outcomes can include: more productive employees who have the ability to complete tasks within normal working hours, more profitable employees who spend the financial usage of the company efficiently, employees who are more likely to engage in discretionary efforts, are safer, healthier, less likely to be absent and less likely to turnover (Fleming and Asplund, 2007; Wagner and Harter, 2006). Engagement does not only have the potential to affect employee loyalty, retention, and productivity, it also has a link to customer satisfaction, stakeholder value, and the company reputation (Sundaray, 2011). Organisations need to recognise that engaged employees, more than any other variable, are powerful contributors to its competitive advantage (Sundaray, 2011).

2.5 Drivers of Employee Engagement

If we believe, as research shows, that committed employees perform better and engagement is a step up from commitment, it is important to understand what the drivers of engagement are. Drivers for engagement will differ between organisations so it is first important to look at the factors that impact engagement, and from there organisations can build their own customised approach to employee engagement.

According to Robinson et al (2004) the strongest driver of employee engagement is a sense of feeling valued and involved.

The main drivers found in the literature that influence employee engagement and which research will be based upon are, relationship with leaders, work-life balance, training and career development, compensation & reward, work environment, relationship with co-workers and organisational policies and procedures.

2.5.1 Relationship with Leaders

In recent years Leadership and its connection with employee engagement has been given a significant amount of focus. There is much debate into the impact an inspirational leader has on levels of engagement.

Research by Anitha (2014) found leadership to be one of the main criteria identified as a fundamental factor in influencing employee engagement. A leader can be defined as a person who effectively influences both groups and individuals within an organisation, who has the ability to help them establish their goals and guides them towards the achievement of these goals, and therefore allowing them to be effective in their role (Nahavandi, 2009). According to Walumbwa et al. (2008) effective leadership can be described as a higher-order, a multi-dimensional construct, that compromises internalised moral standard, self-awareness, relational transparency, and balanced processing of information. Research studies have shown that engagement occurs naturally when leaders are inspirational. It is important for leaders to show employees that their work is important and plays a major role in the business success. When an employee's work is considered meaningful and important it gives them a sense of feeling valued and involved, which leads to their engagement.

2.5.2 Work-life Balance

Work-life balance can be an important factor in levels of employee engagement in an organisation. Work-life Balance is a measure of the balance between ones responsibilities at work and their responsibilities outside of the working environment. According to Dibben, Klerck and Wood (2011) appropriate work life balance policies will have an effect on levels of employee engagement within an organisation. When employees are either encouraged or forced to work longer hours, at the expense of their personal life, they can be less engaged within the organisation.

2.5.3 Training & Career Development

Training and career development is another important factor that needs to be considered in the process of engaging employees. Training and development is a very important tool in the engagement and retention of talented employees. According to Torrington et. al (2014) training opportunities enhance commitment to an employer. This makes them less likely to leave voluntarily then they would if no training was offered. Training and learning development activities help to build up the confidence of employees and motivate them to become more engaged in their job (Anitha, 2014).

2.5.4 Compensation & Reward

According to Bratton and Gold (2007) reward strategies can be described as one of management's key levers to creating higher levels of employee engagement and commitment. When most people think of compensation and reward they usually only think of pay, but compensation and reward can be both financial and non financial. Extrinsic rewards satisfy an employee's basic needs, and intrinsic rewards refer to psychological enjoyment and the satisfaction of the 'challenge' of work. This satisfies their higher level need for self-esteem and development (Bartol and Locke, 2000). In terms of impacting engagement, extrinsic reward alone will not lead to engagement. Although it will not lead to engagement, in order to allow for engagement to occur their extrinsic reward package must be at least comparable to the market average. Bringing pay up to market average is the first step; it will not lead directly to engagement but it sets a foundation in which engagement is possibly achieved (Markos and Sridevi, 2010).

2.5.5 Work Environment

Work environment is considered to be one of the significant factors that determine the levels of engagement in employees. Various studies carried out by Holbeche and Springett (2003), Miles (2001) and Rich et al. (2010) have shown that employee engagement is the result of aspects within the workplace. Deci and Ryan (1987) indicate that a management which nurtures a supportive working environment typically provides positive feedback to employees and encourages them to speak up, displays concern for their feelings and needs, and also encourages the development of skills and solving work-related issues. Therefore a working environment that is meaningful and harmonious, and aids employees is considered to be a strong determinant of engagement.

2.5.6 Co-Worker Relationship

Positive team and co-worker relationships are another important aspect of employee engagement. Anitha (2014) promotes that a work environment that is open and supportive gives the employees a sense of security and safety in work that allows them to completely engage in their work. Employees who feel they can be themselves in work is driven by positive workplace relationships and a feeling of safety (Kahn, 1990). Kahn (1990) discovered that having trusting and supportive teams in work, and strong interpersonal relationships promotes employee engagement. Kahn (1990) also believes that a working environment that is open and supportive is fundamental for employees to engage with their responsibilities and feel safe in their working environment.

According to Kahn (1990) these supportive working environments allow workers to be experimental and try new things without the fear of consequences if they fail.

In addition to Kahn (1990), Locke and Taylor (1990) also believed strong interpersonal relationships lead to greater engagement. Locke and Taylor (1990) argued that workers who developed and experienced positive interpersonal interactions with their colleagues should also experience a greater sense of meaning to their work. Thus, they believed that if the employee has meaningful and strong relationships with their colleagues, their engagement level would be expected to be high.

2.5.7 Organisational Policies & Procedures

Organisations have endless policies and procedures and according to Anitha (2014) these can have a major impact on engagement levels. According to Anitha (2014) it is evident in previous research that amiable policies and procedures are particularly important for engagement levels and the achievement of business goals. Important policies that can have an impact on engagement levels include fair recruitment and selection processes, fair promotional procedures, flexi-time, and support in balancing work and life. Studies completed by Schneider, Macey, Barbera and Young (2009) further the point that an organisation's recruitment policy has a direct impact on an employee's future level of engagement and commitment. The recruitment process is the first interaction that an incoming employee has with an organisation. Whether this

process has been a positive or negative experience for the employee can shape the employee's opinion of the fairness of the organisation.

2.6 Employee Engagement Globally and in Ireland

The economic downturn that began in 2008 is still looming over organisations across the globe to this day. The financial constraints organisations faced meant they had to make tough decisions on how and where they were going to invest their resources, time and their people (Aon Hewitt, 2013). These decisions have impacted the levels and perceptions of employee engagement in organisations across the globe. Based on the five-year longitudinal analysis by Aon Hewitt (2013), it can be seen that on a global scale, engagement levels fluctuated significantly throughout the recession. Although the levels varied over the five years, all regions saw a growth in employee engagement except for North America, which saw no overall increase since 2008. Of all the regions included in the analysis, Europe experienced the most significant increase in engagement (Aon Hewitt, 2013).

Ireland is no different from the rest of the world in that Irish organisations had to make some tough decisions during the recession in order to survive. Many organisations in Ireland had to change their priorities in order to recover from the recession and grow (Tower Watson, 2011). The key priorities for senior executives are cutting costs and improving performance, consistent customer service levels and productivity. Employee focused activities were low on the priority list, and this reflects the challenges organisations face to try and do more with reduced resources.

2.7 Conclusion

Through reviewing the literature surrounding the topic of Employee Engagement, the researcher's first two objectives have been met. Throughout the review, the researcher has been able to gain an understanding of the theories, definitions, and models of engagement. The researcher has also been able to determine what the key drivers of engagement are from the literature, and these are the drivers in which the research questions will be based. The key drivers found in the literature are relationship with leaders, relationship with co workers, compensation, work life balance, training and career development, work environment and organisational polices and procedures.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This Chapter will present a detailed discussion of all the methodological choices considered for the study. This will include an outline of the aims and objectives of the research, "the philosophical reasoning behind the chosen research method", Quantitative and Qualitative Research, rationale behind chosen method, an overview of the sample, ethical considerations, method of data analysis and then finally the limitations of the research.

3.1 Research Defined

Research according to Ghauri and Gronhaug (2005) is a process; it's a set of different activities performed over time that takes a lot of time and consideration. The most important factors in performing research are that it is prepared in a systematic way and its purpose is to find out something (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007). The 'systematic' approach suggests that the research has a basis on logical relationship and its not based on beliefs (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005). The purpose of the research is to 'find things out', which means that there are a multiple of possible purposes for the research, which can include, analysing, criticising, describing, understanding and explaining (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005). Research needs to have a clear purpose; in doing so it would suggest that research is carried out to answer a question or a number of questions (Saunders et al, 2007).

3.2 Research Philosophy

Saunders et al (2007) defines research philosophy as an overarching phrase that relates to the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge. In other words, it relates to certain assumptions the researcher has made and developing new knowledge in a certain field. There are many variables that can determine which philosophy is best suited to a certain type of research. According to Saunders et al (2009) the research philosophy adopted by the researcher contains important assumptions on how that person views the world. He believes that the philosophy adopted will be influenced by practical considerations. Saunders et al (2009) also believes the main influencer is likely to be the researchers relationship with knowledge and the process by which its developed; whether that person is concerned with factual information that can be quantified or the person is concerned with

feelings and attitudes. Quinlann (2011) emphasises the importance of choosing the right philosophical framework to 'fit' the research study. The framework underpins the research project and at every stage of the process there must be a clear 'fit'. Epistemology is defined by Bryman and Bell (2011, p 15) as, 'the question of what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline.' There are three types of epistemology, these are: Positivism, Realism and Interpretivism.

3.2.1 Positivism

According to Saunders et al (2007), if the research philosophy chosen represents the principles of positivism, the researcher will likely adopt the stance of the natural scientist. Similarly, Remenyi, Williams, Money and Swartz (1998, p. 32), describe the researchers preference as, 'working with an observable social reality and that the end product of such research can be law-like generalisation similar to those produced by the physical and natural scientists.' This approach is usually adopted when the researcher prefers to work with facts and numerical data rather then with opinions and feelings. Another characteristic of the positivist approach is that the research is preformed in a value-free way (Saunders et al, 2007). In other words, the researcher sees itself as an external part of the data collection process, and that they in no way can influence or alter the substance of the data. In this approach there is little to no thought of feelings or opinions with regards to the data. Remenyi et al (1998) further state that the assumption is that the researcher remains completely independent of the research, and at no stage affects or is affected by the subject and nature of the research. Saunders et al (2007) argues that it is actually impossible for this to be entirely feasible as the researcher exercises choice in the subject to study, the objectives of the chosen study and what specific data to collect. Gill and Johnson (2002) state another characteristic of the positivist is they are likely to use a highly structured methodology in order to facilitate the replication of their study. According to Saunders et al (2007) it is entirely possible to adopt a positivist approach to aspects of the research project but not necessarily continue this philosophy throughout.

3.2.2 Realism

Realism is another epistemological position that closely relates to scientific enquiry. Bryman and Bell (2011) state that it is a separate position to positivism but very closely related with a number of similarities in its qualities. These similarities are the belief that social and natural sciences should, and can, apply the same approach to the

collection and explanation of data, and the view that there is a reality that is separate to ones own description of it (Bryman and Bell, 2011). There are two forms of realism: direct (or empirical) realism and critical realism. According to Saunders et al (2007) with direct realism 'what you see is what you get'. In other words, what one experiences of reality is accurately what reality is. On the other hand critical realism argues that what we see is our experience of certain sensations, an image of the reality, not reality directly (Saunders et al, 2007). Critical realists argue that our senses can often deceive us, and our interpretations of reality may not be what they actually are. In its simplest form, direct realism is what the thing is and what our senses tell us about it, whereas critical realism takes into account the mental processing that occurs after we have experienced the sensation

3.2.3 Interpretivism

Saunders et al (2007) define interpretivism as a philosophy that advocates for the researcher to understand the differences between people in their role as 'social actors.' Saunders emphasises that the term 'social actors' is very important as it portrays the world as a theatre and humans play a role on the stage of human life. The metaphor of the theatre is all about how people interpret things; actors interpret roles differently, as do all people in terms of interpreting everyday social roles in accordance with the meaning they give these roles. Additionally, people interpret social roles of others quite differently with our own personal set of meanings. Many would argue that when it comes to the study of business and management research, particularly in the areas of organisational behaviour and human resource management, the interpretive perspective is highly appropriate (Saunder et al, 2007).

The researcher in this study is concerned with gaining an understanding of attitudes, feelings and behaviours of the respondents. Therefore, the researcher has adopted an interpretivist philosophy viewing reality as a constantly changing entity, in which each participant in the study will respond and engage with the research in a unique and individual way. The researchers choice to adopt an interpretivist paradigm will lead to a qualitative based study (Hiller, 2010). According to Quinlan (2011) data as complex as that which is investigating feelings and thoughts cannot adequately be measured numerically and quantitatively so therefore data gathered will be qualitative

data. Quinlan (2011, p. 105) defines qualitative data as, "data that represents feelings, thoughts, ideas, understandings; non-numeric data".

3.3 Research Approaches

A researcher must choose between the two different research approaches, deductive or inductive. It is important to make a decision on this at an early stage as it has a major impact on the rest of the research. According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe (2002) there are three significant reasons why the right choice of research approach is decided at an early stage. Firstly, it enables the researcher to make a more informed decision about the research design. Secondly, it helps the researcher to decide what strategies and choices will work for the researcher and which will not. Lastly, Easterby-Smith et al (2002) argue that the researchers knowledge of different research traditions will allow the research to adapt the design to accommodate for limitations. A deductive approach seeks to rigorously test an existing theory or hypothesis where as an inductive approach a theory is created which is justified by relevant cases and literature (Saunder et al, 2007).

3.3.1 Deductive Approach

According to Saunders et al, (2007) deduction involves the development of a theory or hypothesis that is subjected to rigorous testing. As mentioned previously, a positivist stance is commonly undertaken by the natural scientist, as it is a deductive approach to the research. According to Collis and Hussey (2003), in the natural sciences, laws give the foundation for explanation, they allow the anticipation of phenomena; they expect their occurrence and therefore allow them to be controlled.

3.3.2 Inductive Approach

The purpose behind an inductive approach is to get a better feel of what is going on, so the researcher can get a better understanding of the nature of the problem. As the researcher is adopting the interpretivist principles of research philosophy to conduct the research, the inductive approach would be the most appropriate. The researcher is looking to gain an understanding of what drivers the participants feel are most relevant to their engagement in the organisation and as such, an inductive approach was chosen by the researcher.

3.4 Research Strategy

The researcher has chosen to perform a Qualitative research project in order to gain in depth and rich data on the topic of employee engagement within the selected organisation. The researcher is not attempting to prove or disprove a hypothesis but to gain a greater insight into employee engagement practices, understanding and drivers of engagement within the chosen sector. The two methods the researcher considered were focus groups and Interviews.

3.4.1 Focus Groups

Focus groups are when a selected group of people come together to discuss a topic or issue. According to Anderson (2010) the setting of a focus group can encourage people to speak freely about the topic or item they have been asked to discuss. According to Krueger (2002) when holding a Focus group or taking part in one there are rules that are required to be followed:

- Confidentiality is key. What is said while in the focus group should not be spoken about outside of the group
- Sharing is a must. All participants are required to make a contribution to the discussion.
- A group leader is required. One group member should control the conversation when required and keep it flowing and on topic.
- Conversation must remain on Topic at all times.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to focus groups. The advantages would be that they would save a significant amount of time by comparison to meeting with participants on a one to one basis. The disadvantages would be that one confident participant could sway the opinion of the others, or take over the discussion and not give other participants equal time to speak (Anderson, 2010).

3.4.2 Semi Structured Interviews

Anderson (2010) notes that semi structured interviews are a beneficial way of gathering data. He believes the researcher is able to gather richer quality of data by building on the answers they receive from the interviews. Anderson (2010) also states that interviews need to be planned carefully and recorded in a method easy for the

researcher to decipher, as it is very important the data is reliable and unbiased. When the researcher considered the research objectives, they felt semi-structured interviews would be the most appropriate strategy. This strategy will allow the researcher more flexibility in the sequence in which questions are asked and will allow them to ask probing questions if the interview is digressing.

3.5 Sample/Participants

The researcher performed interviews in a top accounting firm in Ireland that the researcher had access to. The researcher interviewed 9 trainees in the accounting firm. The researcher sent out a letter inviting 22 trainees to the interviews, but due to study leave only 9 employees were able to participate in the study during the restricted time frame in and around the Dublin area. The 9 participants were a mix of trainees from 1st years to 3rd years. The researcher understood that this was a small sample in a large organisation, and was aware that the 9 participants would not all be of the same opinion as the 500 trainees currently working for the company in Ireland.

3.6 Data Collection

The chosen strategy for the research project was semi-structured interviews and through these interviews the data for the project was be collected. Keeping in line with the ethical considerations that will be outlined in this chapter, all interviews were kept confidential at all times. The interviews were recorded on the researchers smart phone and saved into a password-protected file. This allowed the researcher focus on the tone of voice and body language of the participant during the interview rather than take notes. It also allowed the researcher to remain focused on the participant and all times and ask further questions if necessary. All participants were made aware and consented that their interview would be recorded but would only be heard by the researcher and their supervisor, and once the research was concluded the recordings would be deleted as to ensure anonymity for all participants. It was extremely important to the researcher to uphold the highest level of ethical standards throughout the entire research process.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues are a very important aspect of any research project. Quinlan (2011, p.69) defines ethics as 'a process of reasoning in terms of the right thing to do.' The researchers aim was to uphold the highest level of ethical standards throughout the

research, as it is an important characteristic of good business research (Cooper and Schindler, 2014). As this study involved qualitative semi-structured interviews, the researcher was predominantly concerned with protecting the rights and identities of the trainees being interviewed. The researcher obtained consent from each trainee prior to the interviews, and all participants were made aware of the proposed research and that they were participating in the research voluntarily and at any stage have the option of withdrawing themselves from the research. The participants were made aware that any information recorded by the researcher is for the purpose of the study and nothing else. The researcher ensured that at absolutely no stage of the research process would the information obtained from the interviews be shown to management or any third party without written consent from the respondents.

3.8 Limitations of Research Method

As the researcher opted for a mono method approach of only using qualitative methods for the research, limitations to this method became evident. The research would have benefited from a mixed method approach in which the researcher would have sent out surveys or questionaries' to the entire sample and then used this information to better develop the interview questions. The combination of surveys and detailed interviews would have given the research more reliable data. Due to the time constraints and the majority of the sample being on annual leave it would have proved difficult to used a mixed method approach. For this reason the researcher chose the mono method approach.

Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter the researcher will consider and evaluate the findings from the interviews carried out with the trainee accountants. The researcher met with each employee individually and explained again the purpose for the research and interviews and confirmed that the employee had consented to the interview. All information was previously sent to the employee prior to the interview but the researcher just wanted reiterate the research was for a Masters dissertation and would be completely anonymous. The researcher gave an introduction to the interview by explaining what the key drivers of engagement were based on the literature, and that these were what the interview questions were based on. It is also important to note that the researcher reiterated to all employees that they could withdraw from the interview at anytime if they did not wish to continue.

4.1 Employee Background

The first of the questions in each interview were an introduction and served as an icebreaker as well as gaining an understanding of the employee's role and whether they feel they are engaged, disengaged or actively disengaged. This research was specific to accountants at a certain level; all employees confirmed they were trainee accountants. The employees varied in range from first year trainees, to third year trainees about to qualify as accountants. Four of the participants were in the tax practice, three were in the audit practice and two were in advisory. The last question in the introduction section of the interview posed whether the employees considered themselves 'engaged, disengaged or actively disengaged', and the responses were mixed. Seven out of the nine employees considered themselves engaged while two considered themselves disengaged; none of the employees identified themselves as actively disengaged.

4.2 Work Environment

When asked if their work environment had an impact of their engagement level seven out of the nine employees said it had. A number of the trainees who answered yes said that trainees generally get the worst seats in the bay and can be moved around to a different desk with little notice if a new Senior has started on their team, and they felt it unfair to be uprooted from their desk. They said this made them feel quite

expendable. Those who answered yes spoke about how modern the offices were, a few mentioned they always had 'all tools required' to do their job. They also mentioned the offices were well furnished and bright, and conveniently located to public transport which made it relatively easy to get to and from work. The one participant who answered no said they did not feel the work environment impacted on their engagement levels, and continued that the office was recently renovated and they said they did not feel the improvement made any impact on their engagement level. The participants noted that during the renovation there was substantial movement of people, teams moving floors and desks and some noise pollution from construction on occasion, but they felt it did not impact their engagement. The same participant said they still had everything they needed to perform their job the movement of desks and noise on occasion did not impact their engagement positively or negatively.

4.3 Training & Career Development

The next question in the interview asked the employees whether the availability of Training & Development had an impact on their engagement. Not surprisingly, all employees answered yes to this. Nearly all the participants said that the main reason for choosing the company for employment was down to their training. They all said the training they are receiving is considered the 'best of the best' in the industry and they know the company is investing in them. On the other hand, a number mentioned that although the training was excellent, the career development wasn't necessarily as positive. They said they have seen a lot of new qualified accountants who stay with the company remain at Senior level for a few years and are never made Manager. They said they feel this has a negative impact of their engagement as they feel loyalty and hard work is not leading to promotion and further career development. One participant mentioned they do not feel there is sufficient career development in the company and once qualified they will be looking to leave. This same participant labelled himself as disengaged in the introductory questions.

4.4 Team and Co-worker Relationships

The next question posed to the participants was whether they felt relationships with their team and co-workers had an impact on their engagement. All participants answered yes to this question. All participants felt that the relationship they have with their team and co-workers has a major effect on their engagement. A few of the

participants felt that this was something the company put an effort into nurturing through frequent team building and general social events. An event that came up in a few of the interviews was that of 'intake night', which they described as a sort of induction for all new trainees in which they work together in teams and perform for the rest of the practice. These participants felt that this event gave them a real opportunity to get to know their peers on a personal level and integrate with their team. A few of the participants felt that positive relationships with their team meant that they were more likely to offer help and support if another team member was overwhelmed with work and would be more willing to collaborate on different projects if there was a positive relationship amongst the team. On the other hand they felt that as much as great relationships had a major impact on engagement in a positive way, bad relationships with co-workers had the same impact. A few of the participants said that on several occasions, lack of support from team members negatively impacted on their engagement and they felt at times unmotivated.

4.5 Relationship with Leaders

When the participants were answering the previous question on relationship with co-workers, the relationship with their Manager or direct Supervisor was mentioned frequently. In order to gain as much information as possible from the interviews, the researcher did not interfere and separated the answers after reviewing them, categorising which answers referred to co-workers, and which referred to Managers/Leaders. It was very clear from all participants that they felt this was a strong driver that impacted on their engagement. One candidate stated that their positive relationship with a manager provided them with a role model in work and whose proficiencies they would like to achieve. They also said having a strong leader meant that they were not overburdened in terms of workload and were not afraid to make mistakes and ask questions and began to enjoy the work they were tasked with. Another participant said they had experienced a strong mutual trust between themselves and their manager and this gave them a sense of autonomy. Another participant had weekly one to one meetings with their manager to plan weekly workloads, discuss any potential issues and give feedback on the previous weeks performance. They felt this provided them with an improved focus and awareness of expectations and also strengthened the personal relationship. In contrast, another participant had the opposite experience in which they infrequently met with their

manager face to face for feedback or regarding the volume of their workload. This participant felt that the lack of guidance and feedback from their manager left them overburdened at times and unable to approach their manager. They felt that there were unrealistic goals and expectations set for them by their manager, which had a negative impact on their engagement level. Another participant discussed how their old manager used to constantly micro-manage, and appeared to have no level of trust in the Team. This was detrimental to the participant's engagement. Another participant, one of the two who considered themselves disengaged, felt that it would not be too much to ask that their Manager to say 'thank you' or 'well done' on occasion to the Team for their hard work and late hours.

4.6 Compensation & Reward

Compensation is personal, and is always a sensitive topic to talk to a stranger about. The researcher was aware that they might not get a great deal of information from the participants on this question. To the surprise of the researcher, the result was almost the opposite. All participants were quite forthcoming in their basic salaries and reward packages. Listening to all the participants speak about their compensation, it was clear there are very transparent and rigid pay scales in the company when it comes to the trainees. Almost all trainees start on a similar basic salary depending on the area of practice in which they are employed. Those in Audit and Advisory, who have achieved a Masters degree start on €1,000 more than those without a masters, those in Tax start on €1,000 more than those in Audit and Advisory, and those in tax who have a masters degree would start on €2,000 more than first year trainees in Audit and Advisory who do not hold a masters degree. Once qualified and out of contract, the trainees will be increased to a salary in the low to mid €40,000 range. When asked if they felt they had a good compensation package, the majority of participants answered yes. One participant said that once you take all aspects of their compensation (both monetary and otherwise) into consideration, notably exam fees and paid time off for study leave, the compensation package is not bad. On the other hand, one participant said that when you consider the overtime that is consistently required, they do not agree that the compensation is not worth the effort required. They said working 50-60 hour weeks and subsequently struggling financially at the end of each month does have an impact on their engagement. The other participants

were of the same opinion that the compensation package had an impact on their engagement, not as much as some of the other drivers, but none the less impacted it.

4.7 Work-life Balance

The next question asked of the participants was whether they felt work-life balance had an impact on their engagement levels. All of the participants answered 'yes' to this question. A few of the employees mentioned that as trainees they were expected to do a certain amount of over time in order to cover their study leave. Two of the participants felt that, although they have a certain quota of over time to reach, it becomes expected that they will do over time consistently regardless of whether they have reached the overtime needed for their study leave. Another participant mentioned that 'overtime is expected of all trainees but never appreciated'. Another participant acknowledges that in some cases over time was necessary to get tasks complete, but the expectation to do overtime outside of these cases was abused by Managers, and can have a major effect on their engagement. This particular participant was one of the two who identified themselves as disengaged. All participants said that in order to stay engaged it was important to strike a balance between the level of overtime they were doing and their personal lives.

4.8 Organisational Policies & Procedures

The penultimate question posed to the participants was whether they felt their organisations policies and procedures had an impact on their engagement level. All participants agreed that to some extent, the fairness of the policies and procedures did impact their engagement. One participant felt the organisations annual leave and unpaid leave policy was very fair. The participant took annual leave combined with unpaid leave for travel in the previous year and said there was no resistance or backlash from her taking the time off. Another participant discussed the recruitment process and how fair they felt it was. Each trainee would be interviewed via the same 'Milk Round' process, and would be subject to interview by staff of the same seniority in every case, The participant felt that it started them in the organisation with an opinion that the organisation was fair.

4.9 Additional Drivers

The researcher was keen to identify if there were any other factors the participants felt have an impact on their engagement that were not included in the interview and thus

not found to be a key driver in the literature. One of the participant felt that flexible working hours would have an impact on their engagement as they would like to start work earlier and finish earlier as to avoid the rush hour, as they said they struggle to squeeze on to a Luas some mornings and can find the commute to work during rush hour stressful. Another candidate said that the availability of classes or activities to manage stress would have a big impact on engagement. The participant mentioned that an organisation for whom their friend was employed by, held mindfulness seminars, yoga classes, and even a wellness week dedicated to managing stress in which there was a different activity or class each day in order to better equip employees regarding stress management. The participant felt that the company investing in the mental health and the well being of its staff would go a long way in terms of improving engagement levels.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Employee Background

As mentioned in chapter four, the researcher started the interview with a few introductory questions in order to put the participants at ease. These questions asked the participants to describe their role in the organisation and outline which practice they worked in and at what year of their training they were currently at. Although only asked for the purpose of getting to know the participants and putting making them comfortable, the researcher saw a direct link between the year of the trainee and whether they identified themselves as 'engaged, disengaged, and actively disengaged'. This brings the researcher on to the next question asked, which was according to Gallup (2002) ranking of engagement levels, which did the participants identify themselves as. Out of the nine interviewees, 7 identified themselves as engaged, while 2 identified themselves as disengaged. These two were in their 3rd year of training with only one set of upcoming exams before becoming qualified.

5.2 Work Environment

The majority of the participants were of the opinion that their work environment did have an impact of their engagement; only one of the participants was of the opinion that it did not impact on their engagement level. The participants spoke about both negative and positive experiences they've had with the work environment which both had an impact on their engagement. This is relatable to the research of Deci and Ryan (1987), which indicated that a management group which nurtures a supportive and safe working environment will improve engagement. In line with this, one of the participants experienced an instance when they felt uncomfortable in the work environment, where they were uprooted from their desk for a new employee starting. The participant noted that this impacted negatively on their engagement. Although one participant was of the opinion that the work environment had no impact on their engagement, they pointed out that while the renovations were happening in the office, the participant still had 'everything required to do their job', so the noise and construction did not impact their engagement negatively. The researcher deduced from this that although the participant felt their engagement was unaffected by the work environment, having all tools required to do the job would be considered a factor of the work environment, and thus did have an impact on their engagement.

5.3 Training and Career Development

According to Anitha (2014) Training and learning development activities help to build up the confidence of employees and motivate them to become more engaged in their job. In line with Anitha (2014) all respondents said that training and development has a big impact on their engagement. Many of the participants chose the company for their training, as it is renowned as being one of the best training firms in Ireland. One of the participants said the fact the company was investing in them impacted on their engagement. By comparison, one of the participants said that although the training is excellent, further training and career development once qualified was not as well supported. They noted that they had seen many qualified accountants not progress in the company once qualified, and this would deter them from staying with the company once they achieved their qualifications. According to Torrington et. al (2014), training opportunities enhance employee commitment to an employer, and makes them less likely to leave voluntarily than they would do if no training was offered. Although this was only the opinion of one of the participants, one of the two who identified themselves as disengaged from the Gallup (2005) rankings of engagement levels, it shows that to that particular employee, the training needs to be continuous in order to ensure their commitment to the organisation is sustained and their engagement level improved.

5.4 Relationship with co workers

According to Kahn (1990), having trusting and supportive teams in work and strong interpersonal relationships promotes employee engagement. All participants felt that their relationship with co-workers had an influence on their engagement. A number of the participants felt that meaningful co worker relationships was something the company invested in greatly with multiple teamwork and social events throughout the year, which gave the employees an opportunity to get to know their peers on a personal level. Kahn (1990) also states that employees who feel they can be themselves in work, come down to positive workplace relationships and a feeling of safety in work. As well as Kahn (1990), Locke and Taylor (1990) are of the same opinion that workers who developed and experienced positive interpersonal interaction with their colleagues will also experience a great sense of meaning to their work. As well as discussing positive co-worker relationships some of the participants discussed instances of negative relationships with co-workers in which they felt

unsupported. This is in line with Anitha (2014), who believes that employees need to feel supported by their co-workers in order for it to improve engagement.

5.5 Relationship with Leaders

It was very clear from the findings that all participants felt their relationship with leaders has a strong impact on their engagement. All participants had experienced a positive relationship with a leader. Some participants said this provided them with a role model, whose skills they would like to achieve. Another participant said it gave them the ability to manage their workload and made them less afraid to make mistakes and ask questions; another said it gave them a sense of autonomy. The majority of the participants discussed regular feed back from Managers and how beneficial it was to them. According to Nahavandi (2009) a leader is someone who can effectively influence both groups and individuals with in an organisation, has the ability to help them establish their goals and guides them towards the achievement of these goals, therefore allowing them to be effective in their role. The researcher determined that the majority of the participants have a leader in the organisation in which they can learn from. The key word in Nahavandi (2009) description of a leader is the word 'effectively'. A number of the participants have experienced when a leader is lacking in effectiveness, and they felt it had a bearing on their engagement. One participant felt their manager never recognised themselves or their Team for hard work or goals achieved. According to Walumbwa et al. (2008) it is important for leaders to show employees that their work is important, and plays a major role in the business success. In doing so the employee feels valued and involved which positively influences engagement.

5.6 Compensation & Reward

As mentioned in the previous chapter the participants were very forthcoming with their compensation packages. It was clear to the researcher that the pay scales in the organisation were very consistent. The participants also mentioned the performance review process, and how this impacted on their annual pay increases. The information acquired in relation to the performance review process showed that although the salaries are consistent across the board for all trainees, greater reward is available to those with the best performance. In line with Anitha (2014) and Bratton and Gold (2007) all participants believed that Compensation and Reward is a driver of

employee engagement. Important to note is that, although all believed it was a driver, none felt it was one of the more impactful drivers. Similarly Markos and Sridevi (2010) believe that in terms of impacting engagement, compensation must be in line with that of the market average, it wont necessarily lead to engagement but it would set the foundation for engagement being achieved through the other drivers. This is consistent with the opinion of the participants, as a number mentioned that salaries across the big 4 accounting firms in Ireland were consistent among trainees.

5.7 Work Life Balance

When asked if work life balance had an impact on engagement there was a unanimous 'yes' from all participants. This is in line with Dibben, Flerck and Wood (2011) who said appropriate work life balance polices will have an effect on levels of engagement within an organisation. That is not to say that all participants felt they had a balance of work and life. The majority of the participants stated overtime was part of the job, of which they had no major issue with unless in cases where it was being abused by a Manager. A few of the participants said there is a culture of over time amongst the trainees, and the work they put into the job during their own personal time is not appreciated. The key to the relationship between work and life is down to a healthy balance. Beedarkar and Panita (2014) agree that companies who provide a healthy work life balance is key to increasing employee engagement.

5.8 Organisational Policies and Procedures

According to Anitha (2014) companies have endless policies and procedures and these can have a major impact on engagement levels. When the participants were asked if the policies and procedures in their organisation had an impact on engagement all participants said they do. Some participants mentioned the annual leave and working from home policy, others mentioned the rigorous recruitment process. These findings are in line with previous studies done by Schneider, Macey, Barbera and Young (2009) who found that an organisations recruitment policy has a direct impact on future levels of engagement and commitment among employees.

5.9 Additional Drivers

Interestingly the factor that came up in multiple interviews was the company investing in the employee's physical and mental wellbeing. A number of the

participants felt that the introduction of activities and seminars, which would seek to potentially improve the physical and mental well being of employees would have a major impact on engagement. The researcher did not come across this as a factor influencing engagement when reviewing the literature on engagement, so some further research was performed to see if there was any information on the topic. Although the researcher did not find anything relating to the impact of these activities and seminars on engagement level, they did come across an article relating to an employees health and engagement level. According to Crabtree's (2005) research, out of the engaged employees researched, 78% felt their work like had a positive effect on their psychological well-being, 15% said it had no effect and 6% felt it had a negative effect on their well-being. This decreases significantly among disengaged employees, where the positive effect drops to 48% and the those who feel work life has a negative effect on well bring increases to 20%, with actively disengaged those who feel their job has a positive effect on their well being decreases to 15% with the negative effect on well being increasing to 51% (Crabtree, 2005). This research does not imply that if a corporate wellness program was introduced that engagement would improve, but it does show that engaged employees are more likely than not to view their job as having a positive impact on their health and well being. Further research on the topic would be interesting to determine whether a corporate wellness program could improve engagement in this organisation.

Chapter 6: Conclusion & Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

The aim of this research dissertation was to conduct an investigation into the area of employee engagement drivers and their relevance in the chosen organisation. The researcher outlined 4 main objectives that were necessary to be fulfilled in order to satisfy the aim of the research. Upon completion of the research, it can be concluded that all 4 objectives have been sufficiently met.

The researcher reviewed the existing body of literature on employee engagement and identified that there was gap in respect of the impact of key engagement drivers on a specific section of an organisation. The researcher had come across no research on engagement specific to those employees in a training role. As the researcher had knowledge of perceived low engagement levels among trainee accountants in a top Irish accounting firm the researcher felt this research would bridge the that gap in the literature. Once the gap was identified the research then outlined the numerous methodologies available to sufficiently gather the required data. The researcher decided on a qualitative method in order to gain rich and insightful data. The researcher then conducted 9 semi-structured interviews with the trainee accountants. Although interviews were chosen as the appropriate method they are not without their limitations. The researcher will discuss later in this chapter the benefit to the research if the researcher had adapted and mixed method approach.

The data from the 9 interviewed was critically analysed and consistencies with the literature identified. The data revealed many consistencies with they key drivers in the literature to what the participants felt had an impact on their engagement. Out of the seven key drivers identified in the literature the majority of the participants felt all seven had an impact on their engagement levels both positively and negatively. The most significant findings were in relation to work life balance, relationship with leaders, and compensation. Work life balance appeared as a key driver of engagement for the majority of the participants. Unfortunately in this case it was being mismanaged by the organisation and having a negative impact on engagement levels among the trainees. Surprisingly compensation was not held as a key driver for the majority of the participants. The data showed that allow compensation was important to them, they were currently getting a compensation package consistent with other

large accountancy firms and therefor they felt it did add to their engagement. They did note that if the compensation package was lower than competitors it may have a bigger impact on engagement. Another key driver from the findings was the relationship with leaders. The participants felt that an effective leader can have a major impact on their engagement. In contrast some of the participants had also experienced the negative impact and ineffective manager can have on engagement. One participant spoke about lack of feedback and recognition and how it was negatively impacting their engagement. Although the majority of the participants identified with all of the drivers and felt all 7 impacted on their engagement the three mentioned, work life balance, compensation and relationship with co workers yielded the most valuable data.

As a result of the research the researcher had prepared a number of recommendations for the organisation in order to improve the engagement issues identified. The recommendations will be outlined in section 6.4 of this chapter.

6.2 Limitations of the Research

When conducting the research there were a number of limitations the researcher was met with. The first limitation was that of time. As the research was being conducted for an academic award, there was a limited amount of time given to complete the research. The biggest limitation faced by the researcher was that of sample size. The researcher was planning on interviewing a minimum of 15 trainees, but due to trainees having exams during July & August, some trainees who had originally signed up to take part pulled out as they were too busy studying or would not be in Dublin. This restricted the researcher to 9 participants who were spending their study leave in Dublin and made themselves available to the researcher. Another limitation the researcher became aware of was some of the participants gaining access to the interview question prior to the interview. As the researcher had to work around the participants study schedules it was not possible to do all the interviews within a couple of days. The researcher was told by one of the participants that they spoke to another participant who had already been interviewed and had knowledge of the questions being asked. The researcher felt that this participant's answers may have been thought out and planned prior to the interview. The researcher believes the answers may not have been the same if answered on the spot like the other participants.

6.3 Opportunities for Further Research

As discussed in the limitations of the research, the researcher was restricted in the sample size due to the time constraints of the research and the availability of the participants over the summer months. If the researcher had the opportunity they would do further research with a larger number of participants to ascertain if there were any further similarities to the drivers found in the literature. As well as this, there is definitely justification for a mixed method approach to be adapted to the research. The researchers feels the introduction of a questionnaire prior to the semi structured interviews would allow for the interview questions to be more specific to the participants and yield better results. The researcher believes another topic of interest for further research could be further research on whether 'Investment in employees health and wellbeing' is a key driver of employee engagement. From the findings, the research shows investment into employees training and career development is a major driver of Engagement in the company it would be interesting to see if invest in the employees health and well being yielded the same results. The researcher would also be interested in researching engagement drivers in the company as a whole and seeing if it yielded the same results as that of the trainees alone.

6.4 Recommendations, Costing's & Timeline

The first recommendation of the researcher is to introduce weekly feedback meetings for all trainees with their Managers. From the findings, it is clear that not all trainees are receiving regular feedback and guidance from their Managers and it was noted as a factor that would impact their engagement. The researcher would recommended a schedule be put in place that each manager holds short feedback sessions with each trainee on a weekly basis outlining what went well the previous week and areas for improvement. The cost associated with this recommendation would be low, but each manager and trainee would need to allocate time in their weekly schedule in order for the feedback meetings to take place. These meetings have the ability to be implemented almost straightaway after all Managers have been briefed on the new policy. Depending on the experience of the Manager, some training may need to be done by the HR department on how to effectively give feedback. If this training is required, this would need to be completed before any schedule is put in place to ensure all feedback sessions are effective for both the manager and trainee.

The second recommendation would be for the company to introduce a corporate wellness program. As mentioned in the opportunities for further research it would be a great opportunity for this organisation to introduce this type of program. The cost associated with such programs would be relatively high as those holding the activities and seminars would yield a fee. The researcher recommends that a pilot wellness program be put in place and research done on whether there was an improvement in engagement levels. The timeline for this type of program would be about 4 months in order to secure speakers and instructors for the activities, and plan out a schedule for the seminars and activities to take place.

The third recommendation would be for the company to perform an analysis on whether they are adequately resourced at trainee level. The researcher found that many of the trainees spoke about being over worked and experiencing high levels of overtime. The researcher would conclude from this that they may be under resourced at this level. In order to tackle the issue of high levels of over time among the trainees, introducing more places for trainees each year may be necessary. The cost associated with implanting such a change would be an increased wage bill. However, disengagement relating to significant and consistent overtime would be reduced with more adequate staffing resources to deliver the required work. The research would also expect client satisfaction to improve with reduced response times (Sundaray, 2011).

Personal Learning Statement

This dissertation has been the hardest part of my journey in Education thus far, but at the same time one of the most rewarding.

My interest in this area came about from witnessing my friends struggling in engagement in this particular career and researching the topic and gaining a greater insight into it has been extremely interesting.

Reflecting on the research and looking at how it could have been improved, the researcher would have adapted a mixed method approach and introduced surveys or questionaries' into the research. This way the researchers could have identified themes emerging from the questionaries' and used the interviews more strategically to delve deeper into the themes that emerged. The researcher would also have conducted the interviews earlier in the summer before the majority of the trainees went on study leave.

In completing this research dissertation, it has given me a better understanding of the area of employee engagement and what the key drivers are in a large private sector company. I feel the skills I have learned and developed through this dissertation will be of benefit to me in my career and future educational endeavours.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions

Introductions
- o Could you describe your job and your role in the organisation?
- o Would you consider yourself an engaged, disengaged or actively disengaged and why?

Work Environment
- o How would you describe your work environment?
- o Do you think the working environment has an impact on your engagement levels?

Training and Career Development
- o Is there the availability of training and development in your role in the organisation?
- o Do you think the availability of training and development in your organisation has an impact on your engagement?

Team and Co-worker Relationships
- o During your time in your organisation have you developed strong relationships with your colleagues? Do you think this has an impact on your engagement levels?

Relationship with Leaders
- o Is there a leader in your organisation that you can look up to? Do you think this has an impact on your engagement?

Compensation and Rewards
- o Do you feel like you have a good compensation and reward package?
- o Do you feel these packages have an impact on your engagement?

Work life Balance

o How would you describe your work-life balance?

o Do you feel this impacts on your engagement?

Organisational Policies and Procedures

o What do you think of the companies policies and procedures? Do you feel this impacts your engagement?

Additional Drivers

o Is there anything else you feel impacts your engagement levels in work? Or any suggestions as to what could be implemented to improve engagement?

Appendix 2

<u>Consent Form</u>

<u>Research Study Title</u>: **'An Investigation into the key drivers of employee engagement among trainee accountants in an accountancy firm in Ireland'**
<u>Research Name:</u> Ailbhe Carroll
<u>Researchers Status:</u> Student, MA in Human Resource Management, National College of Ireland
<u>Researchers Contact Number:</u> 087 0698244
<u>Researchers Email Address</u>: ailbhe.carroll@student.ncirl.ie

Dear Sir or Madam:

You are invited to take part in a research study that is designed to explore employee engagement within your organisation. Should you agree to participate in this research it would be greatly appreciated by the researcher. In order to take part the researcher would like to ensure that you are made aware of the interview process and your rights if you wish to withdraw at any stage from the process.

Involvement in this research will require an interview, this interview will take no longer than 45 minutes in duration and will be conducted on a one to one basis between the interviewer and the interviewee.

The identity of the participants and organisation will be kept anonymous and information will be stored in a confidential manner. The interview will be recorded using a mobile audio-recording device, if at any stage during the interview the participant feels uncomfortable the recording device may be turned off. The recordings will then be transcribed by the interviewer at a later date. The transcribed documents will then be coded and access to these documents will only be permitted to the researcher. All of the data obtained from the researcher will be disposed of in an effective manner upon completion of the study.

Additionally the participant is free to withdraw themselves from the interview process at any stage, as the interviews are entirely voluntary.

The researcher will also make the completed research study available to all participants who are interested in the findings, and would be more then happy to provide them with a copy upon completion.

☐   I have read and understand the description of the study.

☐   I willingly consent to participate in the study.

☐   I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Initials of Participant: _____   **Date:** _____