An exploratory investigation into Employee Engagement in the Non-profit Sector

Employees' understanding of the meaning and antecedents of employee engagement in an Irish non-profit organisation

Gemma Whelan
Student Number: 18150471

MA Human Resource Management

National College of Ireland

Supervisor: Pauline Kelly Phelan

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Name: _Gemma Whelan_

Student Number: _18150471_

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Material submitted for award

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Abstract

Since its debut, employee engagement has been and continues to be considered one of the top drivers of organisational success. This is due to its association with advantageous outcomes rooted in procuring maximum efficiency from the largest overhead in most organisations; its staff. Despite its popularity in practice and ongoing literary attention, there remains considerable disparity surrounding the topic's precise meaning and scope. This has led to the reporting of many different antecedents to employee engagement and therefore inconsistent advice on how to implement it in practice. Studies show a wide breadth of varying antecedents that can also be linked with other constructs and so are a cause for confusion over its distinction from other management practices for organisational success. Research advocates a necessity for engagement frameworks to be adapted for different purposes and contexts. The non-profit sector has been reported to have one of the lowest engagement rates compared to the private and public sectors, yet despite this and its unique context, has a lean literary focus.

This study aims to shed light on this gap in the literature by exploring the meaning and antecedents of engagement in the context of an Irish non-profit organisation.

Using an interpretive philosophy, a qualitative inductive approach was adopted to thematically analyse data collected through one-to-one interviews with 8 staff members across 4 departments in the Irish non-profit organisation being studied. These findings were analysed thematically and compared to theories and framework presented in the literature review. Practical implications drawn from these findings were then discussed and recommendations were made based on the analysis and discussion.

The key themes that emerged from the findings were:

- Theme 1 – Types of engagement
  Employee engagement is an adaptive multi-faceted construct. It involves the relationship of employees with their individual work/job and with their organisation.
- Theme 2 – The spectrum of engagement
  Engagement is transient and can be viewed as a spectrum which includes disengagement.
- Theme 3 – Antecedents for non-profit engagement in the chosen organisation
  These were in support of Akingbola and Van Den Berg (2019)'s framework (with the addition of social involvement) which is significant in its' application to an Irish context.

Four additional sub-themes emerged:

- The strength of value congruence differed between management and worker
- A balance of internal and external recognition
- Engagement management vs. disengagement management
- Social involvement as a significant antecedent for non-profit engagement

This study may be used as a practical tool in understanding the engagement of employees for the organisation being studied and may act as a guide for other non-profit organisations or researchers in the field.

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that this submission in partial fulfilment of a MA in Human Resource Management is wholly my own work and all materials consulted and ideas garnered in the process of researching this dissertation have been properly and accurately acknowledged.

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Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Employee engagement has been shown to have a number of benefits for organisations as well as for individual employees (Seppala *et al.,* 2018; Macey and Schneider, 2008). Advantages such as increased performance and reduced turnover have made it an increasingly popular topic amongst HR scholars and practitioners over the past three decades (Albrecht *et al.,* 2015). So much so, that a survey conducted by IBEC (2019) of more than 400 Irish HR professionals listed it as the number one top priority for Irish organisations in 2020. Even without considering the ongoing struggle that all organisations face of an ever-changing workforce and market, spawning from growing globalisation and digitisation (IBEC, 2019), employee engagement seems to be an approach worth adopting in order to optimise functionality in any organisation. In saying this and despite its' growing popularity in the research, Gallup (2017) reported a surprisingly low percentage of engaged workers globally. According to this research, only 15% of workers are reported to be engaged. Non-profit organisations have the extra challenge of stringent budgets based on unpredictable donations and government funding (Akingbola, 2012; Hall *et al.,* 2003). They are also accountable for public money which adds to the justification and the need for a highly functioning workforce (Akingbola, 2013). A report published by Quantum in 2015 investigated employee engagement in 18 different industries in the USA. They reported the non-profit industry as having the third lowest levels of engagement, with public administration having the second lowest and healthcare having the lowest. They found that non-profit employees were 7% less engaged than the average across all industries.

There has been extensive research surrounding employee engagement in general, yet a consensus over its definition has not been agreed upon (Liao *et al.,* 2009, Seppala *et al.,* 2010; Schaufeli *et al.,* 2002). In order to introduce an idea, a clear definition must be established as this informs influencing

factors which in turn informs the appropriate interventions and strategies to implement the idea (Fraenkal and Wallen, 2006).

This project aims to synthesise and critique the literature surrounding the concept of employee engagement in general - its meaning, antithesis, neighbouring theoretical constructs and antecedents before focusing on the smaller body of relevant research in the non-profit sector specifically. The intention is to establish a solid foundation of its current stance in the literature before conducting deeper primary research to build on this area. The objective of the research is to then build on this research topic by investigating the meaning of the concept and its influential antecedents in a non-profit organisation through conducting qualitative, semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with 8 employees from the chosen organisation.

The Organisation

The non-profit organisation being studied has approximately 250 staff across 5 different departments and 15 locations around Ireland. Providing a free social service to the public, its mission is to become and remain as accessible as possible to those in need of the service. The funding supporting this mission comes through regular fundraisers, grants and public and corporate donations. A small percentage (approx. 20%) is provided by governmental funding. The organisation's long-term strategy is to carefully balance the maintenance of its existing service to the required standard while also expanding to those geographical areas in which it is shown to be needed. After recent organisational restructuring, employee engagement was highlighted as a key focus in the aligned long-term HR strategy. Aspects of staff efficacy such as performance management are in place at management level, however currently there is no measurement tool or formal strategy for engagement in use. In considering this as part of my literary review it became apparent that there was a need to explore the fundamentals of this construct as a prerequisite to looking at how best to

measure it or which management practices to adopt in order to implement it. This research study hopes to etch out which factors are most influential in order to give a clear picture of what engagement looks like for this organisation in a necessary first step to creating a sustainable long-term engagement plan.
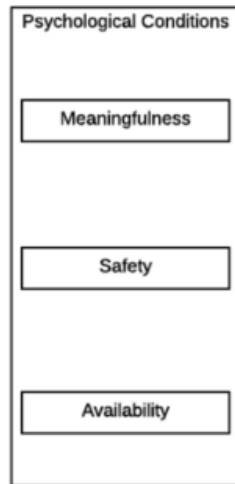
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Structure

This chapter aims to investigate the broad topic of employee engagement throughout the literature focusing on seminal authors and theories with a view to gaining some clarity over its definition and distinction from neighbouring concepts. The literature review will then focus on the antecedents to employee engagement in general before concentrating on the context of the non-profit sector. Based on this review, gaps in the literature will then be highlighted and the chosen area to be explored will be presented.

Employee Engagement

When researching the broad topic of Employee Engagement, two early seminal authors emerged; Kahn and Saks.

Kahn (1990) was the first to pioneer the concept of Employee Engagement, extracting and distinguishing it from the pre-existing concept of attachment (Goffman, 1961). Kahn's theory of engagement is derived from three psychological conditions - meaningfulness, safety and availability. Parallels can be drawn from this concept to Maslow's hierarchy of needs in motivational theory:

Psychological Conditions

Meaningfulness

Safety

Availability

Self-
Actualization
Needs

Esteem Needs

Belonging Needs

Safety Needs

Physiological Needs

Adapted from Kahn (1990)   Maslow (1943)

Saks (2006) explains employee engagement as the level of attention and absorption an employee has when they work. Saks who was the first to make a distinction between employee engagement and organisational engagement also argued that Social Exchange Theory (SET) provides a more appropriate argument as to why employees become more or less engaged in their work or organisation. The idea behind SET in the context of employee engagement is that employers and employees mutually commit to a level of engagement based on the level they perceive is reciprocated (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). In other words an employee will only work to the value they feel their employer places on them whether that be monetary or otherwise.

Since associations can be drawn between Saks and Kahn's meanings of employee engagement with other existing theories (Maslow, SET), it leaves room for theoretical confusion as there could be some conceptual overlap. However, Kahn paints a broader picture of the concept whereby it spans across three distinct dimensions: Cognitive/Intellectual, Emotional and Physical/Behavioral. It is the combination of behaviours from these three dimensions that together formulate employee engagement.
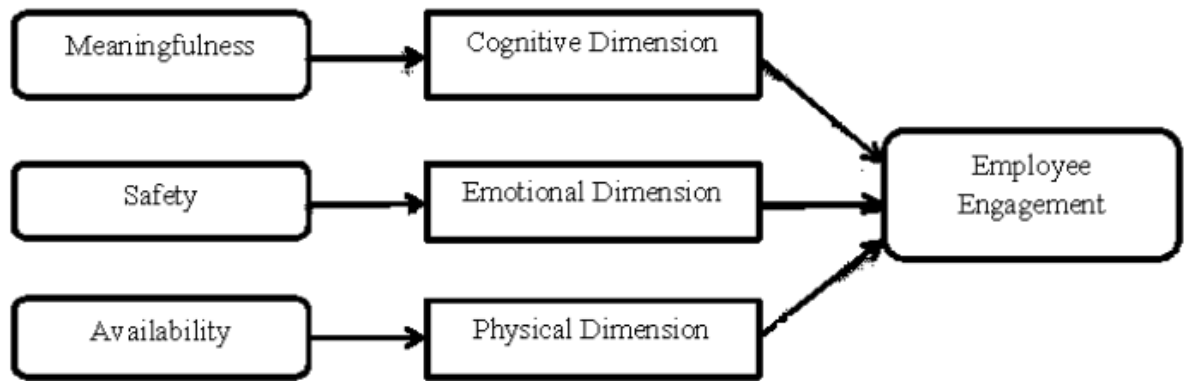
Visual representation of Kahn's Engagement Model (Schaufeli *et al.,* 2006)

These dimensions are widely supported in the literature in different combinations and have served as the foundation for further research and development into the area of Employee Engagement.

These channels will be used to categorise the terms the participants use to describe employee engagement from their perspective in an effort to gain a structure to its meaning for this particular cohort.

Cognitive/intellectual	Soane *et al.* (2012), Kahn (1990), Maslach *et al.* (2001) Saks (2005), Shuck and Wollard (2010)
Behavioural/Physical	Kahn (1990), Saks (2005), Harter *et al.* (2002), Maslach *et al.* (2001), Shuck and Wollard (2010)
Emotional	Kahn (1990), Saks (2005), Harter *et al.* (2002), Shuck and Wollard (2010)

A report by MacLeod and Clarke in 2008 reviewed over 50 different definitions for employee engagement, which alludes to the level of variety surrounding the interpretation of the concept. Since then, even more definitions have emerged. Amongst these, employee engagement is described as various combinations of the following terms:

Defining Terms	Author
Involvement	Harter *et al.* (2002)
Attachment	Goffman (1961) Kahn's (1990)
Absorption	Schaufeli *et al.* (2002) Saks (2006)
Attention	Saks (2006)
Attitude	Robinson *et al.* (2004)
Satisfaction	Harter *et al.* (2002) White (2011)
Enthusiasm	Harter *et al.* (2002)
Investment (mental and emotional)	Czarnowsky (2008)
Commitment	Macleod (2008), Robinson (2012)
Motivation	Macleod (2008)
Vigour	Schaufeli *et al.* (2002)
Dedication	Schaufeli *et al.* (2002)
Empowerment	Pati (2012)

Adapted from Shrotryia and Dhanda (2019)

From an overview of the various definitions, terms and aspects of this dynamic topic, it seems that the structure of employee engagement can be considered as an expression of intellectual, physical and emotional behaviours towards both the work environment and the work itself in the presence of the psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability.

A general definition of employee engagement was selected for the purpose of the study as it was deemed the most appropriate in sufficiently capturing the wide scope of the meaning of this broad topic:

"Engagement is an umbrella term used to measure and describe various forms of involvement or connection with one's job or work environment" (Bakker and Leiter, 2010).

The defining terms in the literature will be presented to the participants. These will be explored to investigate which they perceive to most closely match their understanding of employee engagement or which terms they would choose to use instead. After this, the chosen definition by Bakker and Leiter, 2010 will be presented and used as the definition going forward in the research. This will be done at the end of the interview so as not to influence participants' answers at the beginning.

The Context of the Non-Profit Sector

Akingbola, a leading author in non-profit HRM literature addresses the importance of recognising the distinctive context of the non-profit or "third" sector when it comes to considering organisational management practices (Akingbola, 2013).

Non-profit organisations are largely dependent on fundraisers, public donations and government funding which can be unreliable, seasonal and/or inconsistent (Hall *et al.,* 2003). Unlike the private sector, the very nature of their design necessitates all profits go back into the service instead of being distributed to stakeholders (Hansmann, 1980). Similar to the public sector, there is accountability to spend this funding effectively and responsibly as these public and corporate donations are voluntary and are affected greatly by the perceived integrity of the organisation (Helmig *et al.* 2004). If donations are perceived to be used for anything other than the essence of the organisation, it could be construed as illegitimate and these vital avenues

of funding will be adversely affected (Akingbola, 2013). Here, reputation and public image has an important role to play. Therefore, management cannot always offer competitive salaries and benefits for its staff. Because of these financial constraints, some HR elements that may be relevant to employee engagement such as reward and recruitment practices are somewhat curtailed (Akingbola, 2012; Hall *et al.* 2003).

It is hard to know whether this negatively affects employee engagement in Irish non-profit organisations as the statistics are not available but Kular *et al.* (2008) suggests that non-profits have high levels of engagement due to the intrinsic reward of passion and fulfilment that is linked with making a social impact. Following this logic, those drawn to work in non-profits are more willing to forego high salaries and monetary perks for the good of the mission (Kular *et al.,* 2008). However, statistics from an engagement report of 5,500 organisations across 15 industries in America found that the non-profit sector was in the top three of least engaged industries (Quantum, 2015). This brings to question what effect the contextual factors of non-profits have on the antecedents of engagement.

 Burnout

Burnout is described as a negative psychological state characterised by exhaustion, cynicism and reduced professional efficacy and is therefore correlated with negative individual and organisational outcomes such as poor performance and wellbeing (Freudenberger, 1989). There are a number of studies that apply the meaning of engagement as the antithesis of burnout (Maslch and Leiter, 1997; Maslach, 2011; Gonzalez *et al.,* 2006). In fact, the most widely credited engagement measurement tool, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), is built from this idea. It determines that the absence of burnout indicates engagement and theorises that burnout is caused by the erosion of engagement (Kular *et al.* 2008; Schaufeli *et al.*

2002). There is no neutral term put forth here, instead it seems to depict a spectrum between the two terms; burnout and engagement.

Harshitha (2015) creates a distinction between those who are not engaged and those who are actively disengaged. The former is an inoffensive work state where individuals put in time but not energy or passion. They complete tasks as expected but do not go above and beyond their duties. Meaning it is only those exceptional cases where one would be deemed engaged. Harisha's disengagement and Shaufeli's burnout are much the same in terms of definition which raises the question of whether they are one and the same or if one is further down the spectrum than the other. Hallberg (2006) argues that engagement could only be defined as the opposite to burnout if the definition of burnout was to be expanded upon. Instead, as with Harisha's study, it is proposed that engagement means more than just its opposite, but rather a state of optimal functioning.

Quantum (2015)'s report on engagement in the non-profit sector focuses on the low rates of employee engagement in non-profit organisations throughout America. It does not refer to burnout but instead proposes an engagement scale broken into four parts: Engaged, Contributing, Disengaged and Hostile. The added level of hostility refers to those who are not just disengaged in their own work but who intentionally impact other's engagement levels in a negative way.

The topic of research intends to focus on engagement rather than its antithesis and to cover the two would be outside the scope of this study. Because of this, participants will not be asked directly about burnout, hostility, disengagement or contribution. However, as it is recurrent in the various meanings, models and frameworks of engagement, it is relevant to note. Should participants offer this view independently, it will be relevant to the findings as this would support this interpretation of the meaning.

Neighbouring theoretical constructs

Employee engagement is a multi-faceted construct (Kular *et al.* 2008) and can be difficult to distinguish from other concepts. In particular, there appear to be overlaps with theories of motivation, performance management, commitment, job involvement, job satisfaction, OCB (organisational citizenship behaviour) and flow amongst others.

May *et al.* (2004) contrasts engagement with 'workflow'. 'Flow' is described as a holistic sensation whereby those experiencing it seek no external reward, as the activity itself is rewarding through stimulation and personal achievement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). May *et al.* (2004) distinguishes the two based on engagement being deeper than flow whereby the employee applies this idea not just on an individual level but on an organisational level too.

Robinson *et al.* (2004) compares employee engagement to both OCB and organisational commitment concluding that these are related yet distinct from each other and deeming employee engagement 'one step up from commitment'**.** Saks (2006) echoes this, correlating commitment with attitude and attachment to the organisation. It concludes that OCB extends to voluntary behaviours outside the scope of the individual's role and therefore is more than commitment.

Rurkkhum and Bartlett (2012) find a strong correlation between engagement and OCB. In earlier research, however, Hallberg (2006) distinguishes the two, stating that the main component separating them is engagement's link to employee wellbeing in that its opposite "burnout" is associated with poor health effects such as depression and lack of sleep.

Macleod and Clarke (2008) acknowledge the confusion of this conceptual overlap but distinguish employee engagement by its symbiotic quality between employer and employee. They also point out that it is the

association with wellbeing that differentiates it from many similar topics but mostly it is the multi-dimentional and faceted nature that makes it an accumulation of a lot of shared elements from other theories.

Antecedents to employee engagement in the non-profit sector

While there is abundant research that focuses on employee engagement measurement tools and practices, scholars and practitioners have often overlooked investigating its causal factors (Robinson *et al.,* 2004). Before 2004 there was little research into what conditions are necessary for creating and maintaining an engaged workforce across different sectors and contexts (Robinson *et al.*, 2004) and in 2011, Wollard and Shuck called for more empirical studies into employee engagement and its antecedents across organisations within the same sector. Kaur *et al.* (2017), highlights differences between geographical locations and culture. In 2020, Khodakarami and Diran determined differences in antecedents of employee engagement within the same organisation as a result of variables such as gender and work area.

In 2017, Kaur reviewed the existing literature surrounding antecedents for employee engagement and, with so many influential factors at play, identified over 25 amongst the private and public sectors. The top five most prevalent were:

- Organisational Communication
- Rewards, remuneration and recognition
- Employee Development
- Job Satisfaction
- Feedback, benefits and compensation

When it came to finding studies specific to the non-profit sector however, the research available became significantly more sparse. A database search

found one article relevant to the study of antecedents of employee engagement in the non-profit sector (outside of Ireland) however none were found to study employee engagement antecedents in an Irish non-profit organisation.

In the one relevant research article, Akingbola and Van Den Berg (2019) adopted a new model using the distinction made by Saks (2006) between two types of engagement (job and organisation). It blends Kahn's (1990) theory into this through its choice of antecedents measured; value congruence (psychological), job characteristics (availability) and rewards and remuneration (safety) and found this to be most relevant to the non-profit sector specifically. This can be seen below.
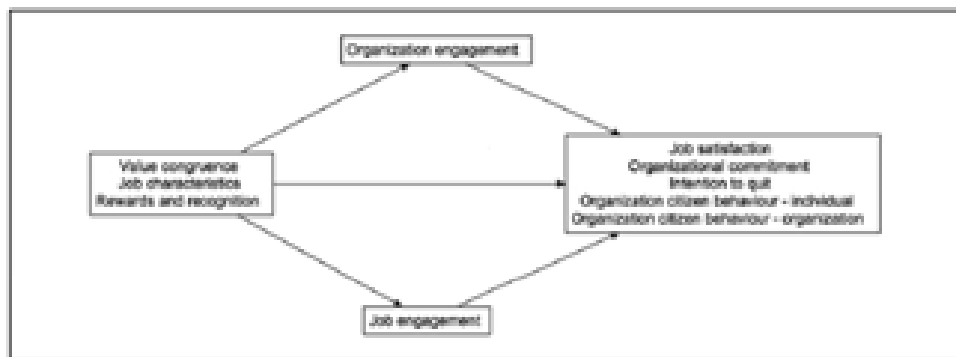
Model of the antecedents and consequences of Employee Engagement
(Akingbola and Van Den Berg, 2019)

Value Congruence refers to how an employee's values match that of their environment (Molina, 2016). Job characteristics is drawn from Hackman and Oldham (1980)'s job characteristics model and is comprised of five separate elements: task identity, skill variety, task significance, autonomy and feedback. Rewards and recognition are motivating incentives that employers use to encourage hard work and loyalty (Akingbola and Van Den Berg, 2019).

This study will investigate whether the antecedents for employees in the chosen organisation are in line with those indicated in other

sectors/industries within the literature and will compare those findings to the framework presented by Akingbola and Van Den Berg (2019) above.

Conclusion

From conducting a literature review into employee engagement, it can be concluded that it is a practice that benefits employers, employees and customers/clients. However, no concrete definition has yet been drawn which has led to the creation of various measuring tools, strategies and guidance based on different understandings of the term and thus incohesive ideas of its causal factors. This forms a weak foundation from which to move toward cultivating it within an organisation and highlights the need to explore the basics of this topic further.

Though closely linked, it is more than its neighbouring concepts of commitment, involvement, attachment and OCB and while there is no agreed definition, the literature supports that its framework is built on three main dimensions (intellectual, emotional and behavioural). It is the expression through all three of these channels that make it a stand-alone concept. These dimensions will be used to explore the meaning of employee engagement with the participants of this study. Their opinions of how engagement is expressed will be categorised based on these and potentially others that may arise. It is hoped that through conducting this research, themes will emerge and that these can be compared with previous literature to either support, contradict or add to the existing body of knowledge.

Research into employee engagement in the non-profit sector is sparse, particularly that of antecedents affecting it. It is noted in previous literature surrounding antecedents to employee engagement that these are unique to any given organisation in any given sector and are influenced by geographical and cultural factors as well as gender and work area. However, the non-profit sector is largely excluded from these studies. This research

study will introduce the Irish non-profit sector into the conversation in the hopes that future scholars and practitioners can build on these findings to construct an evidence-based approach for enhancing employee engagement specific to non-profit organisations.

Chapter 3:
Objectives and Research Question

This study aims to explore the perceptions of employee engagement in an Irish non-profit organisation, specifically its meaning and antecedents. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with 8 employees from the chosen organisation were conducted and thematic analysis was used to derive themes from the data gathered.

There were two main research questions: 1.) What is the meaning of the term employee engagement to individual employees in this non-profit organisation? and 2.) Which antecedents enhance it in their opinion?

Chapter 4: Methodology

The research methodology must be carefully crafted based on the study aims and objectives. When aligning objectives with design, a popular tool used in research design literature is 'The Research Onion' by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) which illustrates the research process using layers. This helps in providing a structure to follow when building a research methodology. At each layer a choice must be made that is most fitting to the objectives of the research being conducted.

Philosophy/Epistemology

The first layer of the research onion is philosophy or epistemology. This refers to the way the researcher views the world and what can be known about it (Mayer, 2015) and can be either positivist, realist or interpretivist.

Positivism is an objective philosophy. It involves testing hypotheses that derive from existing theories. Realism tests the reliability of existing theories under different conditions or circumstances to refine and broaden the scope of these theories. Both positivism and realism are analysed statistically. Interpretivism is largely subjective. It involves the gathering of data and later using the findings to render sense and apply meaning. It puts a human perspective on scientific research and takes individualism into account (Saunders *et al.,* 2009). Interpretivism is the philosophical stance adopted for this research study as it is in line with the qualitative nature and objectives of the study and the intentions of the researcher (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

Approach

This refers to how the question or topic can be investigated and can be either deductive or inductive depending on the nature of the problem or question. A deductive approach involves closed questions around natural sciences These are derived from existing theories generating numerical data that must then be interpreted to apply meaning. An inductive approach leans more towards the social sciences and the way that humans understand the world (Mayer, 2015).

This study adopts an inductive approach as this is coherent with qualitative research and the interpretivist philosophy (Saunders *et al.,* 2009). This means rather than analysing the data using numerical values, a thematic analysis will be used in line with Braun and Clarke's guidelines (2006). This is preferable over a deductive analysis due to the method of data collection being word-focused (interviews) and it allows for interpretation and flexibility through emergent design. This is where, driven by the answers given by the participants, the direction of the study may be altered slightly from the initial focus (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2005). Should the researcher have chosen a quantitative, positivist method (survey or questionnaire), an inductive approach would be more appropriate (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Strategy

The research strategy concerns the method of data collection. There are a range of options available for researchers and must be chosen based on the objectives of the study, the nature of the question(s) to be answered and the resources available to the researcher (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). When weighing up the different strategies available, case study was initially chosen as it provides an example of the situation in one organisation or cohort. However, due to its' multi-method data collection criteria (Yin, 2003), grounded theory was deemed more suitable given the limitations of time,

funding and access. Grounded theory is common in the social sciences and matches the criteria of the relevant study. It is a form of inductive reasoning whereby theory is drawn from patterns sculpted from the findings (Saunders *et al.,* 2009).

Choice

This refers to which methodology is used and may be mono, mixed or multi-methodology.

The study conducted will be qualitative in nature as it corresponds to the broad, open-ended inquiry of exploring an understanding of a concept in one particular organisation. The intention is to have information-rich data from a small sample. A quantitative method is rejected as it is less appropriate to the study of human beings (Saunders *et al.,* 2009). Multi and mixed methodologies are also rejected, again due to the resources available to the researcher being limited by time, funding and access.

Time

This refers to the time taken to carry out the study and at how frequently data is collected during this time. A longitudinal study involves gathering research over multiple points in time using the same sample. A cross-sectional study involves a once off collection of data across various samples. This study will be cross-sectional, as it will be collected at one point in time but two work areas will be studied; management and worker.

Data Collection and Analysis (Technique)

This refers to how the data will be collected and analysed. The data for this study will be collected through non-standardised, semi-structured one-to-one

interviews with 8 employees from the chosen organisation across 4 of the 5 departments.

An interview guide was composed based on the objectives of the research in mind and with linkage to the information gathered in the literature review. The guide was split into two main sections:

1. Understanding/perceptions of the concept of employee engagement
2. Opinions of antecedents to employee engagement

A semi-structured in-depth interview method was chosen. This was deemed appropriate as it allowed for general discussion surrounding the topic and its influencing factors. The direction of each interview was largely driven by the participants themselves. This allowed for the desired openness and flexibility warranted of such a subjective and disputed topic which was in keeping with the emergent design of the study.

Focus groups would have been preferable to allow for debate and discussion between participants considering the mass disagreement surrounding the definition and the vast amount of antecedents noted in the literature. However, this was not possible due to governmental restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. A focus group via remote means was considered but was ruled out as it was rendered impractical when conducted in a pilot environment. It was chosen to conduct remote one-to-one interviews as an alternative as this still allowed for an in-depth exploration and discussion of the topic. It also facilitated emergent design with scope for the development of themes that may materialise during the research (Saunders *et al.* 2009) and which was in line with the qualitative mono-methodic approach adopted (Fraenkal and Wallen 2006).

Follow up sessions with the participants were to allow for fact-checking and clarification. There was no interview guide used for these follow up sessions but the participants were given the opportunity to add to the information

given in the initial interview. It also allowed the researcher to revisit topics or ideas that emerged during the process as is common in qualitative, interpretivist studies using an inductive approach such as this (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2005).

An article by Mishra *et al.* (2014) conducts an exploratory study through one-to-one interviews to investigate employees' understanding and opinions on how internal communication affects employee engagement in a private PR firm. Thematic analysis was used to effectively code the data from the interviews into patterns. Through this, themes emerged which were then presented in the analysis chapter, interpreted in the discussion chapter and applied to practice in the conclusion chapter. The study proposed here adopts the same technique but with the focus on staff in the non-profit sector and looking into the meaning and antecedents of employee engagement in this context. Analysis was conducted thematically whereby the researcher read through the interview notes and sorted the data into buckets of similar information, drawing results into common themes. These were then compared to the existing theories and frameworks laid out in the literature review. Discussion of how this data may be interpreted and how it might impact HR practice was then carried out and lastly recommendations were made based on these findings, analysis and discussion.

Access

Access was granted by the organisation in question through permission from the HR director and CEO to conduct the study. It was requested that the organisation remain unnamed and any identifying information be omitted to protect its anonymity. Basic background details were provided with prior consent. An ethical review was conducted and has been submitted separately. A pilot study was carried out with the initial draft of the semi-structured interview. Adjustments were made based on this before

deployment to the participants which helped ensure clarity in the questions and a smooth flow to the interview process.

Sample

Non-random purposive sampling was used for this study meaning the researcher chose the sample to meet the requirements of the research topic. The inclusion criteria for participants were as follows:
1.) the participant must be an employee
2.) the participant must have at least 1 years' service with the non-profit organisation being studied.
3.) the participant must be full-time.

The initial intention was to have a sample consisting of 1 employee and 1 manager from each department with the aim of obtaining 6 staff at management level and 6 staff at employee level for a total of 12 participants. This was to ensure a broad range of perspectives in order for the results to be as generalisable as possible to the wider organisation and thereafter to the sector. Although an appropriate number of subjects for a study of this type is unknown, Fraenkal and Wallen (2006) recommend a range of between 1 and 20 participants for qualitative studies of an interpretivist nature such as this. Given certain limitations such as timeframe and governmental-imposed social distancing at the time of data-collection, 12 participants was considered an achievable number with the likelihood of generating enough data for this cross-sectional study as planned. However, in the process of data collection, participant availability and accessibility was significantly affected by circumstances surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result of this, it was only possible to interview 8 participants meaning the study excluded one department.

Ethical Considerations

This dissertation was approved by the NCI ethics committee. The procedures for ensuring consent and confidentiality are outlined below.

A description of the study was sent to all participants outlining the topic of the research study and the rationale for the project to ensure informed consent. The initial information given also stated that any participation in the study will be voluntary and confidential. It was made clear that any participant can withdraw from the process at any time. The identities of the participants were protected, and their answers recorded and analysed respectfully and honestly (Fraenkal and Wallen 2006). Once participation was confirmed, consent forms were be sent to participants to sign (Appendix). The researcher sought consent via consent forms for two aspects; the participation in the study and the consent to record the interview. The participant was made aware in the initial contact that the researcher, their academic supervisor and an external supervisor will have access to the data collected. Once the consent forms were returned, they were coded with the participants unique code and stored electronically in a password protected folder on the researchers private laptop that is only accessible to the researcher. The participant was informed that the consent forms will be shredded once the research has conducted and the project has been marked and complete.

Chapter 5:

Findings, Analysis and Discussion

Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the data gathered during the interview process. As guided, it is the salient findings from the interviews conducted that are presented here. An analysis and discussion of these findings follow on from this where thematic analysis is applied and the findings are interpreted and related back to the theories, models and frameworks in the literature review. To protect the anonymity of the participants and the organisation, names have been removed and the participants are referred to as Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2 etc.

The understanding of engagement

The meaning and understanding of employee engagement was discussed with each participant. Firstly, their own interpretation of the term was explored. This brought about a wide variety of responses and differed largely in terms of its classification. Some referred to it as an ability to work; Interviewee 7: *"The ability to mentally commit to work".* For others it was how they worked; Interviewee 5: *"It's how well I work and how involved I am with my job and colleagues"* and for others it was why they worked. Interviewee 6: *"… when I'm really interested or excited about work and I throw myself into it".* Interviewee 3 described engagement as a *"quality some people possess"* whereas Interviewee 1 described it simply as a *"state of mind".*

Some staff pointed out after the interview was conducted that they hadn't thought of the various channels and full scope of engagement and developed

a deeper understanding of the entire topic through the interview process itself. Interviewee 5: *"I suppose I never thought about it fully"* Interviewee 2: *"For me, it meant what gets me into work every day but it seems it's much more than that"*

Levels of engagement

When the chosen definition was presented to the participants, two levels of engagement emerged. These were noted to be of varying duration and depth and were associated with specific points in time or situations during their working day, year, job and career. Participants spoke of an 'every-day' engagement in comparison to a 'longer-term' engagement; Interviewee 1: *I'm often engaged in my job or in the tasks I'm doing. I'll get a buzz from being productive and that keeps me going... but when something's going on in the department and we're all working together towards a deadline, that's when I'd say I'm most engaged".* Interviewee 5: *"When I started here, I was definitely engaged in the work. Always early and finishing my work before the deadlines etc. but being here almost 16 years, [the organisation] is a part of me now and I'm engaged in a much stronger way than just my daily work".*

Current engagement practices

Participants were asked about the current engagement practices in their department. All said there were formal annual appraisals where performance and goals were discussed between staff and their line manager. Interviewee 8: *"We have a meeting every year with our managers to discuss how we are getting on but it's not effective. If you want to give honest feedback, it's hard to do that directly to your line manager"*

Transience

The participants agreed that engagement was transient. Interviewee 3: *"I can go in and out of being engaged throughout the day. I will lose my focus after a while of doing the same thing"*. Interviewee 6: *"If I'm not stimulated or motivated, I find it hard to stay engaged. I always need something to keep me going".* Interviewee 7: *"Sometimes when there's a lot going on, you get overwhelmed and its hard to be engaged, but you get back into it when things calm down again"*

Disengagement/ Burnout

When it came to burnout, no participant volunteered the terms as part of their understanding of engagement or associated it with its meaning. However, once discussion surrounding antecedents began, it became apparent that disengagement was relevant in understanding it as a concept. This is discussed more below. Managers noted the importance of being able to identify disengagement and burnout in their staff. They also pointed out that it required a different approach to engagement management.
Interviewee 7 *"The aim for measuring and implementing engagement strategies is not to merely prevent disengagement, although it is important to recognise when this comes about".* Interviewee 5: *"Identifying when a staff member is not engaging is crucial people management, but it should not be the benchmark for an engaged workforce"*

Antecedents

Value congruence
Participants felt engaged by the shared values with the organisation. The reason they started with this organisation was because they valued its ethos

and mission in helping others and making a social impact. Interviewee 7: *"I am passionate about the cause, it's very important to me"*. Interviewee 8: *"I am motivated by the work we carry out and the people and families we help"*. Interviewee 6: *"[the organisation] stands for everything I do"*

There was also a great sense of pride to be associated to the organisation and the work they carry out. Interviewee 3: *"I'm honoured to be a part of such a wonderful organisation"*. Interviewee 5: *"I love it when people ask where I work because I get to gloat about the good work that we do"*. Interviewee 2: *"People are always interested to hear about my job"*. Interviewee 8: *"I was excited to take a job with [this organisation] as I knew the wonderful work that they did and wanted to be a part of it"*

However, it was acknowledged that value congruence and sense of pride fuelled engagement only to a certain point, after which other antecedents took precedence such as recognition and reward.

Recognition and Rewards

Recognition was consistently important for participants at all levels. After receiving external recognition (from a client or the public), there was a strong general sense of pride to be associated with the organisation and the work it does. For some staff, this recognition was accepted and adequate in fulfilling engagement. Interviewee 7: *"You go above and beyond for [the organisation] because you believe in the work that they do. The feedback from clients and those I've helped is the reward I get for my hard work"*. Interviewee 3*: "The emotional and social reward you get from carrying out this kind of work is in itself rewarding."* While others did value this emotional reward and recognition from clients and colleagues, they noted an absence of recognition and reward from management or directors to be a possible cause for disengagement, thus organisational recognition and reward became important in fuelling engagement for them. Interviewee 7: *"I know the clients*

and my colleagues value me… when I began working here, the job itself was enough to keep me engaged from the perspective of performance, focus and to feel satisfied in my daily work but after a while that wasn't enough. You have to feel like you're getting back what your putting in.. but it doesn't always have to be money. Sometimes it does". Interviewee 4: *"I have more experience now and therefore I feel like I'm worth more to the organisation.. if my expectation doesn't match what I receive, I will naturally feel less engaged. It makes it harder to go the extra mile for the clients when you feel like the organisation doesn't value the hard work you do and sometimes a pat on the back isn't enough [...] otherwise it may cause you to feel resentful and less engaged."* Here, tokens of appreciation or rewards such as a social get together to celebrate a specific work-related achievement or recognition such as a staff lunch were noted as being effective for these staff. Interviewee *7 "I remember after our project last year was complete, we all had a lunch in the canteen. It was just small but the director came in to thank us all and it was really nice… made it easier to get back to the next big project. It gave me the energy"*

Job characteristics

Participants spoke of job characteristics as supportive in keeping employees engaged in the tasks and daily/weekly work.

Skill variety
Interviewee 6: *"If the work is uninteresting or too repetitive, I will become disengaged quite quickly"*
Interviewee 3: *"I'm always learning and progressing. If I feel stagnant I get bored and will find it harder to engage"*

Task significance and identity
Interviewee 4: *"It's important for me to understand what my purpose is within the organisation and how my work fits into the bigger plan. I remember in previous jobs, having updates from management of the short-term and long-*

term goals. Seeing how my work fit into these plans was effective in keeping me engaged daily and weekly."

Interviewee 5: "Working towards a goal and achieving it. there is great satisfaction in that"

Autonomy

Interviewee 7 *"I need to have the freedom to make decisions or I won't be able to do my job never mind feel engaged".*

Feedback

Interviewee 1: *"When I've worked hard on something and receive negative feedback, I find it hard to stay engaged"*

Social involvement

Social involvement was a very important driver of engagement for these participants. This was related to a feeling of belonging with the organisation; Interviewee 3 "It's like we're a family" or to the relationships built with colleagues and/or clients; Interviewee 5: "You develop a special bond with each other", Interviewee 4*: "These [colleagues] are the people you spend most of your time with",* Interviewee 8: "*The friendships I have made at work are what makes it so easy to stay engaged. I've never felt quite so part of the team in my other jobs as I do in this job",* Interviewee 6*: "I feel a responsibility for them [colleagues/clients], beyond just work. We all look after each other".*

This social aspect was particularly evident in light of mandatory remote working conditions that were brought about by the global health pandemic. Interviewee 2: *"You'd really miss the social aspect of work, I'd say I'm not half as engaged [as I was]"* Interviewee 7: *"It's not the same, there's no social interaction... it negatively affects my engagement"*

The cyclical nature of antecedents and consequences

When asked about antecedents noted in other engagement studies, participants identified that a cyclical nature to some whereby antecedents to the elements of engagement were also acknowledged to be the products of engagement. Interviewee 4: "If you are satisfied in your work, you are more likely to be engaged which will in turn make you more satisfied".

Interviewee 8: "It's cyclical - The more satisfied I am in my job, the more engaged I am in my work and therefore the more satisfaction I feel because of this engagement".

Limitations and implications of the study

As noted previously, there were several limiting factors to this study brought upon predominantly by the Covid-19 pandemic. Governmental restrictions and subsequent changes in personal and professional circumstances for both the researcher and the participants meant that the methodology for the study required review and the data collection process was significantly affected. The government-imposed restrictions and health recommended social distancing guidence necessitated the data collection method to be altered from focus groups to one-to-one interviews. It also meant that the medium for conducting the interviews was changed from in person to remote. While not ideal, public health and safety took precedence and the use of online meeting forums allowed for these changes to be made and for the continuation of the study.

As mentioned previously, the number of available participants was affected due to availability and accessibility issues brought about by Covid-19. This meant that not all departments in the chosen organisation could be investigated. The researcher acknowledges that this somewhat limits the generalisability of the study. However, the sample size is still within range (1-20) and the data gathered is information-rich as intended (Fraenkal and Wallen, 2006).

Given the timeframe available to conduct the research, a longitudinal study was not possible to fully validate which factors influence employee engagement for this cohort. Instead, it was the investigation of which factors they perceived to influence them that was the focus of interest.

Similarly, this study does not intend to deduce a concrete definition or framework for the term as this falls outside of the scope of this work but rather explores those proposed in the literature and compares them with the themes gathered in the findings of this study.

Analysis and Discussion

In applying thematic analysis to the findings, 3 main themes emerged within the data collected. Subsequently, when discussing the antecedents 4 sub themes were noted. An overview of these is outlined below and the data supporting these is laid out below that.

- Theme 1 – Types of engagement
- Theme 2 – The spectrum of engagement
- Theme 3 – Antecedents to non-profit engagement in the chosen organisation
- Sub-theme 3.1 – The strength of value congruence
- Sub theme 3.2 – Internal and external recognition
- Sub theme 3.3 – Preventing disengagement/burnout
- Sub theme 3.4 – Social involvement

This chapter demonstrates how thematic analysis was applied to the data in the findings to create themes and sub-themes and relate these back to the theories, models and frameworks presented in the literature review.

Theme 1 – Types of engagement

Unsurprisingly, employees generally demonstrated varying perspectives of the meaning of engagement and what encapsulates it, each placing varying parameters around its scope. Some initially understood it to mean an element of neighbouring concepts such as motivation or involvement. described it as a behaviour of engagement and others perceived it to mean an output of engagement such as performance. This is significant because it is reflective of the disparity and confusion that surrounds the topic in the existing literature and re-emphasises the need for the examination of these various elements and their relationship to each other.

Participants did, however, classify engagement into two types;

- Daily engagement involving attention and focus on one's work
- A deeper engagement involving commitment and dedication to one's job and colleagues/clients

This aligned with the distinction presented by Saks (2006); Work Engagement and Organisational Engagement. This was significant in that it reinforced this classification and placed some structure on the concept. Considering these two types of engagement separately, participants identified different antecedents for each type.

Theme 2 – The spectrum of engagement

Despite the intention of this study to focus solely on engagement, it became apparent during the interview process that its antithesis was unavoidably correlated. This was significant as it supported this interpretation of the meaning in the literature (Maslch and Leiter, 1997; Maslach, 2011; Gonzalez *et al.,* 2006) and its relationship to antecedents and consequences. However, participants stressed that preventing disengagement was not the aim. Instead active engagement management was. Fortunately, the design of the study allows for emergent themes in line with the inductive approach and interpretivist philosophy (Saunders *et al.,* 2009).

Theme 3 – Antecedents to non-profit engagement in the chosen organisation

When it came to antecedents, the non-profit model presented by Akingbola and Van Den Berg (2019) was used as a framework for the three core antecedents for non-profit employees (value congruence, rewards and recognition and job characteristics). A number of sub-themes emerged in the analysis of these antecedents:

Sub-theme 3.1 – The strength of value congruence

Value Congruence was the first of Akingbola and Van Den Berg (2019)'s core antecedents for non-profit employee engagement to be explored and was undoubtably the strongest antecedent of engagement for this cohort of non-profit employees. The participants found there to be a strong sense of connection to the organisation as they felt their values were aligned and they experienced fulfilment and pride from being associated with the organisation and contributing to its mission. This also tied back into Kahn's dimension of meaningfulness which reinforces this aspect of the construct. Workers and management were in agreement of the high impact of this factor which was specific to a non-profit context over others.

This ties in closely with the second core antecedent outlined in Akingbola and Van Den Berg (2019)'s model; rewards and recognition. The mission-driven nature of a non-profit means that many employees and potential employees will waive the criteria for costly rewards such as a high salary and perks due to the altruistic reward they get from carrying out the organisation's mission and contributing to positive social change. This was acknowledged and reflected in the interviews with both workers and management in this cohort. However, participants noted that it was important that rewards and recognition not be neglected or overlooked with the assumption that value congruence fed by external recognition, client feedback or the work itself sufficiently drove non-profit engagement. It was found that reliance on value congruence driving engagement alone could be a cause for dissatisfaction and therefore disengagement for employees. Participants also noted that rewards need not be in monetary form. Participants valued rewards such as flexible working arrangements, concessionary leave days, autonomy, developmental opportunities and career progression.

Sub theme 3.2 – Internal and external recognition

Participants saw departmental recognition as vital in sustaining engagement in their job. However, when the recognition came from upper management or director level within the organisation, this gave employees a boost of organisational engagement. They also received the same boost when receiving recognition externally (by the public, clients). They linked this to a feeling of positivity and engagement towards the organisation and feeling like an important part of the team.

Sub theme 3.3 – Preventing disengagement/burnout

The final core antecedent put forth by Akingbola and Van Den Berg (2019) is multi-factoral and is based on Hackman and Oldham (1980)'s job characteristics model which is comprised of five separate elements: task identity, skill variety, task significance, autonomy and feedback. The participants related these specifically to their 'daily' engagement (work/job engagement) rather than organisational engagement and distinctly associated these elements with preventing disengagement rather than enhancing it. In other words, these five elements were basic criteria that needed to be met in order for employees to engage with their job at all.

- Interesting and challenging work was important to prevent boredom (skill variety).
- Communication was important for staff (particularly workers) to be informed of the wider organisational picture to aid them in seeing the importance of their contribution to the overall organisation (task significance).
- Negative feedback and unsatisfactory task identity or a lack of autonomy were deemed causes for frustration, thus job dissatisfaction and therefore disengagement.

Sub theme 3.4 – Social involvement

Social involvement was an antecedent that came to light outside of Akingbola and Van Den Berg (2019)'s model but was noted as significant enough to add to the antecedents for this sample. A sense of community and feeling part of the team was a contributor to these participants' organisational engagement.

Chapter 6:

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Employee engagement is a topic of growing popularity in business literature due to its value both on an individual and organisational level. Favourable organisational outcomes such as increased performance and reduced turnover have kept it at the forefront of HR practice over the past three decades but while the focus on engagement continues to grow, a literature review highlighted much contestation over its meaning and scope. This provides a shaky foundation for the cultivation of such a complex but greatly beneficial driver of organisational success. In light of the dispute over the topic's meaning, Kulikowski (2017)'s proposal that the term holds a different weight and meaning depending on contextual and sectoral factors would appear to ring true. Despite this, when it comes to exploring antecedents of engagement, the literature largely neglects non-profit organisations. Due to the multi-faceted nature of the construct, there is no one-size-fits-all model for engagement antecedents and so it is important for it to be investigated with the relevant context in mind.

Non-profits by design are mission-driven meaning any and all available funding is directed towards the needs of the organisation rather than to the organisations stakeholders. The non-profit being studied is service-based whereby the return on investment for donations is the output of its' staff. The people resourcing aim for this organisation looks to maximise its workforce potential and continue to serve its' mission through its existing and potential expansion of services.

This study investigates the meaning of employee engagement and its' determining antecedents for one non-profit organisation, shedding light on a sector much neglected in this research area. Due to its unique context, aims and constraints, it arguably must adopt a customisded approach to engagement outside of those used by organisations in other sectors or indeed even those in the same sector. The results from this study act as a building block to inform management practices that will enhance or improve engagement for this specific organisation and potentially other organisations within the sector.

The aim of this study was to explore employee engagement and its antecedents in an Irish non-profit organisation. This was achieved using a qualitative, interpretivist approach which implemented in-depth interviews collecting subjective data from a purposive sample of non-profit employees.

The objectives of the study were achieved as follows:

What is the meaning of employee engagement to this cohort?

To establish meaning, the defining terms and elements of employee engagement were classified into dimensions, phsychological states, antecedents and outcomes based on findings from the study. It was clear that engagement shares many aspects of other constructs and participants recognised this to be the case. It contains elements of these neighbouring constructs and could be considered a desirable result of the collaboration of these elements as a measurable overview of efficient people management.

The scope and parameters of engagement emerged through discussion of the antecedents. It was important to view engagement on a spectrum containing different but strongly connected elements to its structure (disengagement, burnout) as these were found to be relevant to its meaning. However, considering preventing burnout and enhancing engagement to be one in the same was identified as not conducive to engagement success.

Engagement practices should actively strive to enhance and then actively strive to sustain engagement rather than waiting for signs of disengagement or burnout before taking action.

What are the antecedents of employee engagement for this cohort?

The core antecedents for non-profit engagement presented by Akingbola and Van Den Berg (2019)'s model were mostly supported by the findings of this study. Participants identified value congruence and rewards and recognition as two of the main antecedents of engagement for them. Through the discussion of these, some themes emerged.

The strength of value congruence as an antecedent to employee engagement differed between managers and workers. Managers identified it as the main driver of organisational engagement whereas workers noted its relevance to organisational engagement throughout their employment but that a heavy reliance on this factor to drive engagement could hinder their ability to be engaged.

Rewards and recognition were seen as boosts of engagement and were important in maintaining a good attitude towards work.

There was a slightly different take however when it came to the third core antecedent in Akingbola and Van Den Berg (2019)'s model: Job characteristics. This was referred to instead as a necessity in the prevention of disengagement. Participants related a lack of interesting, meaningful work with no autonomy or (positive) feedback as a cause of frustration and/or boredom which, after time, would likely lead the employee to become disengaged. It was seen as a basic requirement for the minimum level of engagement.

When it came to investigating other antecedents within the literature, participants pointed to the cyclical nature of the antecedents and

consequences of engagement. Kaur (2017) identified job satisfaction as one of the top five antecedents amongst private and public sector studies. The participants in this study associated job satisfaction as both an antecedent and consequence. This correlated to Akingbola and Van Den Berg's model where it is presented as a consequence. This meant that, when engagement was viewed as a spectrum, antecedents could become consequences and vice versa. In other words, the transient nature of engagement meant that the consequence of engagement (job satisfaction) then became the antecedent to preventing disengagement. This put some clarity on the various engagement structures and frameworks.

In justifying the variety of terms, definitions and antecedents surrounding engagement as a concept, these findings would consider the need for a much wider and cyclical conceptual framework in order to capture the variety of factors at play and how these interact with each other. Then using this broader framework together with the context and resources available to the organisation, an engagement strategy can be crafted.

It may very well be that the structure looks different for non-profit organisations. The meaningful work carried out through the mission of the non-profit achieves value congruence and a sense of pride. Social and emotional connections with work colleagues and with clients strengthen the identity of self with the organisation. What will ultimately influence the longevity or sustainability of engagement for this cohort of non-profit staff is a careful balance of enhancing engaged employees and prevention disengaged employees and recognising at which point their employees are on this spectrum.

This study may be used as a practical tool in understanding the engagement of employees for the organisation in question and may act as a guide for other non-profit organisations or researchers in the field. The contribution this study makes will be adding to the body of qualitative research surrounding employee engagement, its meaning and antecedents in an Irish non-profit

context but more importantly including non-profits in this area of academic discussion.

Recommendations

Based on this study and the primary research conducted, the researcher has outlined four recommendations for non-profit organisations in relation to employee engagement.

Approach to engagement management
Break the concept of engagement down into its types to make it clearer and more manageable – focus on job engagement at department level and organisational engagement at management level.

Monitoring engagement should be frequent and ongoing to capture its' transient nature. Regular, informal and anonymous check ins such as Pulse Surveys are recommended. Most of these software companies offer a one month free trial online, after which subscriptions can range from approx. €300 – €2,000 per month depending on the package and number of employees.

Acknowledging the relationship disengagement and burnout have to engagement and educating staff on how to recognise them is important. However, engagement management should be active in both enhancing and maintaining engagement rather than merely preventing disengagement/burnout.

Communication and education
Communicate the advantage in achieving and sustaining engagement to employees and managers to entice a combined effort in its implementation for the benefit of both the employee and wider organisation. Educate staff on

what it means to be engaged and how this can be influenced. Focus on antecedents those specific to the organisation.

Maximise involvement

Create regular opportunities for employees to become involved in their organisation as much as possible. Socialisation was found to be effective in creating the sense of community that enhances organisational engagement. This can be of little cost to the organisation and can even be cost-saving (ie involvement in mission-orientated events such as fundraisers). It is also recommended organisations include workers in the discussion of organisational goals so they can gain perspective of the wider picture for the organisation and see the significance of their work in achieving its mission, which in turn enhances value congruence.

Recognition and reward

Feed back any successes and recognise those involved to strengthen organisational engagement. Establish a platform for the hard work and success of employees especially workers to reach upper management/directors. This can be in the form of emails, during updates, or at meetings.

As funding and resources are limited, focus on non-monetary rewards such as flexible working, concessionary leave days, developmental opportunities career progression.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Greetings

Check volume/microphone/camera

Brief warm up conversation

Introduction of the study, the researcher

Reiterate confidentiality and their freedom to withdraw at any point

Time expectation

Confirm consent

Welcome them to seek clarity if they need at any point

General questions about work

Department

Area of work - Worker/Management

Years of service

Understanding/perceptions of the concept of employee engagement

- Have you heard of the concept of Employee Engagement before? What is your understanding of it? How would you describe it?
- Describe the behaviours of someone who is engaged in work.
- What feelings come with being engaged at work?

If they refer to themself..

- Would you say you are always engaged in work?

If they refer to others..

- Would you consider yourself to be an engaged employee? Why/why not?

- Have you gone through periods of being particularly engaged? What were/are the circumstances surrounding this?

- Was there ever a point where you felt engaged? What were the circumstances surrounding this?

- If you were to compose a definition of employee engagement, what words would you use?
- Using the table below, which of these terms (if any) would you use to define it? Are there any that you wouldn't use? Why?

Involvement
Attachment
Absorption
Attention
Attitude
Satisfaction
Enthusiasm
Investment (mental and emotional)
Commitment
Motivation
Vigour
Dedication
Empowerment

Present chosen definition: "Engagement is an umbrella term used to measure and describe various forms of involvement or connection with one's job or work environment" (Bakker and Leiter, 2010).

Antecedents of employee engagement

- What do you think makes you/one engaged at work daily?
- What do you think makes you/one engaged at work longer term?
- Is it just XXX that plays a part?
- If XXX was/were satisfied, could engagement be achieved?
- You mentioned XXX, tell me a little more about this

Value Congruence

- How did the nature/values of the organisation affect you applying to work here (if relevant)? How do you feel being a member of this organisation?
- How would you describe your attitude towards work with this organisation?
    - What is it that makes it XXX for you?
- Would you consider these factors to influence engagement? How?

Job Characteristics
- Discuss if and/or how the following job characteristics might affect engagement:
    - Task Significance
- Do you feel your job is important?
- Do you consider the work you do to significantly affect the lives or well-being of other people?
    - Task Identity
- Does your job involve doing a "whole" and identifiable piece of work?
    - Skill Variety
- To what extent does your job require different skills?

          <u>Autonomy</u>

- Do you have the freedom to make decisions within your job/role? Does this enhance your ability engagement?

          <u>Feedback</u>

- Describe the level of feedback you receive on your work. Is it mostly from colleagues or superiors or from the work itself? How frequently do you receive this feedback? Do you think it affects your level of engagement?

Recognition and Rewards

- What kinds of rewards do you receive at work? Is this a driver of engagement for you?
- Do you feel you are recognised for the work you do? If so, does this drive engagement for you?
- Discuss if and/or how the following might affect your level of engagement:

          Your pay

          A pay raise

          Job security

          A promotion

          Work flexibility

          Praise from your manager

          Some form of public recognition (e.g. employee of the month)

          A reward or token of appreciation (e.g. lunch)

          Benefits (such as insurance, gym membership)

Out of all the influencing factors we discussed, which group of these stood out to you as being the most influential in enhancing engagement?

From the list below, are there any that we didn't discuss that you think influence engagement for you? Are there any you think would be more influential than the ones we discussed? Are there any you would

remove from the list (ie. consider them not to be influential to engagement)?

Organisational Communication
Rewards, remuneration and recognition
Employee Development
Job Satisfaction
Feedback, benefits and compensation
Value Congruence
Job Characteristics

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank participant

Arrange follow up interview

Goodbye

Appendix: 2 Consent Form

An exploratory investigation into employee engagement in the

non-profit sector

• 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 understand that participation involves a one-to-one interview over Microsoft Teams, expected to last approx. one hour and a follow-up session expected to last approx. 20 minutes.

• I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

• I agree to my interview responses being recorded.

• 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. My name will not be used and any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about will be disguised.

• I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the submitted dissertation.

• 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 interview notes will be retained in a password protected file on the personal desktop of the researcher until the results of the research dissertation are issued and that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years from the date the results are issued.

• 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 as below to seek further clarification and information.

Researcher: Gemma Whelan   **Supervisor:** Pauline Kelly Phelan

Contact: **Contact:**
x18150471@student.ncirl.ie   pauline.kellyphelan@ncirl.ie

I consent to the above

Signature of research participant: _____

Date: _____

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

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 3: Personal Learning Reflection

This educational endeavour has been a challenging but very rewarding experience for me. What I have gained are the skills for the interpretation and practical application of knowledge and information. I also have a deeper understanding of the various methods of learning, how I learn best and how to assist others in learning and development. Throughout the process of this course I have developed an appreciation and desire for lifelong learning. I now have a network of colleagues and peers from the class who provide a support system for advice and shared industry experiences. The course has provided me with the knowledge, tools and confidence to change career and secure employment in my chosen field and sector of interest. It has afforded me access to invaluable resources through lecturers, databases and subscriptions to professional bodies such as the CIPD which will continue to inform my practice and further my career in the ever-changing world of work.