An Investigation into the Role of the Manager in Creating an Engaged Workforce within an Irish Telecommunications Company

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Abstract

This dissertation seeks to explore the role of the manager in creating an engaged workforce. It specifically explores this concept within an Irish Telecommunications company (Company X) and seeks to understand what managers with engaged teams do well. It also explores the correlation between engagement and performance.

Employee Engagement is a key strategic element of organisational performance and success and has been shown to be a key driver of individual performance. It is a topic that has gained more and more credence in both management and academic circles over the last 15 to 20 years. This research explores the origins of employee engagement, through examining theoretical frameworks and theories. It also looks at the specific challenges that are present within a call centre environment.

By adopting qualitative research methods, this piece of work aims to answer these questions in a real-life context and align the theoretical concepts and frameworks to the lived experience of managers within Company X. The findings of the research clearly demonstrate that the role of the manager is critical in creating an engaged workforce and also identifies key behaviours that help to contribute to this.

Acknowledgements

Completing this dissertation has been a rewarding experience and one that I could not have completed on my own. Firstly, big thanks my Supervisor, Pauline Kelly-Phelan, for her support, guidance, knowledge and suggestions. She helped to shine the light on the path when I got lost and reigned me in when my flights of fancy took hold.

I would also like to thank the participants who selflessly gave of their time to allow me to pick their brains for knowledge, experience, expertise and opinion. My employer deserves specific mention, especially the people within the organisation who steadfastly supported me throughout this process. Sometimes it was a simple kind word or sometimes it was the nagging voice asking me for progress updates. Both were appreciated and needed. A special word of thanks in that regard goes to Aoife and Julie.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Joan and David, who I think will be as relieved as me that this piece of work has been completed.

Contents

1 – Introduction

Title

The title of this piece of research is 'An Investigation into the role of the manager in creating an engaged workforce within an Irish telecommunications company'. The research consists of an Introduction, an overview of aims and objectives of the research, a literature review, an explanation of the research methodology used in conducting the research, findings from the research and a conclusion.

Overview of the research topic

Employee Engagement is not a new concept. The term is widely believed to been first coined by Kahn (1990) and is commonly seen has the evolution of management and motivation theories such as work motivation and organisational commitment. It is a broad and complex topic, with no consistent agreement or definition. Indeed, the 2009 MacLeod Review found over 50 definitions in existing literature at the time. However, there is much agreement amongst researchers into the benefits of employee engagement for both the individual and the organisation. Various empirical studies have shown that having a comprehensive organisational approach to employee engagement can have a significant impact to a company's bottom line (Bailey, Madden, Alfes and Fletcher, 2015). This explains why more and more organisations are focussing on employee engagement in an organised and systematic way.

For a topic that has been written about so much in academic circles, there are differing viewpoints and frameworks as to what engagement is and how it can be harnessed for the benefit of the individual and the organisation. However, there is much agreement on the fact that an employee's direct supervisor or line manager has a significant role to play.

This case study is designed to explore the role of the manager within an Irish Telecommunications Company (Company X) in driving employee engagement. Autonomy is also highlighted as a key antecedent of Employee Engagement. This piece of research will also look to explore how managers achieve this in what is a highly regulated and controlled call centre environment. Finally, it will also explore if managers believe there is a link between high employee engagement and team performance.

Background and Context

The company (Company X) was selected by the researcher as he is employed by the company as HR Business Partner. This meant that access to both individuals within the company and data relating to the company could be easily obtained. Company X is a leading provider of telecommunications, broadband and television services, employing over 20,000 people across Europe. Their head office is based in London and the Irish operation is run out of Dublin, with just under 1000 employees. Most of these employees (circa 800) are employed in a call centre environment. The remainder are employed in ancillary functions such as Marketing, Finance, Legal, Compliance, HR and operations support functions such as Planning, Coaching, Training and Facilities.

The HR team operate within an Ulrich model whereby there is a small local Business Partnering team (3 people) and UK based centres of expertise that support the Ireland business – Reward, Leadership Development, Recruitment, Occupational Health, Employee Relations and People Experience who are responsible for people comms. All front-line employee support for HR is delivered through a shared service centre model that consists of an in-house team who operate within a UK based contact centre environment. The Business Partnering Team are responsible for working with senior leaders in the Ireland business to help define the People Agenda. This includes the formulation of the Ireland People Plan, organisational design, any strategic change initiatives, talent management and planning and organisational culture. They also interact with the centres of excellence to both feed in design requirements from a business perspective and to help roll out initiatives coming from the COEs into the business.

Illustration 1: Company X Human Resources Operating Model

Justification for the Research

Employee Engagement is a topic that has been written about extensively over the last number of years. A brief search of the term 'employee engagement' on Google Scholar returns over 100,000 results with articles such as 'Antecedents and Consequences of Employee Engagement' (Saks, 2006) cited over 5000 times. This highlights how extensively the topic has been written about. What is of interest to this researcher though is the relatively small amount of research conducted into employee engagement within a call centre environment.

The number of articles drops to 2000, the vast majority of which focus on call centres within India, South Africa or look at the challenges of employee engagement in the context of Outsourcing. The researcher could not find any articles that looked at Employee Engagement within Call Centres based in Ireland. Because of this, he felt that the research was justified. Exploring the role of the manager in driving employee engagement was of particular interest to the researcher based on his research, but he also felt that the findings and outcomes would be of particular interest to Company X and have potential practical applications if a trend in behaviour could be established. In effect, a blueprint for managers could be created that would help them to drive employee engagement within their teams.

Research Aim

As previously mentioned, this research examines Company X and will take the form of a case study, supported by a comprehensive literature review and underpinned by a robust research methodology.

Company X measures employee engaged twice a year using an online platform that gathers both qualitative and quantitative data. There are 26 questions asked, with employees giving a rating between 0-7 for each question and the ability to provide free text under all the questions. These results are then visible at a country, department and team level. Specific questions are asked in relation to both manager and leadership

Question set

Free text comment box
after each question

Driver	Question
eSat	How happy are you working at Company X?
Recommend	I would recommend Company X as a place to work
Retention	I don't often think about looking for a job at a different company
Authenticity	I feel comfortable being myself at Company X
Balance	I can balance my work and personal life
Benefits	I believe Company X offers me appropriate benefits
Collaboration	My team mates and I collaborate effectively to get the job done
Customer	I look for better ways to serve my customers
Empowerment	I feel empowered to make decisions regarding my work
Fairness	I am treated fairly at Company X
Feedback	My manager provides me with feedback that helps me improve my performance
Growth	I have good opportunities to learn and grow
Leadership	I have confidence in my leadership team
Manager	I would recommend my manager to others
Pay	I am paid fairly for what I do
Purpose	The work that I do is meaningful to me
Recognition	I am happy with the recognition or praise I receive for my work
Resources	I have the tools and resources I need to do my job
Role	My role is a good fit with my strengths
Workplace	My workplace enables me to work productively
Open Comment Question	What else is on your mind?
Purpose	I understand Company X's purpose over and above commercial success.
Values	People at Company X live the company values.
Company Direction	Company X has a clear sense of direction
Strategy	Company X has a clear plan to achieve its goals
Action	I believe action is being taken on the results of the last People Survey

GLINT™

Illustration 2: People Survey Question Set

Based on the literature research conducted, the following working hypothesis was developed by the researcher: Teams that have higher employee engagement scores around eSat (employee satisfaction), Manager (I would recommend my manager to others) and Leadership (I have confidence in my leadership team) will have managers that display behaviours that successfully drive employee engagement within their teams. These teams will also have better performance indicators than those with lower scores. Managers within Company X have been chosen as the focus of the study as they are best placed to describe their views on employee engagement and how this impacts performance within Company X.

Research Objectives

The research objective is to investigate the role of the manager in creating an engaged workforce within an Irish telecommunications company (Company X). The researcher as identified several sub-objectives that will be explored also:

- What do managers with high employee engagement scores within Company X do that contributes to these scores?
- How do managers achieve employee autonomy and empowerment in an environment that is both regulated externally and heavily controlled measured internally through various controls and procedures?
- Do managers see a link between high engagement scores and strong team performance?

Based on the literature that the researcher has reviewed as part of this study, there is considerable empirical evidence to suggest that the manager has significant levels of influence on employee engagement and that teams with higher levels of engagement perform better than those with lower levels of engagement (Bailey et al, 2015). However, it is important to highlight that the researcher is looking to explore this correlation, specifically focussing on manager behaviour, rather than looking to prove causation.

Significance of the Research

It is relevant to highlight that this research has been conducted during a period of significant global uncertainty and disruption due to the Covid-19 pandemic. While the researcher has made every effort to ensure that this situation has not impacted either his own views or the views of the subjects that have been interviewed it is important to acknowledge that this uncertainty could have had an impact on the views of the participants.

This case study will attempt to identify what managers with high engagement scores do well from a people management perspective. In the face of global uncertainty and the prospect of an imminent recession (Barua, 2020) it is arguable the role of the manager will take on even greater significance and importance as ways of working and the demands that will be put on employees will change. Both Saks (2006) and Kahn (1990) highlight the importance of the manager in facilitating employee engagement. This view is unlikely to change at any point in the future.

This case study aims to look deeper into the role of the manager with an emphasis on the behavioural aspects of their role.
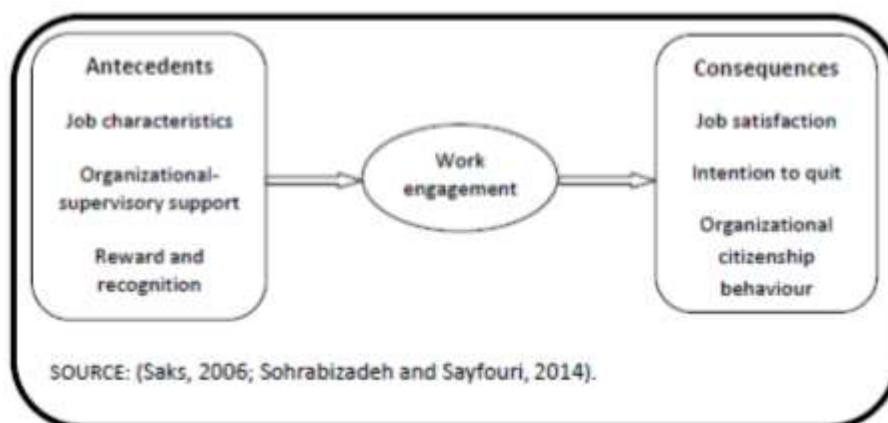
SOURCE: (Saks, 2006; Sohrabizadeh and Sayfouri, 2014).

Illustration 3: Antecedents of Engagement (Saks, 2006)
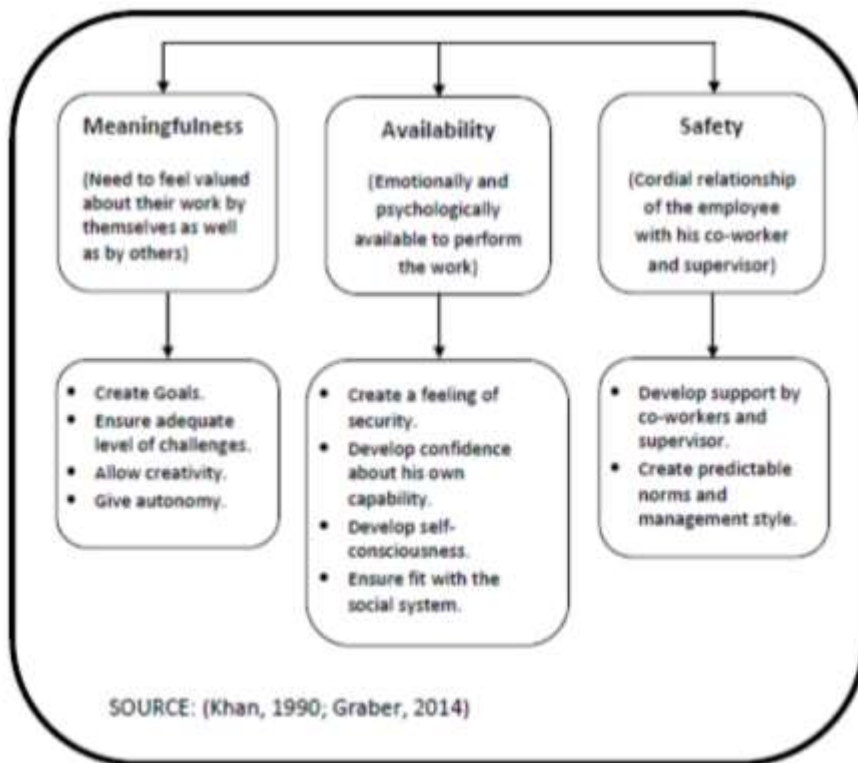
Illustration 4: Psychological Conditions of Engagement (Khan, 1990)

Structure of the Case Study

1 – Introduction

This chapter introduces the topic and sets out the research aims and objectives of the paper. It also sets out the background and context and highlights the significance of the research.

2 – Literature Review

This section provides an insight into the available literature on employee engagement. It looks at different definitions of employee engagement, explores various theoretical frameworks and the most commonly cited antecedents of employee engagement. It will also look at the benefits of employee engagement to both the individual and the organisation, whilst highlighting some of the potential pitfalls. There is also specific focus given to the role of the manager in driving employee engagement within organisations.

3 – Research Methodology

The Research Methodology chapter will expand on the researcher's objectives of the case study and explain the approach that has been taken to conducting primary research. Due attention has also been given to all relevant ethical considerations, the method of data gathering and analysis along with the limitations that are inherent in this piece of research

4 – Findings

Here the researcher presents his findings from the primary research, along with a description of Company X to help set the context for these findings. This is based on a full thematic analysis of the information that has been gathered and is focussed on its relevance to the overall research objectives.

5 – Discussion

In this section, the researcher conducts an in-depth comparison between his findings and what the existing literature tells us about the topic, highlighting both the similarities and the differences that he has discovered.

6 – Conclusion and Recommendations

Finally, the researcher will summarise his findings from the research and the aims and objectives of the case study. There are also recommendations for both improvements that Company X can make and suggestions for further study in this area. There is also a personal reflection on the process of completing this dissertation.

2 - Literature Review - Introduction

Employee engagement as a concept has become prevalent in management thinking over the last decade. It builds on work motivation theories and draws on established ideas such as job satisfaction, work effort and shared purpose. There are many different definitions of employee engagement. One of the leading theorists in this area Khan (1990), argues that employee engagement focuses on how an individual engages with their work environment and how they express themselves Physically, Emotionally and Cognitively. While this focuses on an internal state, it is closely related to behaviour such as increased discretionary effort.

The work of Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) take a narrower view and define work engagement as having three elements

- Vigour (e.g., resilience and effort)
- Absorption (e.g. concentration or sense of flow)
- Dedication (inspiration, enthusiasm and pride)

Schaufeli et al argue that this view means that work engagement can be easily measured and acted upon by the organisation. There is another school of thought that a wider focus of employee engagement is necessary in order to have highly engaged employees. Gifford (2019) argues that knowledge of the wider business context and the ability for the employee to make a clear link between their role and the wider purpose and goals of the organisation is crucial.

It is evident that there several different factors that can contribute to having an engaged work force. The 2009 MacLeod review summarised four fundamental facilitators of employee engagement – Leadership, Line Managers, Employee Voice and Organisational integrity.

Definition of Employee Engagement

Employee Engagement has become an increasingly popular topic in management and academic journals over the last number of years. The first major article to be published in management literature did not appear until 1990 with the publications of Kahn's paper "Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work". According to Saks and Gruman (2014) this article was rarely cited during its first 20 years but has since been cited over 2000 times in the last five years. Saks argues that as a concept, employee engagement is still relatively new and that there are competing and contradictory schools of thought in relation to employee engagement.

One of the first definitions of employee engagement in academic literature appeared in Kahn's 1990 paper. He undertook two qualitative studies into summer camp counsellors and employees of an Architectural firm. In his findings, he stated that the level of engagement displayed by employees was a function of the level to which three psychological conditions were experienced – Psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety and psychological safety. He went on to define employee

engagement as "the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's preferred self in task behaviours, that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional), and active, full role performance".

A more recent theory of employee engagement is based around job burnout. Maslach et al (2001) argue that employee engagement is the opposite of employee burnout. They state that burnout results if a mismatch occurs in six critical areas – workload, control, reward and recognition, community and social support, fairness and values. However, if there is an alignment between the individual and these organisational attributes, then high levels of engagement will occur.

Bakker, Demerouti and Brummelhuis (2012) further define Employee Engagement as "a positive, fulfilling work related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption". These are closely linked but distinct elements. Vigour relates to the level of energy applied by the employee to their work. Dedication pertains to the feeling of significance, enthusiasm and challenge that the employee experiences. Absorption is the level of concentration or engrossment that the employee experiences.

Robinson et al (2004) argue that engagement is "a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its values. An engaged employee is aware of the business context and works with colleagues…to improve performance for the benefit of themselves and the organisation". They believe that engagement is more than just commitment and that the organisation has a significant role to play in helping to facilitate an employee's levels of engagement.

It is clear there is no universally agreed definition of employee engagement amongst academic literature. Indeed Gifford (2018) states that "numerous definitions of employee engagement exist". Welch (2011) argues that there are three waves of employee engagement theory, starting with Kahn's psychological conditions, then moving on to Maslach's Burnout Theory and then Bakker and Demerouti's Job Demands-Resources model. She argues that there is overlap between these waves, with each building on the previous one. She also states that while there is some confusion amongst business leaders as to the meaning of employee engagement, it "is a matter of concern for leaders and managers in organisations across the globe as they recognise that it is a vital element affecting organisational effectiveness, innovation and competitiveness."

Benefits of Employee Engagement

It would appear obvious to state that high levels of employee engagement are a good thing. What organisation would not want a highly engaged, committed and loyal workforce? Research has clearly

shown that there is a strong relationship between employees' behaviour and attitudes, the way that they are managed and how the business performs (Gifford, 2018).

Various studies have highlighted the benefits to organisations of having highly engaged employees. Gallup (2013), published a large-scale study that covered almost 200 companies across 50 different industries in over 30 countries. The study involved 1.4 million employees. The report was explicit in stating that employee engagement was a key differentiator when it came to organisational performance. Business Units that appeared in the upper quartile in relation to employee engagement performed significantly better than those that appeared in the bottom quartile across a range of different metrics. These included:

- 22% Higher profitability
- 37% Lower absenteeism
- 21% higher productivity
- 10% higher customer metrics such as NPS (net promoter score) or Customer Satisfaction

Research published in 2008 by the Corporate Executive Board found that engaged employees are 9 times less likely to leave an organisation than those with low levels of engagement. This obviously has a significant positive impact on operational costs such as recruitment, on-boarding and training. The same research form CEB suggested that organisations with high levels of employee engagement were as much as 10% more profitable than those with medium or low levels of engagement.

Employees that have high levels of engagement also have an emotional connection to the organisation that they work for (Kahn, 1990). This emotional connection can contribute to a higher level of motivation and has the potential to reduce operating costs to the business (Cook, 2008). Cook also argues that engaged employees have a higher level of customer focus and are more enthusiastic in ensuring that the needs of the customer are met.

Bailey et al (2017) conducted extensive research examining 2014 studies that had been completed across various organisations and found that engagement was found to "be positively associated with individual morale, task performance, extra role performance and organisational performance". They also state that "five groups of factors serve as antecedents to engagement: psychological states, job design, leadership, organisational and team factors and organisational interventions". However, they are also clear in defining the limitations of this work and note the danger of interpreting correlation as causation. Despite this, it is safe to say that there is a definite link between highly engaged employees and high performing teams or organisations.

Research also indicates that the benefits of high levels of employee engagement extend beyond the organisation. The employee also experiences significant benefits. Macy and Schneider (2008) state that highly engaged employees "experience more positive emotions towards their work and more likely to experience better career development".

It is safe to say that there is a considerable amount of research, both academic and commercial, to support the view that employee engagement has a positive relationship with the commercial success of organisations and that there are many additional positive benefits including lower company turnover, higher profitability, increased customer satisfaction and indeed increased employee satisfaction.

Potential Challenges with Employee Engagement

On the face of it, it would appear that high levels of employee engagement are an outcome that every organisation would want. Robust analytical studies have shown that higher levels of employee engagement can impact on performance, wellbeing and retention (Christian, Garza and Slaughter, 2011). However, to counter this argument is that this correlation between engagement levels and team or individual performance is not an exact science (Harter, Schmidt and Hayes, 2002). Harter et al argue that some of the best performing teams are the least satisfied.

According to Garard (2020), there may be several reasons for this. Other factors can influence performance outcomes such as having an open and trusting team environment with a strong sense of purpose and the decision-making ability of executive leadership can have more impact on team performance than employee engagement. He goes on to argue that engagement can be a barrier to performance if taken to extremes. He cites some organisational threats that high levels of employee engagement can pose to an organisation:

- Embracing the status quo: Progress can be uncomfortable. The danger is that leaders become complacent and are not self-critical enough in driving change
- Burnout: Taken to extremes, high levels of employee engagement can result in an unhealthy work life balance that results in relationships outside of work suffering and can lead to individual burnout
- Personality Types: Certain character traits such as optimism are more naturally predisposed to high engagement levels. By prioritising these traits, organisations can miss out on diversity of thought and may not be helpful in areas where innovation, creativity or challenge is required

Theoretical Models of Employee Engagement

Given that there is no universally agreed definition of Employee Engagement, it is not surprising that there is also no single model or theoretical framework that can be applied to help us to further understand employee engagement. However, Welch (2011) helpfully points out that there are three main waves of employee engagement theory, each of which build on the previous theory and overlap to giver a more rounded and comprehensive view of employee engagement than the earlier motivational theories of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Herzberg's Two Factor Theory

Psychological Conditions Theory

In 1990, Kahn published his seminal paper, "Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work". In this paper he states that employee engagement is evident in how employees express themselves Physically, Emotionally and Cognitively and that manifestation of this expression can be found in behaviours such as increased discretionary effort. He states that engaged employees have a higher level of psychological availability and that they are ready to fully engage in their work. It is his view that this level of psychological availability is what determines the difference between an employee that is engaged and one who is not. However, he believes that this level of psychological availability does not happen in isolation and that the employer has a significant role in fostering this by creating a psychologically safe environment. He identified four main contributing factors which have a bearing on Psychological safety:

- Interpersonal Relationships – how individuals within an organisation interact with each other and the quality of these interpersonal relationships
- Group and intergroup dynamics – How groups or teams interact and the level of trust that is evident
- Management Style – What approach do management adopt to how they deal with individuals. Is there a consistency across the organisation and do employees feel trusted and empowered?
- Organisational Norms – The way that the organisation operates and the behavioural norms that are evident in the organisational environment.

This theory is of interest to the researcher as it highlights the role of the manager on employee engagement and argues that it is a key determinant of the level of employee engagement that an individual will have.

Burnout Theory

Maslach (1998) takes the view that employee engagement is the opposite of employee burnout. She defines burnout as 'a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job'. This is defined in a multidimensional theory that applies burnout to three key areas:

- Emotional Exhaustion – The major contributing factors to this state are overloading of work and or interpersonal conflict in the workplace
- Depersonalisation – This refers to a detached response to other people and can be self-protective initially but can result in both feelings of and behaviours of dehumanisation
- Reduced Personal accomplishment – This refers to a diminished sense of achievement and a reduced sense of self efficacy whereby the individual feels that they have no development opportunities or that they are 'trapped'.

She goes on to state that there are six key areas in which mismatches can take place that contribute to burnout. The greater the gap or the mismatch between the employee their job, the higher the level of burnout is likely to be. These six key areas are as follows:

- Work Overload: This occurs where demands exceed the human resources to meet these demands and the individual has no time to rest or recover before additional demands are placed on them
- Lack of Control: The individual has little or no control over the work that they do due to either restrictive policies and procedures or micromanagement
- Insufficient Reward: This focuses on inappropriate level of rewards for the work that is done. This relates to factors such as salary and benefits but also internal rewards such as pride in the work being done and the contribution being made
- Breakdown of Community: This can occur either through working in physical isolation or unresolved conflict in the workplace that is likely to result in a significant reduction in social supports
- Absence of Fairness: This can happen when there is either an absence of process and procedures relating to justice or when these are not applied consistently and fairly. In can also relate to issues such as equal pay and promotion opportunities
- Value Conflict: This happens when there is a disparity between an individuals' personal values and the task that they are being asked to do, This could be as explicit as being asked to lie or there could be a conflict between organisational mission statement and the day to day reality.

Maslach argues that these six factors create a framework through which employee burnout can be addressed and tackled. It is also evident from this framework that the role that the organisation can

play in either contributing to employee burnout or in creating an environment that is conducive to an engaged workforce is highly material.

Job Demands Resource Model

The Job Demands Resource Model was first espoused by Bakker & Demerouti (2007). It has since become one of the most popular theories in explaining and describing a working model of employee engagement. The model proposes that there are two main inputs into employee engagement. These can be categorised as the attributes of the job itself and the personal resources that the employee is able to draw upon in times of difficulty or challenge. It is also assumed that this is not a fixed model and will change depending on the circumstances and the level of the inputs. For example, employees are an active participant in this process and can seek out either additional tools or resources to help with tasks and play an active role in their development using feedback and support that can assist with their development (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018).
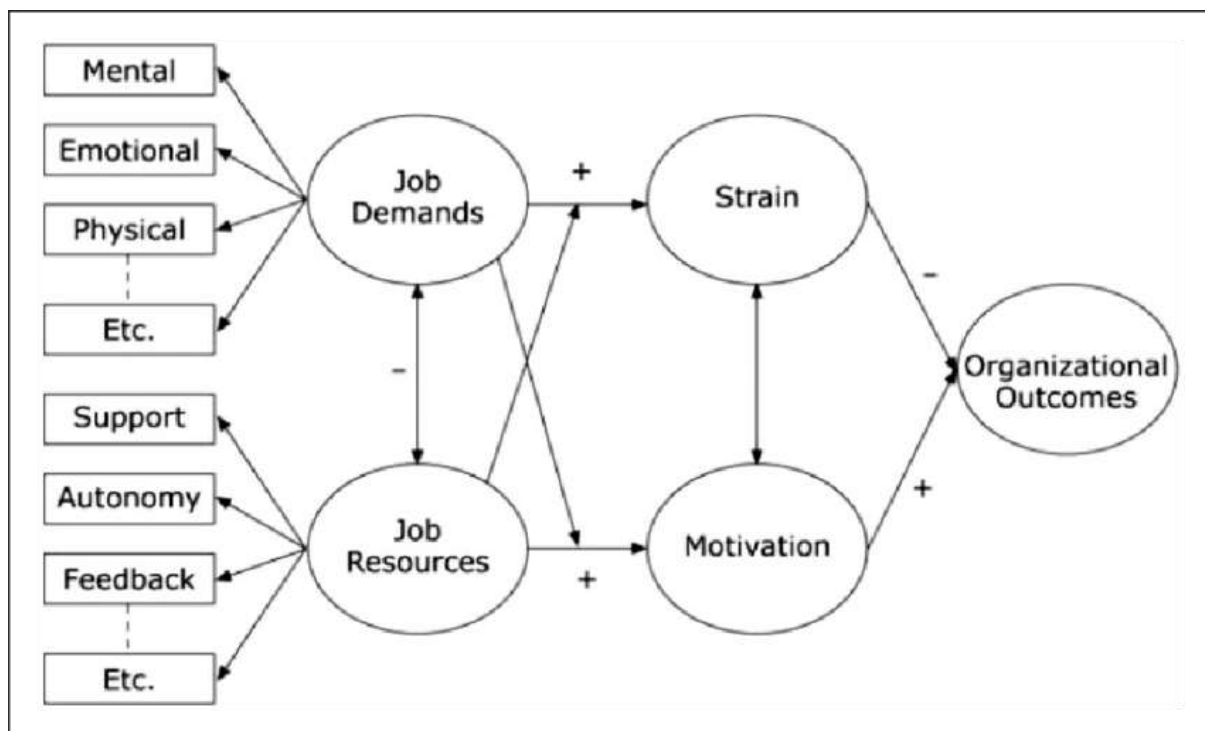
Illustration 5: Job Demands Resource Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Job Demands and Job Resources have been defined as follows:

Job Demands: "those physical, social or organisational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs"

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Job Resources: "the physical, psychological, social or organisational aspects of the job that do any of the following –

- Are functional in achieving work goals
- Reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs
- Stimulate personal growth and development

(Demerouti, et al., 2001).

This model is of interest to this author when considering front line employees in Company X that are operating in a customer services role. There is a real potential for emotional exhaustion as these roles require a high level of investment into "self-in-role" personas (Khan, 1990) when dealing with particularly difficult or challenging customers. These types of roles are generally considered to be most at risk of burnout and require a high degree of social support available in order to prevent this (Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti & Zanthopoulu, 2007).

A potential solution to this dilemma has been proposed in the form of "Job Crafting". This is a term that was devised by Wrzesniewski & Dutton (2001) and is defined as "the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work". While this is a theoretical sound idea, it does pose many operational challenges, particularly for Company X who operate in a highly controlled and regulated environment to which employees must adhere to.

Key Drivers of Employee Engagement

Given that high levels of employee engagement can result in improved organisational outcomes and have a positive impact at an employee level, it would be pertinent to explore what the drivers of employee engagement are. As we have seen, there is no one single definition of Employee Engagement that is universally agreed upon. It perhaps should then not come as a surprise that there is no universal definition of the key drivers of Employee Engagement. Thankfully, the available literature does help to guide us and there are several themes or similarities that begin to emerge.

One of the most cited reports into the drivers of employee engagement is 'Engaging for Success' (2009), commonly known as the MacLeod Review. Commissioned by the UK Government, David MacLeod and Nita Clarke set out to determine both the key drivers of employee engagement and the impact that this has on organisational performance. They conducted case studies across various industries and found common factors that helped to drive employee engagement. The report identified four key "enablers" of engagement:

- Leadership that provides a 'strong strategic narrative around the organisation'
- Line managers who motivate, empower and support their employees
- Provision for employee voice throughout the organisation, to involve employees in decision making
- Organisational integrity whereby the stated mission and values of the organisation are reflected in the actual culture

Zhang (2010) identified eight key drivers of employee engagement

- Trust and Integrity
- A rewarding job
- Effective and supportive direct manager
- Individual contribution to organisation
- Career development opportunities
- Pride in the company that the employee works for
- Supportive team-mates
- Excellent communication.

Wollard and Shuck (2011) undertook a comprehensive review of employee engagement literature and identified as many as 42 antecedents of employee engagement. Interestingly, half of these were individual or personal antecedents such as optimism and inherent motivation, half were organisational antecedents such as supportive organisational culture and manager feedback. This highlights the point that while an organisation can do a certain amount to create the right conditions for having engaged staff, the role of the individual employee is also paramount.

Aon Hewitt, the management consultancy firm, developed a comprehensive engagement model, where they define engagement as 'the psychological state and behavioural outcomes that lead to better performance'. They reviewed data from almost 100 companies world-wide between 2008 and 2012. Their analysis showed a high correlation between increased employee engagement and increased company sales growth.

They make the claim that their model is a 'scientifically proven methodology that provides a solution for improving employee performance and well-being that directly correlates to positive and tangible business outcomes'. This model is of interest as it builds on Hezberg's Two Factor theory (1959) by differentiating between foundational elements of engagement defined as The Basics and The Work and what it describes as the differentiators around organisational agility, engaging leadership and a focus on talent development. They argue that focusing on these engagement drivers, will result in improved engagement outcomes which in turn will improve business performance.
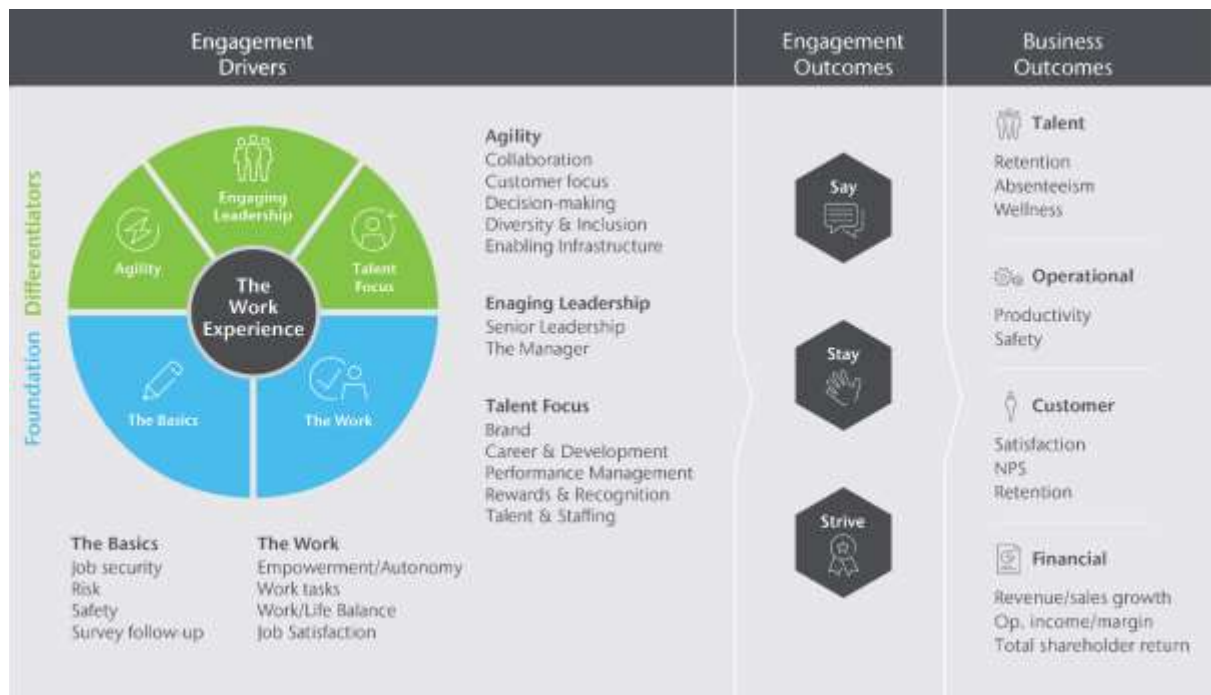
Illustration 6: Aon Hewitt 2013 Trends in Global Engagement

Oehler and Adair (2019) suggest that over two thirds of all companies studied in Kincentric's 2019 Employee Engagement Global Trends Review have engaged employees. They say that the trend of organisations investing heavily in engagement programmes and in upskilling managers as to the importance of employee engagement has contributed to this. They go on to state that "a consistent top driver of engagement is senior leaders' ability to create excitement for the future of the organization. Frontline managers need to help inspire and coach their teams to engage in behaviours that align with cultural priorities."
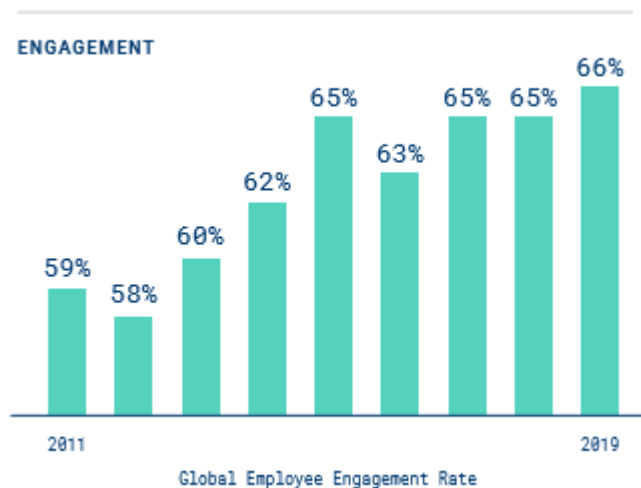
Illustration 7: 2019 Global Trends in Employee Engagement

Luthans et al (2002) argue that the manager's psychological state and how he or she presents themselves in the workplace has a relationship between the employees' level of engagement and impacts how effectively the manager is rated. The level of self-efficacy is an important antecedent for employee engagement. Popli et al (2016) build on this research and argue that the type of leadership style displayed by a manager has significant importance in developing a culture of engagement. Scott-Lennon et al (2010) argue that moving towards a facilitative management approach instead of an authoritarian approach will help to contribute to enhanced employee engagement.

The Role of the Manager

It is clear to this author from reading the literature that there are many antecedents to employee It is clear to this author from reading the literature that there are many antecedents to employee engagement. However, many studies agree that the role of the manager on the employee is one of the most critical aspects. Attridge (2009) and Schneider (2008) both believe that the role of the leader is one of the largest contributing factors affecting employee engagement. This view is also supported by Wang and Walumbwa (2007).

This view is support by Robinson (2009) who conducted an extensive case study into the role of the engaging manager. Earlier research had led her to believe that 'the line manager role is crucial in influencing employee engagement'. The research was conducted across seven diverse organisations and involved 25 'engaging managers', 22 senior managers and 154 team members. In depth interviews and focus groups were conducted along with questionnaires to understand how these managers inspire and engage their teams to perform well.

Her findings were consistent, irrespective of the type of business or size of teams that were being managed. Employees regularly cited the strength of their team spirit as being a key reason for high engagement scores. She states that 'the line manager's role in creating and maintaining engagement was vital, particularly around his or her approachability, awareness of what was happening in the organisation and the team and high levels of skill in two-way communication'.

Praise and recognition were regularly highlighted as a behaviour that had helped improved performance as was individual coaching, support and getting to know people on an individual basis. Team members felt that they understood the wider organisational context and were given a clear sense of purpose as to how their role fit into the company's strategic context. It was also apparent that while all the mangers and teams interviewed had high engagement scores, they also had consistently high levels of performance.

This piece of research is of interest in the context of this dissertation as it suggests that there is a universal approach that managers can take, irrespective of industry, that will result in high levels of engagement and performance.

Employee Engagement in Call Centre Environments

While a review of the literature on employee engagement helps to explain the definition, drivers and benefits of employee engagement both on an individual and organisational level, it is necessary to view employee engagement through a specific contextual lens. Call Centres have become ubiquitous over the last 20-30 years as companies seek the most efficient and cost-effective way of meeting their customers' needs. In effect, businesses that have call centres, either through an in-house or outsourced model have decided to take an approach of 'mass production to customer services' (Cameron, 2000).

While Call centres are structured differently depending on business requirements, there are some common traits. Customer call volume is managed through the sophisticated use of information and communication technology (ICT), allowing for atomisation and routinisation of customer calls. The use of this ICT allows for the distribution, management and monitoring of calls on both an organisational and individual level. The quality of the call or the customer interaction is then measured by a series of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that are enforced through a mixture of behavioural management and people strategies (Houlihan, 2002). According to Holman, Wood and Stride (2005) 'Performance monitoring is one of the most prominent and pervasive of all call centre practices. It is achieved in two main ways. First, information on employees' activity derived from the call management system enables supervisors to examine, for example, an individual's average call time, the time spent taking calls and the type of call taken'.

This model, with an emphasis on both managing the volume of the customer interactions and their quality combined with the constant measurement of KPIs, creates an inherent tension between quality and cost, autonomy of the employee and organisational control, standardisation and flexibility and between constrained job roles and enabling job design (Taylor and Bain, 1999).

Holman et al (2005) suggest that there are four main factors that have a significant impact on the engagement of customer service representatives (CSRs). These are as follows:

- Job Design
- Performance Monitoring
- HR practices
- Team Leader/Manager support

He goes on to state that the level of job design available will vary significantly between organisation, with some companies having a mandated script that CSRs must adhere to while other organisations allow greater autonomy and freedom to the customer interactions that an employee experience. In a study conducted by Deery, Iverson and Walsh (2002) they found that there was a positive correlation between a lack of variety in CSR roles and burnout of employees, suggesting that organisations that allow for a degree of variety and autonomy are more likely to have positive employee engagement outcomes.

Measuring Employee Engagement

As there is no universally defined definition of employee engagement, it is not surprising that there is no universal method of measuring employee engagement. According to Sachs (2014), there are no fewer than seven different scales that can be used to measure employee engagement. He states that the majority of these are based around Kahn's definition of engagement and some are based on the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES). There is some debate as to the effectiveness of the UWES method as a way of measuring engagement as its data validity has been questioned by Cole et al (2011).

These can lead to challenges for an organisation who may be measuring the wrong things and acting on this information and having no meaningful impact on engagement. Saks (2017) suggests the need for both a qualitative and quantitative approach to measuring engagement where employee voice is actively encouraged, and employees can clearly see how their contribution is having an impact on the organisation.

Conclusion

A comprehensive literature review is the foundation of any research-based study. The purpose of this literature review was to evaluate the existing literature in relation to employee engagement, explore the role of the manager in helping to drive employee engagement within organisations and to examine the distinct characteristics of employee engagement in a call centre environment.

This chapter explored the origins of employee engagement as a concept from Kahn's pioneering work on the necessary psychological conditions for employee engagement to exist, through different theoretical frameworks such as Maslach's Burnout Theory (1998) and Bakker's Job Demands Resource Model.

It became apparent to this researcher through the course of the literature review that there is no one single definition of employee engagement that is universally agreed on by researchers. As a result of this, there is no one framework or a single method of measuring employee engagement that organisations can adopt. Because of this, organisations can easily measure and focus on the wrong things. However, there is agreement that high levels of employee engagement result in higher levels of productivity and profitability for organisations. There is debate though about the nature of this relationship and distinction needs to be made between correlation and causation. This makes employee engagement a challenging and broad concept for organisations to successfully grasp.

What is evident through the course of the literature review is that there is consistent agreement amongst researchers that employee engagement is a positive outcome to strive for and that it has benefits to both the individual, the organisation and the customer. There is also a potential dark side to employee engagement whereby over engagement can also result in employee burnout and prove to be counter-productive in the long run.

The literature is also consistent in highlighting the importance of the role of the manager in facilitating high levels of employee engagement. It appears that the old maxim 'People don't leave bad jobs; they leave bad managers' holds more than a kernel of truth.

3 - Research Methodology

Overview

This section will provide an overview of the Research Objectives of this case study. It will also highlight the research methodology that is being used and will explain why that methodology has been selected. The researcher will discuss the procedure that will be followed for data collection and how the data will be analysed. Also, there will be due consideration given to ethics. Finally, the researcher will also explore the limitations that apply to this piece of work from a research perspective.

Research Objectives

The primary purpose of this research is to investigate the role of the manager in creating an engaged workforce within an Irish Telecommunications company. It also aims to explore the following key questions

- What do managers with high employee engagement scores within Company X do that contributes to these scores?
- How do managers achieve employee autonomy and empowerment in an environment that is both regulated externally and heavily controlled measured internally through various controls and procedures?
- Do managers see a link between high engagement scores and strong team performance?

It is important to note that the researcher is looking to explore correlation between employee engagement, the role of the manager and team performance, rather than causation.

Research Philosophy

In forming a research philosophy, the researcher has considered several factors, including access to data and individuals, the time that is available to the researcher and limitations that this may pose, data collection methods, ethics and the research paradigm within which to operate.

It is worth noting that Saunders et al (2007) describes research philosophy as an overarching term that "relates to the development of knowledge and the nature of knowledge". The researcher cannot avoid making certain assumptions in relation to developing new knowledge. These assumptions relate to how the researcher views the world and will be informed by practical considerations. Quinlann (2011) highlights the criticality of selecting the correct philosophical framework to match the research. As the researcher is conducting qualitative research and is primarily interested in the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of his interview subjects, this piece of research will follow the Interpretivism

epistemology. The researcher also recognises that he cannot be value free or detached from the subject and that the interpretation/reality of the subjects interviewed will also be driven by their own value judgements (O'Leary 2017).

The researcher has also considered factors such as Subjectivism and Objectivism. Subjectivism can be defined as "social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors. Social phenomena and categories are not only produced by social interaction, but they are in a constant state of revision" whereas Objectivism is defined as "social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of social actors. Social phenomena and the categories that we use in everyday discourse have an existence that is independent or separate from actors" (Bryman, 2015).

Research Methodology

The methodology that will be used to collect data will be qualitative and primarily consist of in depth 1-2-1 interviews. The researcher believes that this is the most effective way to gain the required information and will allow for flexibility, clarification of responses and probe answers in depth. While this may be more time consuming, the researcher is in the position to easily gain access to individuals within Company X and believes that the level of data collected will be richer than following a quantitative approach. It is the intention of the researcher to interview a minimum of seven individuals at different levels within Company X – one director, one Head of Department, one Senior Manager, two front line managers and two front line advisors. This will give a good cross section of views based on role held within the company. Data collected during these interviews will be analysed using structured observation, via a coding scheme that will be applied to help record answers that are given.

Participant Sample Selection

The researcher decided to conduct five semi-structured interviews with managers in Company X. As the researcher works in Company X, access to these managers was relatively straightforward. Issues of availability and scheduling were easily arranged. It was slightly more challenging for the researcher to decide which five managers to select. Within the Contact Centre, the management structure is as follows:

- Operations Director x 1
- Heads of Department x 2
- Department Managers x 7
- Team Leaders x 49
- Advisors x 600

The method that the researcher used in selecting the interviewees was non-probability sampling. Kane (2010) refers to this as a type of sampling where some individuals have no opportunity to be selected. The reason for this was in order to achieve a good mix of interviewees based on level within the organization, seniority, tenure and gender balance. The researcher felt that the benefit of having a good mix of interview subjects outweighed the potential risk of any selection bias. The managers who have been interviewed are as follows

- Operations Director x 1
- Head of Department x 1
- Department Manager x 1
- Team Leader x 2

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher had intended to conduct face to face semi-structured interviews. Anderson (2010) states that these types of interviews are an effective way of gathering data and allow the interviewer to build on the answers of the subject. They allow more flexibility in the structuring of questions and provide the researcher with the ability to ask probing questions, based on the answers that he has received. However, these need to be clearly planned and recorded to ensure that the data gathered is both reliable and unbiased. The researcher had intended to record these interviews via smartphone and save the data by job title of the interviewee in order to preserve anonymity.

Due to the current environment of the Covid-19 Pandemic and the fact that Company X's workforce has been adhering to government guidelines by working from home, it has not been possible to conduct face to face interviews. In order to overcome this obstacle, the researcher has conducted the interviews using Microsoft Teams. The software has a record functionality which has allowed the researcher to have a record of the conversations. Company X have been using Microsoft Teams daily since moving to a work from home model, so all participants were both familiar and comfortable with the technology. As the researcher is already known to the interviewees there were no issues in relation to rapport building using this technology (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013).

The data that has been collected has been analysed by using Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines. This approach has consisted of reading the data thoroughly and then clustering similar themes with a series of sub-themes also identified. This approach has followed the Six phases of thematic analysis:

- Familiarisation with the data
- Coding
- Searching for themes
- Reviewing the themes

- Defining and naming the themes
- Writing up the research

Ethical Considerations

The researcher has ensured that this piece of work has been carried out in an ethical fashion. Ethics has been defined as "the moral principle and guiding conduct, which are held by a group or even a profession" (Wellington, 2015). Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2016) state that ethics "concerns the actions that are acceptable, and behaviors are appropriate, by societies norms". As a student of the National College of Ireland, this researcher has been led by the ethical guidelines of the college.

Informed consent has been received from all participants and the option to participate in this piece of research was fully voluntary with no inducements to participate or negative consequences of non-participation involved. Anonymity of all participants and the company in which the case study has taken place have been fully observed. The principle of non-harm for all the participants has also been observed. These are the key ethical principles as referred to by Quinlan (2011). All participants in this piece of research were also informed that the data gathered by the researcher would be used for the purpose of this study only. All data gathered has been securely stored and anonymized to ensure compliance with the Data Protection Act 1988-2003.

These principles were made clear to the participants by the means of a consent form which was provided to them prior to the interviews taking place (Appendix 1). The principles were also reiterated verbally before the commencement of the interviews. In addition, the participants were also provided with full contact details for the researcher if they wished to contact him to discuss any concerns. Credit has been given to all resources used in this piece of research through the appropriate use of Harvard referencing.

Limitations

All research projects are subject to limitations, irrespective of the framework used and the approach that has been taken and this piece of research is no different. This case study has adopted a clear theoretical framework and has been based on the interrogation of up to date academic literature and has used a mixed approach of primary qualitative data, overlaid with secondary qualitative data but there are several limitations.

Only one company has been used as part of the case study. Therefore, the findings cannot be applied across the telecommunications sector or across any other industries, regions or locations. The study has been confined to Company X's Contact Centre operation in Dublin only and does not include UK

or European operations where there may be significant differences in both managerial approach and employee engagement.

The case study could have benefited from interviewing a larger pool of managers than the five who were interviewed. However, issues of availability, access and the researchers own ability to balance a busy day job with part time study meant that this was the optimum number that could be selected. The researcher would also have liked to run employee focus groups along with junior manger focus groups. However, there have been challenges in doing this due to the current Covid-19 Pandemic and how this has impacted Company X's ways of working.

The approach that this case study has taken is to examine a specific moment in time within Company X. While this has provided significant insight, a longitudinal study could have provided more depth in terms of looking at trend analysis and employee engagement levels over time. Unfortunately, that is outside of the scope of this study.

As this study is primarily interpretive in nature, it would be remiss of the researcher not to consider his own potential bias. As a HR Professional within Company X, the researcher is responsible for working with senior business leaders in helping define the People Plan (Appendix 2). A significant portion of this plan focuses on employee engagement, both in terms of measurement and the strategy to help drive employee engagement. It has therefore been difficult for the researcher to remain totally objective throughout this process. Having said that, the researcher believes that this is a valuable case study that will be of interest to both the HR community and academics.

4 – Research Findings

Introduction

Ahead of presenting the findings of the research, the researcher has provided an overview of Company X, along with the approach that the company takes to employee engagement. This will help to provide additional context for the findings.

Company Profile

As previously outlined, Company X is categorised as a telecommunications company. They can be regarded as one of Europe's largest entertainment companies with over 23 million customers across seven countries – UK, Ireland, Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland and Spain. The company employs over 30,000 people and generates annual revenues in excess of £13 billion. The company has increased significantly in scope and scale since launching in 1989 as the UK's first satellite TV service. Their group headquarters are based in London where their broadcasting and production facilities are based, along with various support functions for the business. The company is a market leader both in terms of television content production and sports broadcasting. They also have long term strategic partnerships with several key partners such as the English Premier League, HBO and Netflix.

The Ireland business opened in January 2013 with the expressed intention of providing a best in class experience for their Irish customers. While the company had been selling products in Ireland for over 20 years, all customers had previously been serviced out of the UK. The Ireland business employs almost 1000 people. 750 of these work in a call centre environment, 100 in retail stores throughout Ireland and the remaining 150 in support functions such as Marketing, Finance, Compliance, Legal and HR.

The Ireland call centre is structured across three departments – Sales, Service and Customer retention. There is an Operations Director who has overall responsibility for the effective running of the department, a Head of Service and a Head of Sales and Retention. The heads of department each have three Section managers reporting into them and they in turn have an average of six Team Leaders reporting into them. Typical team size is between 10-15 people. The demographic of the call centre is 62% male, 38% female, 80% of the employees are under 30 and average tenure is 2.5 years.

Since the Irish business opened in 2013, there has been a high degree of focus on performance of the business with an emphasis on customer retention and sales. While this resulted in significant business growth and profitability, it came at a cost with attrition levels and absence being higher than the industry norms and Ireland employee satisfaction levels being significantly lower than the company average. As a result of this, the Irish business has been on a significant journey of cultural transformation with a much greater degree of emphasis on long term sustainable performance. A clear expression of this is the fact that there is a five-year people plan in place that sits alongside the business plan.

Company X Ireland People Plan: Great people inspired to do great work
In 2024, Company X will look, feel and operate differently than today

Industry leader for inclusion	Empower and grow exceptional talent	Great work always recognised
A culture that drives a sense of belonging and healthy workforce	Recruitment & attraction transformed	Highly engaged/ high performing people
Gender balance at every level	Inspirational leadership culture	Balance of customer & people performance metrics
Multicultural diversity which reflects our population	Best in class facilities, learning, development & coaching initiatives	Transparent & balanced reward structures
Career paths that caters for multi generations	Future skills map & clear development paths	A feedback culture - coach and inspire
A disability-friendly organisation	Digital career platform that enables movement	Recognise people and great work always
No gender pay gap	Future workforce ready, Rotations & Talent programmes	

Simple & easy to always do our best

| Admin eliminated / automated for our leaders | Access to the best tech & tools in all workplaces | Flexible resourcing (Including Home Working) | Brilliant basics, delivered first time (ER, PDP process, ASR) | Operating models that build connections & collaboration |

Illustration 8: Company X People Plan

The People Plan is structured into three different buckets of activity with success metrics attached to each bucket and progress regularly reviewed by the People Executive Steering Group which consists of all the Ireland Directors, the Head of HR and HR Business Partner.

One specific element of this plan is around having Highly Engaged/High performing people. The reason for this is that Company X's HR team and senior business leadership agree that high engagement and high performance are synonymous with each other. There is a detailed plan around employee engagement in order to achieve this objective. This exists from a top down perspective looking at items that are relevant on an organisation level such as Work Life Balance, Pay, Leadership Culture and Communication. Each team then also has a bottom up plan for things that can be actioned at a team level. There is an Employee Engagement Champion on each team who works alongside the team leader in order to help put these local plans into action.

This helps to illustrate the point that there is a significant focus on Employee Engagement within Company X in Ireland and the gap between Ireland and UK engagement scores is starting to close.
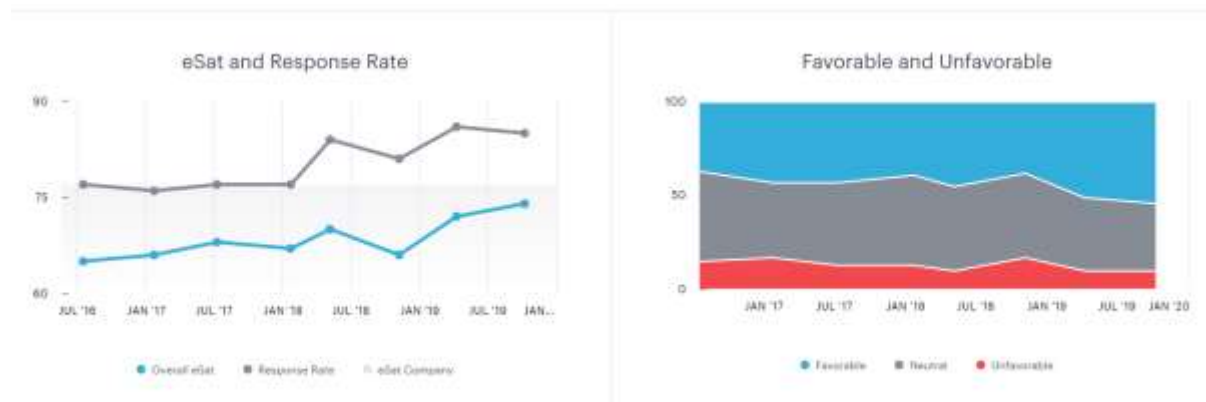

Illustration 9: Company X Ireland Employee Satisfaction ratings

In-depth Interviews

As outlined in the research methodology chapter, the researcher conducted 5 in depth semi structured interviews with the following individuals:

- Operations Director x 1
- Head of Department x 1
- Department Manager x 1
- Team Leader x 2

Due to the current Covid-19 Pandemic and the fact that Company X is currently operating in a 100% working from home environment, all the interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams. Each interview was scheduled for one hour. All took a minimum of 50 minutes and 2 of the interviews over-ran significantly due to the quality of the conversation. The interviews were recorded using Teams functionality and the researcher took comprehensive notes also.

Upon reviewing the data collected, it became apparent that there were several themes that emerged. These are as follows:

1. Attributes of Inspiring Leaders
2. The Link between Engagement and Performance
3. The Manager's Contribution
4. Benefits
5. Challenges
6. One Thing to Change

1 - Attributes of Inspiring Leaders

All the managers who were interviewed had either previously or currently worked with a leader or manager that they found to be inspiring to them personally. What was particularly interesting about this was the similarities that were evident in the language that was used to describe these leaders. The Operations Director referred to a sense of charisma and the ability to connect with people at all levels in the organisation – "You can sense Leadership when they walk into the room. It is partly how they carry themselves before they even open their mouth". He felt that a high level of emotional intelligence was essential in order to be an effective leader and that skills could be learned to improve on this but that there was a certain element of leadership that was innate.

The Head of Operations referred to the "how" of a leader she had previously worked with, that he had the ability to connect with people and inspire followership. She also highlighted work ethic as being critically important. Her view was the same as the Operations Director in that a high level of emotional intelligence was essential but differed slightly in her view that leadership could not be taught – that you either 'have it or you don't'.

The Sales Manager also identified the ability to connect with employees on a human level as being a key attribute of a leader that inspired him. He highlighted the ability to interact with all levels within the organisation and having a broad understanding of the business and being able to see the bigger picture as being important also – "The best boss I have ever had is X, he would engage with you on a personal level and you would not want to let him down. It would almost be like disappointing your father!"

Team Leader 1 highlighted two managers in Company X that inspired him and said that their characteristics were very similar. He said they both have very high standards, interact with you on a personal level, are excellent communicators and were fair and consistent in how they treated people across the business.

Team Leader 2 highlighted clear communication and the ability to be personable as being characteristics of a leader that inspired her. She said that she would not want to let that leader down and felt a strong sense of commitment to them because of the way that they interacted. She also highlighted emotional intelligence and treating people as human beings as being a key characteristic.

2 – The Link Between Engagement and Performance

All of those interviewed were unanimous in their agreement that there was a link between having an engaged team and performance levels. Interestingly, the Operations Director was of the view that contagion happens within teams and that this is either positive or negative – "I have seen it happen where one or two negative people can bring the whole team down. Suddenly, a team that was doing okay has a really bad atmosphere around them". He felt that Company X place a high degree of emphasis on the team and that because of this, engagement levels in the main are consistent across a team. He felt that teams are either engaged or disengaged and that this was reflected in the performance of that team. He did state that it was possible to get performance through bad management but that this was not sustainable over the long term.

The Head of Operations used an example to illustrate this point. One of her teams had been performing poorly and returned the lowest engagement scores in Company X in April 2019. She changed the manager of the team and over the last year both performance and engagement have improved significantly. This was the only thing that changed, with the nature of the work and all other structures remaining the same. However, the new manager placed a high degree of emphasis on communication within the team and this resulted in the turn-around in performance and engagement levels – "By changing the manager and removing a leader that had not been performing, we totally transformed the team. The whole atmosphere changed, and performance improved significantly".

The Sales Manager felt that 90% of the time, teams with high engagement scores will be high performing. He said that the manager pushes people in a positive way and because all the team are committed to achieving objectives that this will result in high performance. He did highlight that at times a bad manager can have short term success in performance through micro-management or using fear as a motivation tool but that this success is always short term and never sustainable.

Team Leader 1 felt there was a 'happy correlation' between engagement and performance. He said that engaged teams are more likely to be focussed on things such as their own development or wider organisational initiatives such as Corporate Social Responsibility programmes. This then fed into greater levels of commitment to the organisation which resulted in better team performance – "If sales are going well, everyone is happy. Also, it is a lot easier for sales to be going well when people are happy. It almost becomes a positive circle with one feeding the other".

Team Leader 2 is a relatively new team leader in Company X, and she said that one of the first things that she noticed was that the teams that had the best sales figures were also the teams with the best engagement scores. She said that this was one of the main reasons why employee engagement was so important to her as a manager because it 'almost guarantees that I am going to hit my targets'.

3 – The Manager's Contribution

While the five managers may have expressed it differently, they were again in unanimous agreement that the role of the manager is critical in driving employee engagement at an individual, team and organisational level.

The Operations Director was of the view that people leave their manager not the company. He said that the manager sets the tone for the team. He talked about the importance of how the manager 'shows up' and the face that he/she presents to the team. He highlighted the current Covid-19 pandemic as an example of this. As the crisis was unfolding the management team were making critical decisions and their teams were looking to them for guidance. Even though the management team was feeling overwhelmed and dealing with a situation that was well outside of their comfort zone, they needed to present a calm presence to the wider business so that people felt that the management team were in control of the situation and making the correct decisions for the business and its employees.

The Head of Operations was of the view that employee engagement was all down to the manager. She used the examples of different engagement scores from her different managers to highlight this point. One leader is struggling with relatively poor engagement scores and she felt that this was down to his communication style and that this was having a negative impact.

The Sales Manager talked about 'manager inputs resulting in engagement outputs'. He stated that how the manager sets the tone is critical. That a good manager will remain optimistic, set out clear objectives, tailor supports to the individual and make people feel involved in the team. He also said that a manager needs to be consistent in approach and treat people fairly. He also talked about the need for resilience as how the manager reacts to events has a significant impact on employees – "The Team Leader sets the tone. They are the first person that the employee looks to when they come in. How the Team Leader approaches setbacks is critical. If he or she is getting angry or stressed, this rubs off on other people".

Both Team Leader 1 and Team Leader 2 talked about the need for a manager to be consistent and to treat people fairly on the team. They felt that problems arise when employees think that they are being treated unfairly or that a manager has 'favourites' on his or her team. Team Leader 1 made an interesting point in that he felt that highly engaged teams will still perform well when the manager is not around as they do not want to let him/her down. Both Team Leaders stated that they felt the single most important factor in employee engagement was the role of the manager.

4 – Benefits

All managers were again in agreement that there are significant benefits in employee engagement to both the business, the individual and the customer.

The benefits to the business were highlighted as being a stronger business performance. This resulted from lower levels of absence, lower levels of attrition, greater likelihood of achieving targets and an ability of the organisation to make change at pace because people were 'on board' and committed to the business. The Operations Director listed additional benefits to the business such as engaged employees being more likely to commit to overtime, adapt to business needs and be more focussed on positive customer outcomes – "Employees who are engaged just 'get it'. They want to be here; they want to do a good job."

The Head of Operations did caution against the 'tail wagging the dog' insofar as there is a danger that the business listens to employees too much – "Sometimes I think we listen to our employees to much. There is a danger that we just end up pandering to employee engagement surveys and this can be a distraction at times". This was a minority view amongst the managers interviewed.

Some of the benefits listed for the individual included a greater sense of self and a sense of achievement for those that are highly engaged. Happiness was a theme that was cited by all five managers. The Operations Director and the Sales Manager both also felt that engaged employees were more likely to get promoted as they would be more likely to get involved in additional projects or have a higher profile within the organisation. Team Leader 1 and the Sales Manager highlighted better mental health as a benefit to the individual. They felt that employees who were highly engaged were more likely to be resilient and able to deal with the day to day challenges of working in a call centre environment and talking to customers all day.

All five managers agreed that having engaged employees benefits the customer. Company X strives for what is called 'First Call Resolution'. This means that a customers' query or complaint is resolved at the first attempt. If employees are highly engaged, this is much more likely to happen as the employee will be invested in this and have a sense of ownership with each customer. The Head of Service used an example of how she feels as a customer when she is dealing with an employee that is either unenthusiastic or unhelpful and how different this customer experience is when dealing with someone that is obviously trying to help and is passionate about the company and its products or services.

Interestingly, there was no consensus amongst the five managers on the challenges of creating engaged teams, with each having a slightly different viewpoint.

The Operations Director felt that the biggest challenge is in ensuring that front line leaders (Team Leaders in Company X) are engaged themselves. He believes that when a leader is not engaged, this has a critical impact on the team and can be almost impossible to recover. He was somewhat self-critical in feeling that Company X have not done enough to ensure that front line leaders are fully engaged. He is concerned that this will become a problem as leaders at this level become more tenured and are spending more time in role – "We need to do more to make sure our Team Leaders are engaged. As a population, they have so much influence within our business but sometimes we don't involve them enough in decision making".

The Head of Operations felt that the biggest challenge was the need to constantly innovate. She is of the view that Company X does a massive amount of activity in relation to employee engagement and that some employees do not appreciate the level of effort that goes into this as it is the first professional environment that many of them have worked in. She says that as a leader this can at times be frustrating. She also feels that Company X could do more to leverage best practice from other organisations when it comes to employee engagement.

The Sales Manager felt that the biggest challenge to creating engaged teams is the fact that a Contact Centre Employee's role can be very monotonous. He described the role as being repetitive and challenging having to speak to customers all day every day. He said that the nature of the calls can at times be challenging. Because of this, he generally thinks that the life span of a Contact Centre Employee is about two years. After that, he feels that employee engagement starts to drop off and that the limited opportunities for advancement in what is essentially a hierarchical pyramid structure can be frustrating for employees. He also stated that shift patterns can have an impact on employee engagement but acknowledges that there has been a lot of work done by Company X in order to improve work life balance.

Team leader 1 highlighted burnout as a challenge to employee engagement. He felt that when things are not going people's way from a performance perspective that this can really get some people down. He felt that this reflects how the business is structured, with a daily focus on individual goals and targets.

Team Leader 2 felt that tools and resources were a challenge. Employees can get frustrated if the technology that is supposed to help them do their jobs is not working properly. This happens when there are either IT issues at group level that impact the Irish Business or can be simple things like broken headsets. She also cited that time was a challenge for her personally and that she needs to be strict with time management to ensure that she is delivering what she needs to.

6 – One thing to Change

All five managers were asked what one thing they would change within Company X that they believed would result in higher employee engagement. They were effectively given a 'magic wand' and there were no constraints on what they could choose. This question probably caused the managers the most difficulty in answering and once again there was no agreement or consistency in the answers that were given.

The Operations Director would ensure that all front-line leaders had the same level of clarity and ambition as Heads of and Directors. He also felt that it was important to involve them more in decision making rather than giving them briefing packs to go through with their teams. He felt that several lessons have been learned during the Covid-19 Pandemic and that certain supports and structures have been put in place that should continue. For example, there used to be Quarterly 'Town Halls' that all leaders would attend. Instead, there is now a 30-minute weekly briefing call that the Operations Director and the HR Business Partner hold for the 50 front line leaders and this has really helped with landing messages and ensuring clarity across the leadership group.

The Head of Operations struggled to answer this question as she feels that Company X does so much as is – "I don't know what more we can do to be honest. I have never worked for a company before that's so people focussed". She did think that it was potentially a flaw that the business has a policy of promoting internally to Team Leader level and that Company X could benefit from some 'Outside In' thinking at Team Leader level.

The Sales Manager said that the one thing he would change would be for all employees to be aligned to Company X's values and for there to be real clarity across the business on the importance of the values. He felt that if this happened, it would result in employees always thinking about the customer, people would be communicating more efficiently, there would be better behaviours and that

employees would feel more empowered. He felt that organisational values acted as a foundation for high engagement.

Team Leader 1 said that he would empower front line employees more and give them a greater sense of autonomy. He questioned whether Company X engages enough with its employees in using their expertise. While there are feedback mechanisms around process improvement, he does not think that these are simple enough to use or that front line employees have enough input into changes to operational processes or procedures that have a direct impact on their day to day roles.

Team Leader 2 said that she would equalize incentives across the three different departments – Sales, Customer Service and Retention. The incentive model places a greater emphasis on Sales so high performers in this department will earn considerably more than high performers in Customer Service or Retention. She thinks that this is unfair and that if the business is really committed to the customer, earning potential in the form of performance related pay should be the same across the three departments.

Overall Findings

The analysis of the primary research found that there were several similarities in the answers that were given by the five managers that were interviewed. Overall, they had a broad understanding of employee engagement as a concept. While not referring to any theoretical frameworks they highlighted several key academic concepts

- Feeling of contribution
- Level of motivation
- Investment in role and company
- Sense of satisfaction or enjoyment

There was universal agreement that Employee Engagement contributes to both team and individual performance. Indeed, they all felt that this was not even up for debate and felt that it was true of all the teams that they managed. All were able to give examples of high performing teams with Company X that have high levels of employee engagement as measured through the company's twice yearly eSat Survey. Those that were not front-line managers (Operations Director, Head of Operations, Sales Manager) also gave examples of teams that had low performance and low employee engagement scores.

There was also a high degree of consistency in their views around the attributes of managers that have highly engaged teams, with the most commonly cited characteristics being as follows:

- Consistency
- Fairness
- Communication
- Empathy
- Emotional Intelligence

All also agreed that creating empowerment and autonomy in a call centre environment is a challenge and concepts such as job crafting only have a limited application in an environment that is externally regulated through ComReg and has a high degree of repetition. However, they felt that levels of autonomy are enhanced by internal programmes/activities such as the following

- Mentor programme
- Employee Engagement Champions
- Employee Networks
- Specialist/Champion roles

Overall, the researcher felt that there was a high degree of engagement in the process from the five managers that were interviewed. The answers that were given were rich with context and example and there was a high degree of honesty from the participants.

5 – Conclusion

Overview

The research conducted in this dissertation set out to investigate the role of the manager in creating an engaged workforce within an Irish telecommunications company. The research also set out to explore three sub-objectives:

- What do managers with high employee engagement scores within Company X do that contributes to these scores?
- How do managers achieve employee autonomy and empowerment in an environment that is both regulated externally and heavily controlled measured internally through various controls and procedures?
- Do managers see a link between high engagement scores and strong team performance?

The literature review highlighted key definitions, theories and antecedents of employee engagement and focussed on the role of the manager in creating an environment where employee engagement can flourish (Robinson, 2009). Overall, the findings of the research mostly aligned with the established theories reviewed by the researcher. It was also apparent that Company X adopts key principles of creating an engaged workforce, as outlined in the literature review (Aon Hewitt, 2013) (Holman et al, 2005).

Thematic Analysis of Research and Literature Review

All five participants had a good understanding of what employee engagement is and its benefits to both the individual and the organisation. They talked about the individual's sense of contribution, the level of motivation to complete tasks and the extent to which the individual is invested in the company.

This understanding can be clearly linked with academic theorists such as Robinson et al (2004) who states that engagement is "a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its values. An engaged employee is aware of the business context and works with colleagues…to improve performance for the benefit of themselves and the organisation". It is also closely aligned to Bakker, Demerouti and Brummelhuis (2012) who talk about vigour, dedication and absorption.

There was universal agreement that the role of the manager is critical in driving employee engagement with teams. The Operations Director and Head of Service both gave almost identical quotes where they said that "People don't leave their employer; they leave because of their manager". This a view that is support by the research conducted by many academics including Zhang (2010),

The MacLeod Review (2009) and Robinson (2009) to name but a few. The most commonly cited characteristics of a good manager were consistency, fairness, communication, empathy and emotional intelligence. Once again, this view is supported by the literature, especially in the work undertaken by Robinson (2009). She specifically says, 'the line manager's role in creating and maintaining engagement was vital, particularly around his or her approachability, awareness of what was happening in the organisation and the team and high levels of skill in two-way communication'. It was the belief of the participants in the case study that by displaying these behaviours regularly, managers that did so got higher employee engagement scores that those that did not.

There was less universal agreement on how to create autonomy and empowerment in a highly regulated environment that Company X operates in. All agreed that this was a challenge but did not agree with academics such as Holman et al (2005) who suggest that 'job crafting' can be a potential antidote. The Operations Director was as explicit as saying "We have certain performance and regulatory objectives that we have to hit, and everything has to be done within the context of achieving these". However, they felt that it was possible to enhance autonomy beyond the pure confines of the job itself though both development programmes and wider Corporate Social Responsibility activities that the company undertakes. This view is supported by Deery, Iverson and Walsh (2002) who suggest that an increased level of variety in call centre roles reduces the possibility of burnout.

Finally, there was universal agreement that managers across the business see the link between high engagement scores and strong team performance. The Head of Service, who is relatively new to the business, said that she was initially surprised at the level of People focus within Company X but has come to see the benefits. Again, this view is supported by the literature and studies such as Gallup (2013) and the Corporate Executive Board (2008) who have shown an empirical link between engagement and performance.

Recommendations for Further Research

As discussed in the Research Chapter, there are several limitations applicable to this piece of research. These included the time available to the researcher, access to individuals and the fact that the study only focusses on one telecommunications company in Ireland so cannot be considered to have wider application across the industry. The research was also completed during the Covid-19 pandemic which also posed challenges, primarily around not being able to conduct face to face interviews or focus groups and instead having to rely on technology.

It is the view of the researcher that further study into the role of the manager in driving employee engagement in a call centre environment is warranted. Call Centre environments are unique in the challenges that they pose to both organisations and employees. Burn-out, repetition, difficulty in job crafting and a lack of autonomy are significant issues. If time had permitted, the researcher believes that a more in-depth study of these factors at a front-line employee level would be particularly interesting. Some such studies have been conducted (Deery et al, 2002) (Holman et al, 2005) but none specifically within Ireland so it would be interesting to see the correlation or indeed differences based on the views of an Irish workforce.

As has been previously outlined, the antecedents of employee engagement are many. However, many scholars highlight the need for autonomy and the ability to 'job craft' and have a degree of variety to one's role as being critical factors. A specific study on how this can be achieved in a call centre environment and the benefits of doing so would be of interest.

In addition, while this piece of research has given an overview of a managers view of their role in driving employee engagement within a specific organisation, it has not included the views of employees on the front line who are interacting with the managers daily. An obvious opportunity for further study would be to correct this omission.

In conclusion, this piece of research has given a comprehensive review of the literature that is available in relation to employee engagement and the role of the manager. It has looked at different theoretical frameworks and explored the other antecedents of employee engagement. It has then applied a robust research framework in order to investigate the role of the manager in creating an engaged workforce in an Irish telecommunications company and explored several themes identified by the managers during the research. Finally, the research as suggested a pathway for future scholars to walk down in order to further explore this fascinating subject.

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Appendix

1 - Consent Form

Investigation into the role of the manager in creating an engaged workforce within an Irish Telecommunications Company

Consent to take part in research

- I……………………………………… voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves participating in an interview that will take approximately 1 hour via Microsoft Teams
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research
- I agree to my interview being recorded via Microsoft Teams
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in a dissertation which will be published online by National College of Ireland
- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm, they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and recordings will be retained in the home of Rob Sutton until 11/20
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years until November 2022
- I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Rob Sutton, MA in Human Resource Management, bobbysutton@gmail.com 0860149780

Signature of research participant

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Signature of participant   Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

-------------------------------------- ---------------------

Signature of researcher   Date

2 - Interview Questions

<u>Introduction</u>

- Please describe your job and your role in the organisation?
- What is your understanding of Employee Engagement?
- Is there anyone in the organisation that inspires you as a leader? If so, why is this?

<u>Importance of Employee Engagement</u>

- How would you describe your own levels of engagement?
- Do you think Employee Engagement matters to both the individual and Company X?
- What do you think are the benefits of high employee engagement to the individual, the business and our customers?
- Do you think there is a link between high employee engagement and strong team performance?

<u>Role of the Manager</u>

- Why do you think some teams have better engagement scores than others?
- In your view, what is the single most important factor in driving employee engagement?
- What do you think good leaders do to drive engagement in Company X?
- Does Company X do enough to equip our managers with the skills and knowledge needed to drive employee engagement on their teams?
- What is the biggest challenge to having highly engaged teams?
- If you could change 1 thing that you believe would result in higher employee engagement, what would it be?

3 – Pro-forma Interview Invite

Sutton, Rob (HR Business Partner)
Required Sutton, Rob (HR Business Partner)

Accept ∨ | ? Tentative ∨ | ✕ Decline ∨ | Propose New Time ∨ | ⋯

Mon 01/06/2020 14:34

01 June 2020 16:00-16:30   Teams

Dear Manager,

As discussed, you are being invited to participate in an interview for my dissertation research. Your assistance is greatly appreciated and hopefully will not take up too much of your time. For the purpose of my dissertation, I will be interviewing five people managers and have selected you as someone who I believe will add value to my research.

Before you accept/reject this invite, please read the below carefully which explains the purpose of your participation and that full confidentiality and protection based on your participation is assured. If you accept this invitation but need to cancel at a later date please let me know as I will need to arrange for another participant.

Do you have to take part?
That is totally up to you. I have selected you on the basis that I feel that your opinions will add value to my research but participation is 100% optional

Will what I say to you be kept confidential?
All information collected will be treated confidentially. Anonymity will be ensured and you will not be named in my dissertation. Data being collected is for academic purposes only and will only be used in the completion of my dissertation. All data gathered shall be managed according to the University's policy on academic integrity. Our call will be recorded via Microsoft Teams but this will only be used to help me transcribe the interview

What will happen to the results of the research study?
The findings from our interview will be categorised and analysed by me only. No names will be attached to any of the data gathered. The findings will be used to answer my key research questions.

Thanks in advance for your participation and if you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact me.
Regards
Rob

Join Microsoft Teams Meeting

Learn more about Teams | Meeting options

4 - Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule			
Attendee	**Date**	**Scheduled Time**	**Duration**
Operations Director (recorded)	18/05/2020	12:00-13:00	75 minutes
Head of Department (recorded)	18/05/2020	16:00-17:00	50 minutes
Section Manager (recorded)	19/05/2020	09:00-10:00	70 minutes
Team Leader 1 (recorded)	20/05/2020	11:00-12:00	50 minutes
Team Leader 2 (recorded)	21/05/2020	14:00-15:00	65 minutes

5 – List of Illustrations

Illustration 1: Company X Human Resources Operating Model, internal document

Illustration 2: Company X, Annual People Survey Question Set, internal document

Illustration 3: Antecedents of Engagement (Saks, 2006)

Illustration 4: Psychological Conditions of Engagement (Khan, 1990)

Illustration 5: Job Demands Resource Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007)

Illustration 6: Aon Hewitt 2013 Trends in Global Engagement

Illustration 7: 2019 Global Trends in Employee Engagement

Illustration 8: Company X People Plan, Internal document

Illustration 9: Company X Ireland Employee Satisfaction ratings, internal document