

**The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employee engagement for
millennials within Irish private sector SMEs.**

Jane Mulligan

MA in Human Resource Management

National College of Ireland

Submitted to the National College of Ireland, August 2022

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

National College of Ireland

Research Students Declaration Form

(Thesis/Author Declaration Form)

Name: Jane Mulligan

Student Number: 20127723

Degree for which thesis is submitted: MA Human Resource Management

Title of Thesis: The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employee engagement for millennials within private sector SMEs.

Date: 17 August 2022

Material submitted for award

A. I declare that this work submitted has been composed by myself.



B. I declare that all verbatim extracts contained in the thesis have been distinguished by quotation marks and the sources of information specifically acknowledged.



C. I agree to my thesis being deposited in the NCI Library online open access repository NORMA.



D. *Either* *I declare that no material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.

Or *I declare that the following material contained in the thesis

formed part of a submission for the award of

(State the award and the awarding body and list the material below)

Submission of Thesis to Norma Smurfit Library, National College of Ireland

Student name: Jane Mulligan Student number: 20127723

School: School of Business Course: Masters Human Resource Management

Degree to be awarded: Masters

Title of Thesis:

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employee engagement for millennials within Irish private sector SMEs.

An electronic copy of your thesis will be lodged in the Norma Smurfit Library and will be available for consultation. This electronic copy will be accessible in NORMA norma.ncirl.ie the National College of Ireland's Institutional Repository. In accordance with normal academic library practice all theses lodged in the National College of Ireland Institutional Repository (NORMA) are made available on open access.

I agree to an electronic copy of my thesis being available for consultation within the library. I also agree to an electronic copy of my thesis being made publicly available on the National College of Ireland's Institutional Repository NORMA.

Signature of Candidate: Jane Mulligan

For completion by the School:

The aforementioned thesis was received by

Date: _____

Abstract

Millennials are increasingly becoming an important generational group for employers as generation X and baby boomers move to the later stages of their career and eventual retirement. Due to their increasing importance in the workforce, employers should ensure there are retention and engagement plans in place to support these employees. The researcher wanted to explore the impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the engagement level of the millennial age group within small medium enterprises (SMEs) within the private sector in Ireland. The pandemic has been an unprecedented time for organisations and required organisations to change the way their employees worked overnight. The researcher wanted to investigate how leadership in SMEs responded to such a rapidly changing working world and their response to maintaining engagement amongst their millennial workforce.

From investigation into the literature, the researcher identified several gaps which led them to developing several research questions. These research questions focused on the areas of comparison between millennial engagement prior and after the pandemic, did the pandemic negatively impact engagement amongst millennials and leadership's response to employee engagement. The researcher conducted five interviews with millennials who worked in SMEs in a variety of sectors in order to explore the impact the Covid-19 pandemic had on employee engagement.

After analysing the data from the interviews, the researcher discovered that overall, the pandemic had a positive effect on employee engagement amongst millennials in comparison to their engagement levels prior. One of the biggest reasons for this was the feeling of freedom working from home provided. However, the responses were mixed in relation to the overall impact the pandemic has had on employee engagement. Some participants became more engaged due to the change in their working environment and removal of the commute, while others described their frustration with micromanagement from leadership and the isolation of working from home.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my supervisor Dr Lynn Farrell on her guidance and advice throughout this process.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to those who took time out of their busy schedules to participate in this study. Their time and experiences were greatly appreciated.

Finally, I would like to give a big thanks to my boyfriend, family and friends for putting up with me the last two years and providing constant reassurance that it would all be worth it in the end.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Chapter One: Introduction | 1 |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Background and Context..... | 1 |
| Justification for the Study | 2 |
| Research Aims | 3 |
| Research Objectives and Questions | 3 |
| Overview of Chapters | 3 |
| Chapter Two: Literature Review | 5 |
| Introduction..... | 5 |
| Employee Engagement | 5 |
| Drivers of Employee Engagement | 7 |
| Work-life Balance..... | 10 |
| Conclusion | 11 |
| Chapter Three: Methodology | 13 |
| Introduction..... | 13 |
| Approach & Research Philosophy | 13 |
| Quantitative..... | 14 |
| Qualitative..... | 15 |
| Participants of the Study | 15 |
| Research Instrument..... | 15 |
| Procedure | 16 |
| Data Collection and Analysis..... | 17 |
| Ethical Considerations | 17 |
| Limitations of the Study..... | 18 |
| Introduction..... | 20 |
| Employee Background..... | 21 |
| Level of Engagement | 22 |
| Work-life Balance..... | 23 |
| Work Environment..... | 24 |
| Drivers of Employee Engagement | 25 |
| Feelings of Value & Motivation | 27 |
| Engagement of Leadership | 27 |
| Chapter Five: Discussion | 29 |

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction..... | 29 |
| Employee Engagement | 29 |
| Drivers of Engagement | 30 |
| Environment..... | 30 |
| Leadership..... | 31 |
| Work-life Balance..... | 32 |
| Value & Motivation | 32 |
| Conclusion | 33 |
| Chapter Six: Conclusion | 35 |
| Research Questions..... | 35 |
| Limitations of the Research | 36 |
| Recommendations, Cost Recommendations & Implications..... | 37 |
| Personal Learning Statement | 38 |
| Bibliography | 39 |
| Appendices..... | 47 |
| Appendix A..... | 47 |
| Appendix B | 49 |
| Appendix C..... | 51 |
| Appendix D..... | 51 |
| List of Tables | 54 |

Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

This chapter will provide a background to the study, which highlights critical pieces of literature in the area of employee engagement. This section will be followed by the justification of the research and identify gaps in current research that made this research worthwhile. Following the identification of the area to be researched, the aims and objectives of the study will be defined. Finally, an overview of the remaining dissertation chapters will be presented, highlighting the key topics to be addressed.

Background and Context

The area of employee engagement can be considered ambiguous, and there is no true definition of employee engagement. Several authors that will be mentioned throughout this dissertation have varying opinions on the definition of employee engagement. However, it is suggested that if an employee feels valued and fulfilled in their position, it will ultimately lead to higher productivity and commitment to the organisation. It can be said that employee engagement is a concept that has always been necessary to boost motivation and job satisfaction (CIPD, 2021a). One of the key pieces of literature in the area, defined employee engagement as a psychological state where an employee is physically, cognitively, and emotionally invested in their organisation (Kahn, 1990). It is essential to grasp this definition as without those characteristics present, an organisation cannot receive full commitment from their employee.

In recent times Baby Boomers and Gen X have been the most dominant generational age groups in the workforce, these groups are between the ages of 42 and 67. As these two groups move towards the later stages of their career and eventual retirement, the millennial age group is increasingly becoming more important for employers. However, in this rapidly changing working world, the competition amongst employers to attract and retain this generational group has never been more critical. The millennial age group has been chosen by the researcher as one of the key focuses of the study to be undertaken. One of the main decisions for this has been the millennial's growing importance in the workforce and the desire of employer's retain this group. The researcher would like to clarify that a millennial is an individual born between 1981 and 1996.

The Covid-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented shift to the human resource function and changed the employee and employer relationship. For the purpose of this dissertation the period of the Covid-19 pandemic is considered to run from March 2020 when the first restrictions were effective until January 2022 when restrictions were lifted (Oireachtas, 2022). Employees were expected to change the way they worked overnight while remaining committed to the organisation and their work. Chanana and Sangeeta (2021) noted how employers are going beyond to ensure engagement during challenging times, for example accessibility to leadership, additional equipment and regular check-ins. However, these capabilities can be implemented by larger organisations, but this leaves questions surrounding the concept of employee engagement occurring in small medium businesses (SMEs). The interest in research of private sector SMEs rather than public sector SMEs can be centred on the aspects of ownership and control. Public organisations are normally state or semi-state run and are obliged to be open and transparent in how they are run. However, private sector organisations can implement whatever policies and procedures they see fit, which increases questions about their approach to employee engagement during the pandemic.

Justification for the Study

Throughout the exploration of the literature surrounding the area of employee engagement, several aspects became apparent that seemed to be neglected. The aim of the research in the dissertation is to provide a novel contribution to this area of study.

The Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically shifted how we work and value our time and work-life balance. During this period, most global companies were forced to adapt their working routines overnight, which impacted employee engagement in some capacity (Kundu and Nag, 2021). Although the pandemic altered the working landscape, the literature surrounding the impact it has had on employee engagement is still less than plentiful. The available literature leans toward a more overall impact on all employees rather than focusing on specific groups. Weideman and Hofmeyr (2020) noted that while the effect of remote working on employee engagement focused solely on large multinationals, there is a gap in investigating the issue within SMEs. This research also noted the need to explore the generational group's experiences.

The research conducted within this dissertation seeks to investigate what impact, if any, the pandemic played on employee engagement within the millennial generational

group. The researcher felt this age group was an oversight throughout reading the present literature and was intrigued to learn about their experiences and opinions.

Little literature has been written on the area of employee engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic in Ireland. This research aims to provide a contribution to this neglected area of study. It is the desire of the researcher that the conclusions from this study can be used by SME leadership to gain a deeper understanding into the impact the pandemic has had on employee engagement within their millennial workforce.

Research Aims

The main aim of this research is to investigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employee engagement. This research will address the need to discuss employee engagement in the most up-to-date context and the gap in research exploring the impact of the pandemic on employee engagement within SMEs in Ireland. There will also be an investigation into the generational groups' experiences of employee engagement during this time, focusing on the millennial generation. This research will also focus on Irish SMEs' response to employee engagement during the pandemic, such as whether there has been an introduction of new policies to ensure employees remain engaged regardless of circumstance or no change at all.

Research Objectives and Questions

The objective of this research is to gain insight into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employee engagement among millennials in Irish SMEs. The current study will, therefore, explore the following questions:

- How has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted employee engagement amongst millennials working in Irish SMEs in comparison to their level of engagement prior?
- Has the Covid-19 pandemic had an overall negative impact on employee engagement within Irish SMEs?
- Have Irish SMEs' leadership responded effectively towards employee engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Overview of Chapters

This research is composed of a total of seven chapters. Chapter one, the current chapter, is an outline of the research to be undertaken and introduces areas to be discussed later in the study.

Chapter two is the core base from which the research will be undertaken. This chapter explores the key pieces of current literature in the area of employee engagement. During this exploration, the main themes present in the literature will be identified. Throughout the presentation of these themes, the key arguments and concepts will be highlighted from previous research. From the discovery of these viewpoints, the researcher will analyse and critique the proposed arguments and highlight neglected areas of study within employee engagement research. These gaps in the literature will be the foundation for further discussion within this dissertation.

Chapter three provides detailed information on the research and ethical considerations related to the study. This section begins with an overview of the research and highlights the justification of the chosen method to research the area of employee engagement. The sample of participants will be discussed along with the chosen research method, design, and reasoning behind these choices. Finally, this chapter will conclude with the limitations of the research.

Chapter four presents the key findings gathered from the research and analysis of themes gathered from the data.

Chapter five relates to the discussion of the research and identified themes. Each theme will be addressed separately and highlight findings and implications they may have on employee engagement.

Finally, chapter six provides an overview of the key findings from the research. A brief plan will also be outlined, which will advise recommendations to combat implications identified from the study. The dissertation will conclude with a personal learning statement which will provide a reflective insight into the researcher's experience undertaking the study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter will explore current literature in the area of employee engagement. This chapter aims to identify and discuss the main themes related to employee engagement discovered throughout researching the literature. This chapter will begin with an exploration into the overall theme of employee engagement and the growing importance of the area in SME-sized organisations. Secondly, throughout the literature research, critical engagement drivers are identified. These drivers are concepts that organisations have identified as ways to increase engagement amongst their employee population. Finally, the theme of work-life balance will be examined and its relationship with the aspect of employee engagement, focusing on the links between work-life balance and engaged employees. These themes will be presented through the different opinions and thoughts of authors of current literature on the subject of employee engagement.

Employee Engagement

During the employee engagement research, it became clear that there appears to be no agreed definition of the concept. CIPD (2021a) noted that there could be varying opinions on what it truly means, and in one journal, fifty different definitions appeared for employee engagement. When the concept first appeared in academia, Kahn (1990) was the earliest to define employee engagement as how employees express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally in their organisation (Kahn, 1990). As this definition originated several years ago, there have been a lot of developments and changes in human resources since the initial publication. However, the approach of Kahn's original definition of employee engagement focuses on a state of the psychological state of the employee towards their organisation. It is still considered to be the core aspect of employee engagement today. Some authors have developed the concept of employee engagement into a psychological state. Schaufeli and Bakker's (2004) research showed three key traits to show employees fully engaged in their work. The first is vigour; the employee puts energy and effort into their work. Secondly, the employee appears to show dedication to their work and conducts it with pride. Finally, the employee is absorbed and consumed in their organisation and work.

From defining employee engagement, the question can then be asked why this area is considered an essential aspect of an organisation's human resource function within an

organisation? As mentioned, employee engagement is considered vigour, dedication and pride in one's work. An employer considers these characteristics to go beyond the basic job requirements of an employee but is a voluntary pro-active response to an employee's work and team (Uddin et al, 2019). Due to the competitiveness organisations face, employers are encouraging their employees to actively engage with the organisation's developments with vigour, dedication and pride to survive in rapidly changing markets (Chen, 2017). It has been argued that higher levels of engagement will increase an employee's performance and productivity which is a desirable prospect for organisations (Furnham and MacRae, 2017).

CIPD (2021) released a discussion report on employee engagement and practices within the workplace. This report suggested that employees engaged with their work and organisation can help increase their influence within the company by obtaining more positive working conditions and greater access to managers. This CIPD research also identified positive outcomes between committed engagement and areas such as absenteeism, turnover and well-being. However, the aspect of absenteeism and engagement raised more questions than other areas. The research indicated the sample sizes were too small to commit to engaged employees fully and were less absent from their jobs than those who were not (CIPD, 2021b). Nevertheless, the argument could be made that highly committed employees could feel they cannot take several days off at once. This could be fear of not being aware of what is happening in the organisation or stepping away from their work.

There have been many discussions focusing on the positive aspects of employee engagement. However, it has been suggested that a superior level of engagement towards one's work, in turn, can result in pressure to achieve and an extreme amount of work-related stress (Seppälä and Moeller, 2018). In a study conducted by Yale University for their Centre of Emotional Intelligence, two out of every five individuals surveyed declared they had suffered high levels of burnout and engagement while at work. (Seppälä and Moeller, 2018) The study also identifies the concept of engaged exhaustion, where the employee feels highly motivated and frustrated with their work simultaneously, leading to eventual disillusion and movement away from the organisation (Seppälä and Moeller, 2018). From reading the literature, the concept of psychological strain associated with constant engagement is rarely addressed. This concept is an area that can be considered highly relevant for employee engagement in

a pandemic world, as employees continue their engagement with their work while working remotely and the psychological impact of the unknown surrounding life in a pandemic. It can be said that juggling commitment to an organisation and the pressures from working in a remote setting can lead to added work-related stress and eventual burnout for employees.

Much is written about employee engagement at a multinational company or companies with several hundred employees. From reviewing the literature, the area of employee engagement is less spoken about within an SME context. There could be several reasons for this, one being that many SME employers believe employee engagement is a ‘flashy’ concept for companies with unlimited budgets (Hastwell, 2020). According to Forbes, a study of 700 small businesses during lockdown found that most employees were satisfied with their jobs and four out of five respondents felt appreciated by their employer for their work. However, not all results were positive for small companies, as three out of four employees surveyed felt more alone while working at home for a small business. Burnout was also an area which was an issue for SMEs during the pandemic as it required employees to respond rapidly to this new way of working and forced many employees to take on more responsibility within their company (Perna, 2020). However, it can be suggested within a larger company, employees can sometimes be overlooked for the extra efforts and hours they put in throughout the pandemic. The feeling that can arise from this situation often breeds a disengagement or even hatred for a job and eventual resignation by the employee (Lipman, 2021).

Drivers of Employee Engagement

Along with well-being being one of the main drivers of engagement within the workforce, studies have identified several other factors that impact employee engagement. Anitha (2014) identifies several key drivers of employee engagement in their literature, most notably, environment, leadership, colleagues, compensation, and career development opportunities. It is believed that when all of these elements are at their most effective, genuine employee engagement is present among the workforce and allows the company to reach its optimal potential (Bedarkar and Pandita, 2014). However, many of these factors were altered or completely changed during the remote working period of the Covid-19 pandemic. Each of the drivers of engagement will be discussed separately, highlighting the relevant literature on each.

Anitha (2014) refers to the environment factor as an optimal atmosphere for employees to feel secure and supported by their employer and team. This factor focuses on the creation of an atmosphere that allows an employee to express their opinions and ideas freely. The environment driver can be considered one of the most apparent factors affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Not only are employees working from their homes, with many people's homes not having adequate space to work full-time remotely, but employees are also trying to navigate an unprecedented global pandemic. The uncertainty of the outside world due to social restrictions and new medical requirements can make many employees feel disengaged and disenchanted from their work (Liu et al, 2021). Liu et al (2021) concluded these findings while surveying hospital workers during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Leadership can also be impactful toward the engagement of employees. Solid organisational leadership can motivate and recognise employees for their contributions leading to a sense of confidence and engagement from the employee (Peters, 2019). However, Risley (2020) argued that the Covid-19 pandemic required plenty of action from organisational leadership to maintain engagement. The research noted that weekly check-ins and regular communication from leadership positively influenced engagement and greatly benefited the management and employee relationship. From other pieces of literature, it is noted that poor leadership can drain employees and drive many of them away from a company (Peters, 2019). Poor leadership is the second biggest cause of resignation by employees, coming in behind less than favourable salaries (Negros, 2022). An example of this can be seen in 'The Great Resignation', which seems to be impacting global organisations. The pandemic gave employees much extra time to examine their lives, both professional and personal and reorganise their priorities (Hunt, 2022). The Harvard Business Review (2022) noted that many organisations focused purely on the aftermath of an employee's resignation rather than preventing resignations. The authors Clementi and Ferrazzi (2022) reiterated with previous literature the positive outcomes that can arise from consistent check-ins with direct reports and discovering what engages and satisfies employees in their work (Clementi and Ferrazzi, 2022).

Colleagues play an essential role in employees' engagement due to the relationships, and the support colleagues can offer each other. When employees are in a supportive environment, they are more likely to offer their opinions and ideas (Kahn, 1990).

However, this has been challenged during the pandemic due to social isolation. It can be suggested this idea has resulted in many employees withdrawing and not engaging with team members. In order to focus more on millennials, Kłopotek (2017) researched young people's experience working remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic. The results concluded that most of those surveyed preferred a face-to-face working environment rather than a virtual one but still appreciated the work-life balance of remote working.

The area of employee compensation is also regarded as a significant pull factor in relation to employee engagement. The concept of benefits and compensation has been used to attract talent to work for a specific firm and keep current employees engaged and motivated (CIPD, 2022). Employee compensation can be both monetary and non-monetary. For example, most organisations offer some annual monetary bonuses to employees (CIPD, 2022). While many organisations realise that bonuses are no longer enough and have introduced extra annual leave days, free lunches and gym memberships, to name a few (CIPD, 2022). However, a critical failing of the compensation factor as a driver in engagement can be the lack of communication between employer and employee on entitlements. One study noted that only 41% of companies surveyed provided annual information on employee entitlements, and 58% of those surveyed admitted that benefits were purely used as a method of attracting talent (Baska, 2018). This asks the question as to whether companies took a more active approach concerning employee benefits during the pandemic in order to increase engagement or if companies updated their compensation offering to align with stay-at-home policies. From exploring the literature there was very little discussion surrounding this theory. The research conducted later in this dissertation aims to investigate this further.

The driver of career development and progression is an area that is considered very important to some employees. Anthia (2014) identifies this driver as providing employees with a goal to achieve, for example, a promotion or transfer and therefore allowing the employee to remain engaged with their work. An organisation's offering of training and learning for their employees also significantly impacts an individual's engagement, allowing the employee to build greater confidence around their role and capabilities (Anthia, 2014). How did the Covid 19 pandemic impact this driver? Osborn et al (2022) suggested uncertainty about career progression was a concern amongst

employees throughout the pandemic due to a rapidly changing global market and potential layoffs within an organisation. This worry was evident amongst younger employees whose careers were in the early stages and possibly felt their careers were in a vicarious position (Osborn et al, 2022). Osborn's (2022) research had a small focus on younger employees. However, the author regarded younger employees as those aged 16-24 which is a generational group younger than millennials. It can be said that Osborn's (2022) findings are still applicable to this study due to the age groups being quite similar.

Work-life Balance

Employers are continually seeking ways to encourage engagement among their employees. In general, engagement is considered a two-way relationship between the employer and employee. Therefore, for an employer to expect commitment and dedication from their employees, they must offer something in return (CIPD, 2021a). De-la -Calle-Durán and Rodríguez-Sánchez (2021) have suggested that employers offering excellent salaries to their employees is no longer enough, and many employees have now sought non-monetary offerings from their employers. Many larger organisations have responded to this demand by offering monthly well-being days, arrangements for employees with young children and mindfulness programmes (De-la -Calle-Durán and Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2021).

As mentioned, continuous over-engagement and exerting oneself into work can lead to burnout and work-related stress. However, employers offering their employees well-being and work-life balance options is their response to combatting this issue. The evolution of larger organisations toward this employee offering can be considered a competitive move to attract and retain talent (Shoemaker et al, 2011). However, these changes raise questions about the SME response to these challenges. De-la -Calle-Durán and Rodríguez-Sánchez (2021) brought this issue into their research and noted that further research is required into the offering, if any, being provided by SMEs. This is one aspect this dissertation hopes to gain insight into.

Organisations increasingly use well-being programmes to retain engagement amongst their employees. It has been said that when an employer ensures employees feel healthy with slight feelings of stress, this can foster engagement (Anitha, 2014). Arguments have been made in a CIPD survey that well-being programmes should not be treated as an additional offering but as a valuable tool by organisations to ensure organisational

health (CIPD, 2020). Lavigna and Basso (2020) have also reiterated this argument that an engaged workforce has the possibility of improving overall organisational performance. However, the question arises in relation to SMEs having the ability to produce a meaningful well-being programme? Most authors referred to larger organisations when discussing well-being from reading the literature. It can be asked whether SMEs could replicate their version of a well-being programme or whether their budgets could incorporate an impactful well-being programme.

Conclusion

Reviewing the literature in the area of employee engagement can be seen to be highly impactful for organisations to ensure their employees are committed and satisfied with their work and the company. From reading the literature it is unclear if actively engaged employees can be achieved by organisations in the SME sector. However, it can be suggested a potential successful starting point could be focusing on different engagement drivers that work for that particular company and its employees.

Anitha (2014) identified several key drivers for employee engagement. Each of these drivers can build confidence, satisfaction and drive amongst employees to ensure employee engagement with their organisation. Drivers of engagement are not necessarily monetary but are non-monetary offerings from an organisation and impactful leadership and development opportunities. However, like most elements within a company, the area of employee engagement was tested during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many successful organisations that retained the engagement of their employees during the pandemic pivoted to this new way of working, for example regular check-ins by individuals in leadership positions, additional annual leave days and well-being initiatives De-la -Calle-Durán and Rodríguez-Sánchez (2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic allowed many employees to evaluate their current positions, which has resulted in many organisations facing ‘The Great Resignation.’ Employees are now beginning to understand the importance and actively demand a better work-life balance from their employers (Shoemaker et al, 2011). There is now more excellent knowledge surrounding the impact of over-exertion in one's job (Seppälä and Moeller, 2018). Therefore, it can be suggested for organisations to introduce elements of well-being into their corporate offering to combat burnout and work-related stress.

It is important for the researcher to explore the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employee engagement within the millennial generational group because of the gaps in the literature. There is little literature on the millennial age group and their experiences within an SME environment during the pandemic.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will examine the research methodology used to conduct this study. This section will begin with an overview of the research approaches available to the author. The remaining sections in the chapter will discuss the sample used, the reasons behind this choice, the procedure around the research process, and the data collection method. Finally, the ethical approach of the research will be considered, along with the limitations identified during this research.

As mentioned previously in this dissertation, this research aims to discover the impact on employee engagement for millennial employees within SME organisations. The research hopes to focus on the unique experiences of individuals who participated in the study and draw on points of interest from arising themes in their responses.

The objectives of the research, which were previously laid out in the introduction of the dissertation, were as follows:

- Has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted employee engagement amongst millennials working in Irish SMEs in comparison to their level of engagement prior?
- Has the Covid-19 pandemic had an overall negative impact on employee engagement within Irish SMEs?
- Have Irish SMEs' leadership responded effectively towards employee engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic?

This chapter hopes to address and confirm the research method most applicable to the above objectives.

Approach & Research Philosophy

The researcher can implement different research philosophies. There are many different research philosophies which are appropriate, and a case can be argued for each. However, certain studies fit better with one approach over another in order to achieve the researcher's objectives.

The researcher began the process by understanding Saunders's (2009) research onion. This idea is based on the metaphor that conducting effective research is similar to peeling an onion. Every layer must be peeled away one by one in order to reach the

most suitable method for conducting this piece of research (Saunders et al, 2009). The research begins with the research philosophy which is the foundation the future research will be built on. Research philosophies can be built from either ontology or epistemology. Ontology refers to the nature of reality, the “what” and the “how.” Two features of ontology are objectivism and subjectivism. While objectivism relates to how a ‘social entity exists’, subjectivism focuses on understanding the validity of social phenomena. (Saunders et al, 2009) While epistemology focuses on “how” we obtain the knowledge and our understanding of this knowledge (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Positivism, interpretivism and pragmatism are all philosophies which operate from the assumptions of either ontology or epistemology. Positivism is based on the idea of gaining data from experiences and verifying it through scientific methods. On the other hand, interpretivism argues that scientific methods cannot interpret human behaviour or experiences, but a qualitative approach must be implemented to gather data. Pragmatism encourages the use of the best tools possible to explore research, the aim is knowledge is not fixed but constantly interpreted and questioned (Saunders et al, 2009).

The next stage of the onion is the approach which are identified as either inductive or deductive. An inductive method is identified as a qualitative approach to research, while the deductive method is focused on a quantitative approach. Inductive approach refers to conducting research where very little is present on a certain area, therefore research take place in order to gain knowledge on this area. While the deductive approach is cemented in theory and research is built upon an already developed body of work (Saunders et al, 2009).

Upon analysing the philosophies, the researcher decided to focus on epistemology, using interpretivism as the most suitable way of understanding the impact the Covid-19 pandemic had on employee engagement.

Quantitative

The quantitative research method provides complex factual data from questionnaires, polls or surveys. (Barnham, 2015) It is said that the quantitative approach leans on the mathematical or numerical viewpoint of the data.

There are many advantages to choosing a quantitative research method, such as allowing a large sample group to be analysed, which can provide excellent knowledge

on a specific area of study. The quantitative method can also be less time-consuming than the qualitative approach due to the ease of using surveys and polls and the software available to organise the data. (Rahman, 2017) However, the quantitative method can also have drawbacks. For example, it requires the researcher to be distant and neutral when conducting the research. (Cooper and Schindler, 2014) This can appear impersonal and not gain a complete understanding of the experiences of the individuals supplying the data for the research.

Qualitative

The qualitative research approach is focused on gaining insights into individuals and learning from their experiences rather than focusing on statistical data. Qualitative research investigates a person's behaviour, feelings and lived experiences and the relationship between them. (Rahman, 2017) One of the main advantages of a qualitative research method is to dig deeper into the human experiences of a specific situation. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2002) As this study aims to gather knowledge about the experiences of an employee's engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic, the qualitative approach seems to be the most applicable for this research piece.

Participants of the Study

Individuals were sought to participate in this research from several private sector SME workforces.

All the employees selected were required to be from the millennium age bracket, this is classified as those aged between 25 and 40 years old. The qualitative sampling technique used by the researcher in this study was purposeful sampling. This technique was chosen due to the freedom it gave the researcher to select the qualifying criteria necessary to take part in the research (Suri, 2011).

The researcher completed interviews with five individuals. These individuals were at various career stages, ranging from junior-level roles to director-level positions. Most individuals who accepted an interview with the researcher worked in various industries within the private sector, such as public relations, financial services and the aviation industry.

Research Instrument

Another advantage of the qualitative approach is that it allows the researcher to develop open-ended questions and build a rapport with the individuals sharing their experiences.

The researcher chose the method of semi-structured interviews as the instrument to conduct this study. Semi-structured interviews were an appropriate choice for this research due to their flexibility (Carruthers, 1990). It allows the interview to probe further on responses provided to gain an excellent range of the individual's experience.

The interviews were offered to the participants through virtual video calling software or face-to-face. These options allowed the researcher to engage with the individual and create a comfortable atmosphere which would encourage the participant to be as open as possible during the interview. Privacy and confidentiality were the main priorities for the researcher while conducting the interviews, and all measures were taken to ensure anonymity. Those measures will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

All of the participants chose to interview video call. There were a number of reasons for this, primarily due to the recent rise in Covid-19 cases and busy work schedules made video interviews the more feasible option.

The participants were asked fifteen questions, which were created to gain a deeper understanding of the participant engagement levels during the height of the pandemic. The questions were designed in order to capture the most genuine opinions of the participants while answering the research questions set out at the beginning of the dissertation. While also considering the influence this has had on work-life balance, relationships with leadership and what drives their engagement. The individuals interviewed provided plenty of material from their honest and insightful responses.

Procedure

The researcher approached the office manager of each of the SMEs and asked if their employees would like to participate in this research. The office manager informed their staff of this opportunity and passed on the researcher's contact information if they were interested in participating.

Ten companies were selected randomly, and an email was sent to their office manager, which outlined the purpose of the communication and a participant letter (see appendix A) containing an overview of the study I was conducting. The researcher requested the managers to forward the participant letter and the researcher's contact details to their employees, and those interested in participating could contact the researcher directly. The researcher received an acknowledgement from most managers and received emails from a total of seven possible participants.

Those interested in participating received further information on the study, such as a consent form (see appendix C), an information sheet (see appendix B) and a list of questions. Two possible participants did not respond to this email with further information, leaving the researcher with five interested participants. Video calls were arranged with participants at times that were suitable for them. These calls lasted approximately 40 mins and were recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

The researcher's purpose in recording and transcribing the interviews is to ensure complete submersion by the researcher into what is being said by the participant. It is to remove distracting notetaking from the session and allow the researcher to interject and probe further into what is being said by the participant. Another objective is to ensure all responses are analysed correctly, and the researcher misses nothing. It will allow reoccurring themes to be identified of employee engagement experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Data Collection and Analysis

All semi-structured interviews were conducted in a confidential manner. Participants were ensured throughout the session that anything they shared was to remain anonymous. As mentioned previously, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The audios of the interviews were recorded on the researcher's iPhone and stored in a password-protected file on the researcher's laptop. All forms and transcripts were also stored in a protected file. The recording and any documentation signed by participants will be stored and deleted to align with NCI guidelines.

The qualitative analysis approach chosen by the researcher was a thematic analysis. This approach was suitable due to the ability of this analysis' flexibility in order provide a substantial findings (Nowell et al, 2017). King (2004) also stated that the thematic approach is an excellent option when reviewing attitudes of several different participants while focusing on their varying similarities and differences.

Ethical Considerations

It is of core importance for the researcher that participants feel comfortable sharing their employee engagement experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic in their organisation. From initial contact with the participants, it was clear that all opinions given during their interviews would be kept confidential and not shared with their organisation or any other individuals. Before the interviews, participants provided information on the study and consent forms to ensure all participants were happy for

their opinions to be used in this research. The letter to participants can be seen in appendix 1. This was their initial information on the study.

Throughout the researcher's contact with all participants, it was clear that participants could refuse to participate at any time before, during and after the interview. Permission was requested before conducting the interview, and the participant signed the consent form. Before the commencement of the interview, the participant was made aware that they could still withdraw from the research. This also was reiterated at the end of the session, informing participants they could withdraw up to a week after the interview. Consent was received from the participants before the recording of the interview began. Participants were also informed that the researcher would transcribe interviews, and they were again given the opportunity to withdraw or continue with the interview. It was of the utmost importance for the researcher that participants were given several opportunities throughout the process to withdraw in order to ensure comfortability, trust and confidence between researcher and participant.

Any identifying comments made by the participants during the interview process was omitted from the transcripts in order to ensure anonymity.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations were identified throughout this study. Firstly, a focus group within one SME organisation was initially considered the research instrument. However, this method was ruled out because the number of employees who fit within the criteria for the study was relatively small. This could lead to employees feeling under pressure or obliged to take part in the study. This is something the researcher wanted to avoid. It was a priority for the researcher that all participants were freely willing to share their engagement experiences in order to ensure all responses were as genuine as possible.

Secondly, the qualitative approach requires plenty of time to be implemented. This can be considered a limitation. Therefore, the researcher only could interview a small number of participants, which reflected the time constraints associated with the deadline of the dissertation. As mentioned previously, two initial participants decided not to partake in the study or did not respond to further communication from the researcher. The researcher also encountered issues with willing participants who would request date changes of the scheduled interview. This would increase the timeframe required to conduct interviews. By conducting more interviews, the researcher could

have compiled a greater pool of experiences from the participants which would have provided more breadth for the research.

As mentioned in this section, all participants asked for interviews to be conducted through video call rather than in person. There could be a number of reasons for this. The main reason mentioned by participants were limited availability and avoiding scheduling conflicts between researcher and participant. Although using video call software can be efficient and practical in time of remote working, it can be said there are drawbacks to using this method. One of the issues that can arise is a poor internet connection which can cause a lag in the video. This results in less of a conversation that flows and more of a stagnated and broken conversation. Another limitation to video calls is the lack of visibility of hand gestures, body language and eye contact, which would be specific aspects of a face-to-face conversation (Irani, 2018). These natural elements of an in-person meeting could have provided the researcher with social cues and reactions to specific questions which cannot be picked up on via a virtual meeting.

Chapter Four: Research Findings

Introduction

This chapter will focus on the findings gathered from the interviews conducted by the researcher. As mentioned in the previous chapter, there were five participants from the millennial age group who worked in various industries in the private sector. Those interviewed were at different points in their careers; this provided the researcher with varied experiences at varied role levels.

Before the commencement of the interviews, each participant was provided with an information sheet containing details of the study and a copy of the questions. The document containing the interview questions (see appendix D) also provided a glossary of terms so that participants could be fully prepared before the interview.

The following sections are divided into the different themes that arose during the interviews. An outline of responses received, and an analysis of the questions used by the researcher will be presented in the below sections. The questions created by the researcher focused on employee's background, employee's level of engagement, work-life balance, employee's work environment, drivers of employee engagement, employee motivation and engagement with leadership. These topics will be explored in detail in the sections below.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with five participants, which were recorded. The researcher proceeded to transcribe the interviews once they had finished. After completing all five interviews, the researcher began a thematic analysis of the data. The transcripts were examined for reoccurring themes within the interview answers. These themes will be presented in detail in this chapter. The thematic analysis approach was chosen as it produces a final and clear interpretation of the data (King, 2004). The thematic approach has also been described in the literature as suitable for those conducting their first research analysis experience (Nowell et al, 2017).

The table below shows an overview of key facts about each participant in this research to provide the reader with context while reviewing the findings. As previously mentioned, two individuals were initially interested in participating in the research but ceased communication with the researcher prior to scheduling the interview.

Table 1: Overview of Participants

| Participant | Gender | Role Title | Sector | Current engagement level |
|--------------------|---------------|----------------------|------------------|---------------------------------|
| A | Male | Client Director | Communications | Engaged |
| B | Female | Compliance Officer | Financial | Engaged |
| C | Female | Account Manager | Public Relations | Engaged |
| D | Male | Office Administrator | Public Relations | Disengaged |
| E | Male | Analyst | Aviation | Engaged |

Employee Background

The first six questions asked by the researcher sought to create a background of the participant and ensure they fit within the criteria necessary to participate in the study. The questions required the participant to confirm they were in the millennial age group and that their company contained less than 250 employees, which classifies it as an SME. All participants confirmed they fit both criteria.

The following four questions asked participants what their current job title is and how long they have been in this particular. They were also asked to confirm if they worked in this particular role throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. The researcher also asked participants to clarify if they worked remotely or in an office during the pandemic. These questions were asked to gather greater insight into the participant's circumstances and employment background.

As mentioned in this section, all participants confirmed they fit the criteria to take part in this study. Participants were then asked what their current role was and the duration they had been in the particular role. All participants had different roles within their organisations. These included Client Director, Account Manager, Compliance Officer, Analyst and Office Administrator. In comparison, the duration of the participants in their current roles was between eleven months and six years.

Participants were also asked if they worked in this role during the Covid-19 pandemic. All participants confirmed they did except for participant C, who changed companies during the pandemic.

Participants were asked did they work remotely or continued in an office environment during the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants A, B and C worked remotely, while participant D was required to be in the office at certain times. Participant E continued to work in their office for the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Level of Engagement

Participants were asked if they considered themselves engaged, disengaged or actively disengaged. Engaged was defined as an employee who was passionate about their role and organisation. Disengaged related to employees who did the minimum amount of work to complete their responsibilities but were not fully committed to the organisation. While actively disengaged was a hostile employee who was both an underperformer and resentful towards the company. All participants asked this question responded as engaged except for participant D, who considered themselves disengaged. Although it must be noted that participant C, who changed organisations in the middle of the pandemic, referred to themselves as disengaged when they were with their previous employer.

The researcher asked participants to describe their level of engagement prior to the pandemic. Participant E was finishing their master's degree, so this question did not apply to them. Participant A said that while they felt engaged, but they had been in the role for four years and began to feel "fatigued." This participant said if the pandemic had not occurred and change to the way we work had not happened, they would have been "ready for a move" due to the "lack of diversity" in their work.

Participant B regarded themselves as disengaged prior to the pandemic. This individual changed roles before the pandemic and felt "demotivated" by their previous organisations. The "below market salary" this individual was earning was a factor leading to their disengagement. Participant C also regarded themselves as disengaged prior to the pandemic, describing their engagement as "waning." The reasoning behind their disengagement was "negative management" that negated on "promises of promotions and benefits." Participant C described their management as "never instilled any excitement or confidence." Participant D also considered themselves disengaged,

describing themselves as "exhausted" and having disagreements with "management decisions".

Participants were then asked if the Covid-19 pandemic affected their level of engagement. Participant A suggested it allowed them to "prioritise" their personal and professional life. Prior to the pandemic, this individual worked and commuted five days a week to their company's office. When this shifted to remote working, they realised how much they "valued" this way of working and could now discover the "important things in life and work."

Participant B found the work-from-home situation better for their engagement due to the lack of "distractions" they encountered while working in an office environment. Participant C said they were "initially more engaged" when they were asked to work from home. It allowed them to get away from the office, which they regarded as "toxic and demotivating." Participant D described their engagement as deteriorating more when the Covid-19 pandemic hit. They regarded themselves as "isolated" and found it challenging to be shown work-related activities via video call. They also "lost touch" with colleagues, which they found difficult. Finally, participant E said there were "no changes" to their levels of engagement and that they remained engaged throughout the pandemic.

Work-life Balance

The researcher asked participants whether their work-life balance improved after the Covid-19 pandemic. Participant A reiterated how the new hybrid working model has allowed them more personal time, such as "exercising more" and "more time with family." This new way of working made them realise "how much I valued that" and "became important to me." Participant B noted that their work-life balance has "massively improved", which they attributed to their "travel time" significantly reduced.

Participant C noted that their work-life balance "improved massively" during the pandemic. The free time from hybrid working allowed the participant to go on "walks before work every morning" and have a "leisurely breakfast." This time allowed participant C to realise the time they had previously wasted before the pandemic, "travelling an hour to work" and "spending money on lunches" when they could "do most of my job perfectly well at home." However, these thoughts changed after the

pandemic for participant C, who described their work-life balance as “slipping back” to pre-Covid-19 levels. They try to make “a conscious effort” to ensure they take “regular exercise” while keeping up with work.

Participant D noted that the new hybrid approach to working can be “lonely,” but they have benefited from the free time it has provided to “get things done in my personal life” and “spending time with family.” Participant E had a unique experience from the other participants as they remained working in an office for the entirety of the pandemic. They “struggle to see friends and family and have extra time” while participant E continues to commute and work in an office five days a week. However, participant E knew this was a job requirement and felt they could not “complain” about their situation.

Work Environment

The researcher asked participants if their work environment affected their level of engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic. Participant A felt their level of engagement did not deteriorate while working from home. They did not lose touch with other colleagues and noted it was “easy to connect” due to the virtual environment and the small firm they worked in. Participant B noted that their level of engagement remained unchanged due to the “less stress” they felt while working remotely away from their office environment.

Participant C stated they felt their engagement level was “difficult to keep.” They described the psychological environment of work as “really negative” and “very toxic.” Participant C later referred to their physical work environment as negatively impacting their engagement levels due to initially “working from a kitchen table in my family home.” This participant stated that once they set up a home office, their engagement improved, “I needed to actually put together some form of a home office and once I did those things got a lot better.” However, once participant C returned to Dublin, their engagement level shifted, “When I came back to Dublin, to my apartment, all of a sudden, I was working from my tiny bedroom at the foot of my bed, and I found that difficult. That was definitely not great for my mental health and keeping engaged in my job- it made everything so much more difficult.”

Participant D noted that their engagement level began to lead to disengagement. “Yes, the isolation really impacted me at times because it was a new job.” This participant

noted that they struggled to work in the home environment, “my bedroom was my office and everyone in my family was working at home too, so it felt like a prison at times.” Participant E worked in their company’s office throughout the pandemic with no possibility to work from home. This participant suggested, “I personally would prefer the choice” when asked how they felt about not being allowed to work remotely by their employer. They also stated they “felt obliged to be engaged because they were in the office.” Participant E also commented on how the environment felt “unsafe” at times, “they (Participant E’s employer) had the normal restrictions in place like mask wearing, but it felt very relaxed at times and actually after a while everyone ignored them.”

Drivers of Employee Engagement

The researcher examined drivers of engagement for each participant by asking them if their company introduced any measures to promote engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic and if those measures impacted their engagement within the organisation. Participant A noted that they did not observe any noticeable measures introduced by their organisation. However, this participant did note extra calls that the company added. "A daily phone at 9.30 am, every day, which I felt was overkill. I have a seven-year-old now, so he was five and six during the lockdowns, who needed to be dropped to school. I think locking in a particular time every single day wasn't very family-friendly, and also wasn't going to work for somebody like myself, who's kind of a morning person, and gets up and starts work as early as I can. So having a call at that hour of the day was really disruptive to my work.”

Participant B noted that their employer introduced social activities to increase engagement, “They (Participant B’s employer) started social zoom calls once a week, and we were also sent out hampers too.” Participant C noted a different experience of “having a call every morning to check in on how people were doing. Initially, this was to see if people were overworked or what was on their plate. But it very soon felt like a teacher checking in.” Participant B later noted their new employer “brought in some social type things like sending people out kits for making cocktails that kind of thing... It felt much more natural and fun, not like a schoolteacher checking up on you. It made me more motivated in my job; it gave me more autonomy, I suppose.”

Participant D suggested, similar to participants A and C of regular check-ins by management, “there were many calls throughout the day without notice so you always

felt on, I felt I couldn't step away for a half an hour even during lunch." Participant D noted that elements of social interaction were brought in: "we had online companies come in who would do team building or magicians." Participant E stated, "vouchers were given out on a Friday morning to be spent in a local pub that evening." However, this participant did not mention further measures, or anything introduced prior to restrictions being lifted on pubs.

Participants were also asked what they think are the critical factors in the workplace that drive employee engagement for millennials and if they believe the Covid-19 pandemic affected these factors. Participant A suggested "interesting work, but for a business they believe in as well. So, I think values are really important now. So, I think everything from like sustainability to, you know, general ethics, I think that became more apparent and obvious. You're taking a step back, you're not in that office environment anymore. So, making sure that the culture and values were genuine, as opposed to something that was printed and stuck open poster on the wall." Participant A also noted that due to the pandemic, millennials expect a work-life balance offering from their employer. "I think particularly now, because so many people were working from home, and were able to choose a little bit more flexibility in terms of their time or their location of work. People have got used to that now. They expect that now. So, I think people will see it as a piece of respect that you're to expect from your employer, to trust you to choose the location and time that will work best for you to do your job. I think employers that don't do that, will struggle with retention."

Participant B noted that "reasonable working hours and respect for when you're off the clock", was a factor for them regarding employee engagement. Participant B also mentioned that they were previously disengaged before the pandemic due to the issue of being overworked. "Pre-Covid, I feel like burnout was one of my main reasons for becoming disengaged with my work."

Participant C stated that they felt a critical factor for millennial engagement was trust in the employer. "I think managers should be aware that millennials want to be trusted. Most of us have been working in jobs now for several years, we're not children we don't need to be micromanaged. It's about finding that nice blend of helping and supporting people and also allowing them to learn and make mistakes."

Feelings of Value & Motivation

The researcher asked participants if they felt motivated or valued by their employer during the Covid-19 pandemic. Participant A noted that their employer introduced daily morning calls to motivate the team, “I think morale was probably the goal, although it turned into checking up. They were making sure they knew that everybody was actually up and out of bed and working. So, I think I don't think it came off as a morale motivator that they wanted.”

However, participant B felt regular check-ins by their employer was a positive factor to feeling motivated. “My manager was very proactive in checking in with his team and getting positive feedback on our work. This definitely made me feel like a valued team member and kept me going.” Participant C noted they felt unmotivated by their previous employer during the pandemic, they suggested the work they were assigned helped them to stay motivated, but their employer did not. “It was definitely the clients that I was working with that motivated me and the type of work I was doing but the actual company that I worked for or the agency that I worked for, they did not motivate me one bit.” Participant C had had a different experience with their new employer, “if you had to work particularly late on something they would make sure that you took time back on another day they really made me feel part of the team. There was a general understanding that we are all in this together, and we'll get through it together and in the meantime we just all have to look after each other.”

Participant D noted that being valued was of great importance to them, “there would be times I would work really hard on something to get it across the line, and I'd send it on but hear nothing. But if there was an error, they'd be calling me to fix it straightaway, a little appreciation wouldn't go a miss.” Participant E stated that working from the office environment during the pandemic kept them motivated, “going into the office every day and seeing your team, hearing everything that's going on definitely kept me motivated and engaged.” Participant E also noted that promotions could be earned quite quickly in their organisation which kept them motivated. “You can move up quickly if you put the work in so, knowing that definitely kept me motivated to commute into the office five days a week.”

Engagement of Leadership

The researcher asked participants if their manager/supervisor's engagement affected their own during the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the participants noted that they

struggled with leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic, which harmed their own engagement. Participant C stated, "In my job during the pandemic, my line manager stayed very close to me and to be fair, that did help keep me engaged and helps me do really great work but eventually it became so micromanaged it was depressing... In the agency I moved to, my manager gave me enough autonomy to go and work on clients. I'm really stepping to a more senior role. I was trusted. She was really engaged and so enthusiastic that it actually influenced how I felt."

Participant D noted that their manager's lack of engagement left them feeling isolated. "My manager was unavailable a lot during the working day because she had her children, so I would not hear from her and find myself with nothing to do...but I would get emails at 9 pm with tasks to do, so I would spend my evenings stressing about these emails." Participant D was also required by their manager to go into the office regularly while they did not. "I was asked a few times to go in on my own when the pandemic was in full swing to check the office, sort out the post, send out stationary but I felt this went unacknowledged and became an expected thing I do."

However, not all experiences were negative between employer and employee. Participant B stated that their manager was involved in their work, keeping them engaged. "My manager was very involved without micromanaging to keep me on top of my work, and this really helped me."

Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter will dive deeper into the findings from the previous chapter on research findings and will aim to connect these discoveries to the literature discussed in chapter three. The researcher desires to identify comparisons and contrasts between what was explored in this study's research and the current literature available.

As previously mentioned, the main aim of conducting this research was to gain a deeper understanding of millennial employees' experiences throughout the Covid-19 pandemic in Irish SMEs. The interviews obtained several different accounts of employee experience throughout this period, as well as results concerning experiences with leadership, drivers of engagement, work-life balance and feelings of motivation and value.

Employee Engagement

The five participants in the researcher's semi-structured interviews were asked to clarify their current level of engagement and whether they would describe themselves as engaged, disengaged or actively disengaged. Most respondents stated they were currently engaged, while one individual felt disengaged. According to the literature, employee engagement can be defined as an employee's psychological state of commitment to their organisation. (Kahn, 1990) According to Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), there need to be three key traits to ensure employees feel fully engaged: vigour, dedication and absorption. One of the individuals supported these characteristics by outlining their interest in the company's performance, regularly seeking meetings with leadership and general interest in all aspects of the organisation. The individual who described themselves as disengaged described the main reason for this as having a negative opinion of leadership within the organisation. This opinion can also be supported by Caldwell's (2021) theory that a successful relationship between employer and employee is the most integral aspect of employee engagement.

Participants were asked to clarify the length of time they were in their current roles. This was between eleven months and six years. This question was asked to identify the participant's position within their company. The participant's titles ranged from Client Director to Office Administrator. However, it can be asked if the participant's level of seniority and duration within the organisation could affect their engagement experience

throughout the pandemic. Hinzmann et al (2019) conducted a study on employee engagement within 70 global SMEs in the technology sector to see if seniority played a role in an individual's engagement level. Their research concluded that employees in senior positions were less engaged than others within the company. They identified that the most engaged individuals were those with less than two years of service in the company (Hinzmann et al, 2019). This was not true of the sample used in this research, the most senior individual interviewed regarded themselves as engaged and took an active role in their company.

Participants were also asked to share their experience of employee engagement prior to the Covid-19. This was asked to distinguish the impact the Covid-19 pandemic had on their level of engagement. Three out of five participants shared that they were feelings of disengagement before the pandemic. However, one of the participants regarded themselves as engaged but possessed feelings of fatigue due to a lack of diversity in their work and working arrangements. Seppälä and Moeller (2018) noted in their research that even engaged employees could begin to feel frustrated with their work which can lead to eventual disillusion with their organisation.

Drivers of Engagement

During the researcher's examination of the literature, several key drivers influence employee engagement amongst employees. Anitha (2014) stated several factors were essential for an employee to be engaged, most notably, environment, leadership, colleagues, compensation, and career development opportunities. During the interview sessions, participants were asked whether their companies had introduced measures to ensure engagement. However, it was clear from the participant's responses to this question that not all of Anitha's drivers were present in their answers. Although it can be said that a participant who did not identify all of Anitha's drivers, does not mean they are not engaged in that particular organisation. It can be suggested that the factors which arose during the interviews are the drivers which are a priority for the participant and do not necessarily portray a lack of offering on the organisation's part. Participants mostly noted drivers such as environment, compensation and career development. The participants did not mention the drivers of colleagues or leadership in their interviews.

Environment

According to the literature, the environment theme was considered one of the critical drivers of employee engagement (Anitha, 2014). The driver of environment refers to

the employee's physical work environment and the working atmosphere between employee and employer. Anitha (2014) stated that to achieve the optimal environment, the employee must feel supported by their employer to express themselves and have a suitable physical working environment to do their work effectively. One participant noted the antagonistic effect fully remote working had on their engagement. The individual stated that they had no option but to work in their bedroom in their small apartment. They felt this harmed their mental health and left them disengaged with their work.

Leadership

The topic of leadership was evident throughout the participant's responses. Most interviews highlighted frustration with leadership, which affected their level of engagement with the company and their work. Risley (2020) suggested frequent communication between employees and leadership can only benefit the relationship during the pandemic. Participants noted that frequent communication from leadership during the pandemic, such as daily team and social calls, left participants feeling drained, and one regarded them as too intensive, breeding a feeling of distrust. Peters (2019) also noted that management behaviour like this could have the opposite of the intended effect and drive their workforce away.

Participants were also asked if their manager or supervisor's engagement affected their own during the pandemic. One participant noted that their manager's constant check-ins during the day while working from home kept them focused and engaged on their work, eventually developing the practice of micromanaging the employee. This participant noted the need for managers to understand an employee's communication style and consider this. For example, it can be said that some employees prefer phone calls to emails.

In the previous literature section, Negros (2022) stated that poor leadership was the second most significant cause of employee resignation. This statement appeared in two separate interviews. One participant felt the increase in working hours and elements of micromanagement from leadership drove them to change the company during the pandemic. Another participant noted they felt frustrated with management decisions, leading them to consider moving organisation.

Work-life Balance

As previously mentioned in this dissertation, employers expect and want their employees to be actively engaged with their work and their organisation. However, employees now expect something in return from their employers for their engagement (CIPD, 2021a). All participants, bar one who took part in the interviews, worked remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic. Two participants noted that the introduction of hybrid working has positively impacted their engagement levels as their employers responded to their requests for a diversified approach to working. Kłopotek (2017) stated in their research that respondents to their survey preferred an in-person working environment over a remote approach to work. However, this result can be argued due to the responses from participants during their interviews. Currently, remote individuals do not wish to return to their previous way of in-person working and value the work-life balance that remote working has provided.

Shoemaker et al (2011) noted that employers are increasingly aware of the growing need for a solid work-life balance to combat over-exertion and retain their employees. One participant stated that before the Covid-19 pandemic, they began to feel disengaged, and their gruelling working schedule affected their personal life. This individual also noted that prior to the pandemic, they were considering changing jobs due to the exhaustion of their working schedule. After the pandemic, a hybrid approach to work was introduced into this individual's organisation. As a result, the individual decided to stay with their current company.

Value & Motivation

It can be suggested that an employee feel valued or motivated by their employer can be a positive factor in employee engagement. However, it has been stated in the literature that when an employee goes beyond what is expected of them in their organisation, these efforts can be redundant. It can be said that if the employer does not value these efforts, it can lead to demotivation on the part of the employee (Lipman, 2021). One participant in the interview stated that the extra responsibility they took on during the Covid-19 pandemic was unappreciated by management. This employee took on extra work such as ordering work from home equipment for their colleagues, researching Covid-19 workplace policies and going to the office several times to ensure a safe environment. The individual felt they were stretched for a time between their typical role and these extra responsibilities and considered these additional responsibilities

unvalued by their employer. This has led to the personal feeling demotivated as they have no acknowledgement from their employer of the work they contributed to the organisation. As a result, the employee is considering moving to a different organisation. This experience reinforces Lipman's statement that demotivation can lead to disconnect with one's organisation and eventual resignation (Lipman, 2021).

It has also been stated in the literature that offering compensation and benefits to employees increases motivation and engagement (CIPD, 2022). However, throughout the examination of the interview responses, several participants noted the benefits they receive from their employer. However, no participant noted that this impacted their engagement or motivation. Individuals stated they received benefits such as gym memberships, hampers and additional days off. However, one participant noted the offering was nothing exceptional compared to what is being offered in other organisations.

Conclusion

The researcher conducted this study using a small number of participants to answer research questions developed at the beginning of the process. It can be said from examining the responses from the participants that there is no blanket answer on the level of engagement of millennials in the workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic. Each individual had a unique experience working in their organisation throughout the pandemic. Participants A and B felt engaged throughout the pandemic due to working from home, which was their preferred location. However, participants C and D both felt disengaged from their work and company, which ultimately led participant C to leave their organisation. While participant E had a unique experience of their role during the pandemic, being their first role out of college so felt engaged to succeed in this first step in their career.

The research area of millennial engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic is still an area worth investigating for future studies. After examining the literature, several gaps became apparent regarding studies conducted on millennial engagement within the timeframe of the pandemic. There could be many reasons for the lack of previous research. One reason that can be suggested is that the pandemic has been a recent phenomenon, and literature on this area has only been conducted in the medical field. The researcher has contributed a small study to this area and allowed future researchers to understand the importance of gaining further insight. A more significant number of

millennial participants in a specific sector could be recommended as the next step in further research. This could allow a future researcher to gather more personal experiences in the context of one industry during the pandemic to narrow the focus further on employee engagement amongst millennials. Therefore, a focus group approach could be more applicable to larger information gathering in one industry.

The qualitative research conducted in this study identified several key themes from the participant responses, employee engagement, drivers of engagement, environment, leadership, work-life balance and value and motivation. Leadership in SMEs should familiarise themselves with these key themes when examining their millennial employee's engagement levels. Not only could this increase engagement, but it can also help retain and attract millennial employees within the SME sector.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Research Questions

The title given to this dissertation was 'The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employee engagement for millennials within Irish private sector SMEs.' This study investigated the employee engagement experiences of millennials during this timeframe. It was also the researcher's goal to explore SMEs' response to employee engagement during this time and the measures they did or did not introduce. At the beginning of the study, the researcher identified the below research questions to answer by conducting semi-structured interviews with willing participants who fit the criteria necessary for the study.

How has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted employee engagement amongst millennials working in Irish SMEs in comparison to their level of engagement prior?

From analysing the research, most respondents felt the Covid-19 pandemic had a positive impact on employee engagement compared to the employee engagement levels prior to the pandemic. Many participants noted burnout or had lost interest in their role before the pandemic. The introduction of the work-from-home policy allowed many participants to prioritise their professional and personal responsibilities. It can be said that the pandemic allowed the participants to evaluate their organisation and role, and for many of them, this reignited their level of engagement.

Has the Covid-19 pandemic had an overall negative impact on employee engagement within Irish SMEs?

After the researcher examined the interview data, there was no specific answer to this question as the experiences were mixed. Some participants regarded the Covid-19 pandemic as a positive experience and increased their engagement levels. This was due to the creation of a hybrid working environment that was a better fit for some participants. This new way of working allowed the participants more free time and work without distractions from an office environment. These aspects increased the participant's engagement and commitment to their role and organisation. However, several participants regarded the pandemic as having a negative impact on their engagement due to their working conditions and feelings of isolation. Some participants had to work in their bedrooms during the pandemic and admitted this affected their

mental health. Other participants noted that they felt isolated from colleagues and struggled to engage via video calls. These factors ultimately negatively affect the engagement levels of these participants. This question could be worthwhile for future research to gain more insight into the impact of the pandemic on employee engagement.

Have Irish SMEs' leadership responded effectively towards employee engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Overall, the research suggested that leadership did not respond effectively in order to maintain or increase employee engagement during the pandemic. Through investigation of the research, several reasons were identified. Firstly, leadership responded to the Covid-19 pandemic by introducing daily calls with employees. It could be assumed that leadership felt this was a way of maintaining morale and a sense of community. However, participants felt this was a form of micromanaging and created a sense of distrust between leadership and employees. Secondly, communication between leadership and employees was also considered an issue. Participants noted the lack of communication with their manager during regular working hours, which left the employees feeling stressed when receiving emails during the evening. Finally, participants did not mention a policy or offers associated with engagement. Some participants noted they were sporadically offered gifts or an additional annual leave day. However, nothing was mentioned concerning a benefits policy an employee could refer to ensure their engagement and commitment to the organisation are rewarded.

Limitations of the Research

Several different limitations of the study were identified by the researcher. Firstly, the time constraints associated with working on a piece of research with deadlines, while working in full-time employment. These circumstances proved challenging for the researcher in order for them to complete meaningful and quality research into this area.

Secondly, the researcher found it difficult at times to gain interest from potential participants. It was noted earlier in the research that a number of initial participants ceased communication for unknown reasons. This significantly reduced the number of participants the researcher had ready to schedule for interviews.

Finally, the researcher at times felt some of the participants held back on their true feelings or they wanted to portray their organisation in a positive manner. There could be a number of reasons a participant might hold themselves back in interview, one of

them could be the fear the information could be shared with their organisation or their organisation identifying them. However, the researcher informed all participants on several occasions their opinions and experiences would be anonymised, and the greatest care would be taken in protecting the information they shared.

Recommendations, Cost Recommendations & Implications

The first recommendation provided by the researcher would be an effective communication policy between leadership and employees. Many of the participants in the research noted issues of communication, whether that be too little or too much. The researcher suggests that every manager have discussions with their team to identify everyone's communication preferences. There are no financial implications for this suggestion, but the manager's time and effort are required. The manager must listen to their team's preferences and arrange meetings around these choices.

The second recommendation to SMEs would be to encourage their management to gain a better insight and understanding of working with their teams in a hybrid environment. The Institute of Public Administration offers management-level courses to educate leadership to effectively manage employees in a hybrid environment. This is an online day-long course and costs a total of €395.

During the study, the researcher noted the lack of structure surrounding well-being and benefits options for the employees of SMEs. Many participants noted they received a hamper or a day-off once in a while but not a concrete offering that an employee can refer to. A benefits plan can be developed in-house by leadership through consultation with employees. Before commencing such an activity, the employer should define their ultimate goal for a benefits plan, whether this is a tool for attraction and retention or used as an employee value proposition. The employer should also factor in their own financial boundaries when creating employee benefits plans. In order to introduce such a plan, the organisation must be willing to devote their time to its research and development. This could take several weeks to create and implement. Many companies offer tailored made wellness plans to organisations. WellSteps is an app-based solution that encourages mental and physical wellness through activities and challenges amongst the team. The cost of this app is 0.50c per employee per month. Ultimately, both plans should be communicated to staff and regularly discussed by those in leadership to encourage their teams to engage.

As mentioned previously in the study, there is growing importance in the positioning of millennials in the workplace due to older generational groups moving towards retirement. A recommendation can be suggested to SME employers to establish a development plan for their millennial employees to ensure retention. During the research, it was mentioned that promotions never came to fruition for one of the participants. Human Resource software such as Personio allows small companies to create and manage their training and development plans for employees. Access to this software is currently €4.43 per employee per month.

Personal Learning Statement

I knew that taking on this dissertation would be a challenge but also an outstanding achievement once completed. I have wanted to change careers for a long time, and the area of Human Resource Management has always interested me. I knew when joining the course that my ultimate goal would be to complete a dissertation in this area.

The SME private sector was particularly interested in me as I had previously worked in many companies that fit within this model. It struck me how vastly different they all operated. A common theme I noticed within the sector was turnover and burnout due to too few people doing too many jobs within the company for very little recognition. When taking on this dissertation, I knew this was an area I wanted to examine. It was a key aim of mine to explore how these organisations dealt with their employee engagement and if it was a focus of theirs or not. I believe the Covid-19 pandemic had an enormous impact on the SME sector and left many of these companies wondering if they would survive. As I was not working in the SME sector during the pandemic, I wondered how these companies' employee morale and engagement were.

As discussed in my section on further research, future researchers have many opportunities to add to this fascinating area. I am proud of myself for contributing to this area of study. If I were to undertake the process again, I would prefer a more extended timeframe to complete the study to gather more participants and provide further depth and breadth to the research.

Bibliography

Anitha J. (2014) 'Determinants of employee engagement and their impact on employee performance', *International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management*, 63(3), pp. 308–323. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPPM-01-2013-0008>

Barnham, C. (2015) 'Quantitative and Qualitative Research: Perceptual Foundations', *International Journal of Market Research*, 57(6). <https://doi.org/10.2501%2FIJMR-2015-070>

Baska, M. (2018) 'Businesses 'throwing money down the drain' by not communicating employee benefits', *People Management*, 27 July. Available at: https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/article/1744782/businesses-throwing-money-down-drain-not-communicating-employee-benefits#_ga=2.183323872.770197530.1658066330-2028650963.1656574317 [Accessed 14 July 2022].

Bedarkar, M., Pandita, D., (2014) 'A study on the drivers of employee engagement impacting employee performance', *Procedia – Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 133, pp. 106-115, ResearchGate. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.04.174>

Caldwell, C. (2021) *Employee Engagement: A Human Resource Management Perspective*. EBSCOhost. Available at: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,cookie,shib&db=e020mww&AN=2932160&site=eds-live&scope=site> [Accessed: 30 July 2022].

Carruthers, J. (1990) 'A Rationale for the Use of Semi-structured Interviews', *Journal of Educational Administration*, 28(1). <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578239010006046>.

Cattermole, G. (2018) 'Creating an employee engagement strategy for millennials', *Strategic HR Review*, 17(6), pp. 290-294. Emerald. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SHR-07-2018-0059>.

Chanana, N. and Sangeeta. (2021) 'Employee engagement practices during COVID-19 lockdown', *Journal of public affairs* 21(4), Wiley Online Library. doi:10.1002/pa.2508.

Chen, S. (2017) 'Cross-level effects of high-commitment work systems on work engagement: the mediating role of psychological capital', *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources* doi: 10.1111/1744-7941.12144.

CIPD (2022) *Employee Benefits*. Available at: <https://www.cipd.ie/news-resources/practical-guidance/factsheets/employee-benefits#gref> [Accessed 6 June 2022].

CIPD (2021a) *Employee engagement and motivation*. Available at: <https://www.cipd.ie/news-resources/practical-guidance/factsheets/engagement-motivation#gref> [Accessed 9 January 2022].

CIPD (2021b) *Employee Engagement Definitions, Measures and Outcomes*. Available at: https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/employee-engagement-discussion-report_tcm18-89598.pdf [Accessed 9 July 2022].

CIPD (2020) *Health and Well-being at Work*. Available at: https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/health-and-well-being-2020-report_tcm18-73967.pdf [Accessed 9 January 2022].

Clementi, M. and Ferrazzi, K. (2022) 'The Great Resignation Stems from a Great Exploration', *Harvard Business Review*, 22 June. Available at:

<https://hbr.org/2022/06/the-great-resignation-stems-from-a-great-exploration>

[Accessed 14 July 2022].

Cooper, D. R. and Schindler, P. S. (2014) *Business research methods*. 12th edn.

Available at:

<http://www.mim.ac.mw/books/Donald%20R%20Cooper's%20Business%20Research%20Methods,%2012th%20Edition.pdf> [Accessed 9 July 2022].

De-la -Calle-Durán, M.C. and Rodríguez-Sánchez, J.L. (2021). *Employee Engagement and Wellbeing in Times of COVID-19: A Proposal of the 5Cs Model*. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(10), p.5470. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18105470> [Accessed on 9 January 2022].

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2002) *The qualitative inquiry reader*. London: Sage Publications.

Furnham, A. and MacRae, I. (2017) *Motivation and Performance : A Guide to Motivating a Diverse Workforce*. London: Kogan Page. Available at:

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,cookie,shib&db=e020mww&AN=1507670&site=eds-live&scope=site> [Accessed: 26 June 2022].

Hastwell, C. (2020) *10 Employee Engagement Strategies for Small Businesses*. Available at: <https://www.greatplacetowork.com/resources/blog/10-employee-engagement-strategies-for-small-businesses> [Accessed 25 July 2022].

Hinzmann, R. and Rašticová, M. and Šácha. J. (2019) 'Factors of Employee Engagement at the Workplace. Do years of Service Count', *Acta Universitatis Agriculturae et Silviculturae Mendelianae Brunensis*, 67(6), pp.1525-1533. doi:10.11118/actaun201967061525.

Hunt, J. (2022) ‘The great career re-evaluation: ‘I wanted to work in a completely different way’, *The Irish Times*, 14 May. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/the-great-career-re-evaluation-i-wanted-to-work-in-a-completely-different-way-1.4871395> [Accessed 8 July 2022].

Irani, E. (2018) ‘The Use of Videoconferencing for Qualitative Interviewing: Opportunities, Challenges, and Considerations’, *Clinical Nursing Research*, 28(1), pp. 3-8. Sage Journals. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1054773818803170>.

Kahn, W.A. (1990) Psychological Conditions Of Personal Engagement And Disengagement At Work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), pp. 692-723. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/256287> [Accessed on 8 January 2022].

Kieran, S. and O’Shea, D. (2022) ‘The Great Resignation: why are so many people leaving their jobs?’, RTE, 16 February. Available at: <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2021/0830/1243569-great-resignation-workplace-reforms-pandemic/> [Accessed 18 July 2022].

King, N. (2004) ‘Using templates in the thematic analysis of text’, *Essential guide to qualitative methods in organizational research*, 21, pp. 257–270. doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446280119.n21>.

Kłopotek, M. (2017) ‘The Advantages and Disadvantages of Remote Working from the Perspective of Young Employees’, *Organization & Management Quarterly*, 40(4), pp. 39–49. Available at: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,cookie,shib&db=bus&AN=133706845&site=eds-live&scope=site> [Accessed: 9 January 2022].

Lavigna, B. and Basso, P. (2020) *Employee Engagement: Why It Matters (Part 1)*. Policy & Practice, 78(3), p. 16. Available at: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,cookie,shib&db=edsgis&AN=edsgcl.631877296&site=eds-live&scope=site> [Accessed on 31 October 2021].

Lipman, J. (2021) ‘The Pandemic Revealed How Much We Hate Our Jobs. Now We Have a Chance to Reinvent Work’, *TIME*, 1 June. Available at: <https://time.com/6051955/work-after-covid-19/> [Accessed 2 August 2022].

Liu, D., Chen, Y. and Li, N. (2021) ‘Tackling the negative impact of COVID-19 on work engagement and taking charge: A multi-study investigation of frontline health workers’, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 106(2), pp. 185–198. doi:10.1037/apl0000866.

Mello, J. and Flint, D. J. (2011) ‘A refined view of Grounded theory & its application to logistics research’, *Journal of Business Logistics*, 30(1), pp. 107-125. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2158-1592.2009.tb00101.x>.

Mukhles, M. and Al-Ababneh (2020) ‘Linking Ontology, Epistemology And Research Methodology’, *Science & Philosophy*, 8(1), pp. 75–91. doi:10.23756/sp.v8i1.500.

Negros, J. (2022) ‘Factors that Leverage the Key Drivers of Creating a Culture of Employee Engagement in the Business Process Outsourcing Company: A Qualitative Inquiry’, *Journal of Education, Management and Development Studies*, 2(1), pp. 67–75. doi:10.52631/jemds.v2i1.73.

Nowell, L. S. and Norris, J. and White, D. (2017) 'Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1). doi: 10.1177/1609406917733847.

Oireachtas (2022) *Dail Eireann debate – Wednesday, 2 Feb 2022*. Available at: <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2022-02-02/18/#:~:text=In%20line%20with%20this%20approach,Public%20Health%20Emergency%20Team%2C%20NPHET>. [Accessed 2 August 2022].

Osborn, D.S., Hayden, S.C.W., Marks, L.R., Hyatt, T., Saunders, D. and Sampson, J.P., (2022) 'Career practitioners' response to career development concerns in the time of COVID-19', *The Career Development Quarterly*, 70(1), pp. 52-66. National Library of Medicine. doi: 10.1002/cdq.1228.

Perna, M. (2020) 'Small Businesses Go Big On Employee Engagement During Pandemic', *Forbes*, 15 September. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markcperna/2020/09/15/small-businesses-go-big-on-employee-engagement-during-pandemic/?sh=3e947ddb626f> [Accessed 12 July 2022].

Peters, J. (2019) *Employee Engagement: Creating High Positive Energy at Work*. EBSCOhost. Available at: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,cookie,shib&db=e020mww&AN=2322279&site=eds-live&scope=site> [Accessed: 17 July 2022].

Rahman, M.S. (2017) 'The Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches and Methods in Language "Testing and Assessment" Research: A Literature Review', *Journal of Education and Learning*, 6(1), pp. 102-112. doi:10.5539/jel.v6n1p102.

Risley, C. (2020) 'Maintaining Performance and Employee Engagement During the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Journal of Library Administration*, 60(6), pp. 653–659. doi: 10.1080/01930826.2020.1773716.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P., Thornhill, A., (2009) *Research Methods for Business Students*. 5th ed, Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.

Schaufeli, W. and Bakker, A. (2004) 'Job demands, job resources, and their relationship with burnout and engagement: a multi-sample study', *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 25, pp. 293–315. doi: 10.1002/job.248.

Seppälä, E. and Moeller, J. (2018) '1 in 5 Employees Is Highly Engaged and at Risk of Burnout', *Harvard Business Review*, 2 February. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2018/02/1-in-5-highly-engaged-employees-is-at-risk-of-burnout> [Accessed on 8 January 2022].

Shoemaker, J., Brown, A., Barbour, R. (2011) 'A Revolutionary Change: Making the Workplace More Flexible', *The Solutions Journal*, 22 February. Available at: <https://thesolutionsjournal.com/2016/02/22/a-revolutionary-change-making-the-workplace-more-flexible/> [Accessed 10 January 2022].

Suri, H. (2011) 'Purposeful Sampling in Qualitative Research Synthesis', *Qualitative Research Journal*, 11(2), pp. 63-75. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ1102063>.

Uddin, M.A., Mahmood, M. and Fan, L. (2019) 'Why individual employee engagement matters for team performance? Mediating effects of employee commitment and organizational citizenship behaviour', *Team Performance Management*, 25(1/2), pp. 47-68. <https://doi.org/10.1108/TPM-12-2017-0078>.

Weideman, M. and Hofmeyr, K. B. (2020) '*The influence of flexible work arrangements on employee engagement: An exploratory study*', *South African Journal of Human Resource Management*, 18(1), pp. 1–18. doi: 10.4102/sajhrm.v18i0.1209.

Appendices

Appendix A

Letter to Participants

Dear Participant,

I am inviting you to take part in important research on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employee engagement for millennials within private sector SMEs. This research is part of the requirement for the completion of my Master of Arts in Human Resource Management at the National College of Ireland.

The main objective of this research is to explore how the pandemic may have impacted on millennial employee engagement via individual interviews and compare the experiences of other participants within the same age group.

Any information provided during the interview is completely confidential. No personally identifying information will be linked with the research materials and all data will be de-identified in the report that result from the research.

No information will be shared with your employer. You will be asked to give permission for your interview to be recorded. The recording made of this interview will be used only for analysis. No one outside the research team will be allowed access to the original recording and subsequent transcripts will be stored under a code name with personally identifiable information removed.

The time it takes for an interview varies, depending on how much you have to say, but most interviews last approximately 45-60 minutes in length. They will be held in person or virtually, depending on Covid-19 restrictions and participant preference. The interview will be a little like a conversation. I will ask you to talk about your experiences of employee engagement in your current workplace and how you think the pandemic has or has not impacted on your experience. The list of questions will be provided to you before the interview also.

Before the interview you will be asked to sign a 'consent form' for a research interview. You can decide to withdraw from the interview by contacting the lead researcher at any point up to one week after the interview's completion without

providing any reason. In this instance all video recordings, transcripts and typing of your interview would be destroyed.

If you are interested in participating in this research and would like to know more, please contact me at x20127723@student.ncirl.ie

Many thanks for your time and consideration.

Kind regards,

Jane Mulligan

Appendix B

Information Sheet

Purpose of the Study

As part of the requirements for the MSc in Human Resource Management at the National College of Ireland, I have to conduct a research study. The study is concerned with investigating: The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employee engagement for millennials within private sector SMEs.

What will the study involve?

Participants in the study will be asked to take part in a semi-structured interview to discuss their experience of employee engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic. These interviews will be 45-60 minutes in length and will happen in person or through Zoom. Interviews will be recorded and kept in a password protected file. Opinions and experiences shared in these interviews will be anonymised, assessed thematically, analysed and presented within my final dissertation.

Why have you been asked to take part?

You have been asked to take part in this study as it requires a sample of participants who fit a certain criterion i.e., the participant works in a SME and is part of the millennial generation group. For reference, an SME company size is regarded as an enterprise with less than 250 employees. To be considered a millennial you must have been born between 1981-1996.

Do you have to take part?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you wish to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form. By signing the consent form, you agree to participate in the interview. You will have one week after completion of the interview to withdraw from the study. If you do wish to withdraw during this period, please contact the lead researcher and all data pertaining to your participation will be destroyed and not included in this study.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

Yes, all opinions and experiences will be de-identified during the analysis and subsequent reporting.

What will happen to the information which you give?

Any personal identifiable data will be kept confidential and only known to me and my NCI supervisor. It will be stored in a password protected file on my personal computer. Interview transcripts will be de-identified and stored separately to potential identifiable information. All interview recordings will be deleted once my degree has been conferred. Transcripts and consent forms will be stored separately for a further two years after this they will be deleted. These items are usually kept in case of further publication.

What will happen to the results?

The results will be presented in my final dissertation. They will be seen by my supervisor and a second marker. The thesis may be read by future students who are also conducting research on this theme.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

There are no apparent negatives to taking part in this research. You will be sharing your opinions and experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic that has not had much attention to date.

Any further queries?

If you need any further information, you can contact me as follows:

Jane Mulligan

Email: x20127723@student.ncirl.ie

Appendix C

Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project: **The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employee engagement for millennials within private sector SMEs.**

Name and Position of Researcher: Jane Mulligan
Master's student in Human Resource Management
National College of Ireland

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time up to one week after the completion of my interview without giving a reason.

I give my permission for to my interview to be recorded via audio recording or audio-visual recording should I participate online. I understand that the recording made of this interview will be used only for analysis. I understand that no other use will be made of the recording without my written permission, and that no one outside the research team will be allowed access to the original recording.

I give my permission to the researcher to use direct and indirect quotes that will be de-identified in their project.

I agree to take part in this interview for this research project, and I understand that my data will be kept confidential. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials and will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.

Name:

Date:

Signature:

Name: Jane Mulligan (Researcher)

Date:

Signature:

Appendix D

Interview Schedule

1. What age group do you fall within?
2. What is your current role?
3. Can you confirm your company's size fits within the SME criteria for this research?
4. How long have you been in this particular job/role?
5. Did you continue to work in this job/role throughout the Covid-19 pandemic?
6. During the Covid-19 pandemic did you work remotely or continue to work in an office environment?
7. Would you consider yourself an engaged, disengaged, or actively disengaged employee?
8. How would you describe your level of engagement prior to the Covid-19 pandemic?
9. Has the Covid-19 pandemic affected your level of engagement?
10. Has your work-life balance improved or deteriorated after the Covid-19 pandemic? Why or why not?
11. Do you think your work environment during the Covid-19 pandemic affected your engagement?
12. How valued and/or motivated by your company did you feel during the Covid-19 pandemic?
13. Did your company introduce any measures to promote engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic? If so, what were the measures and how did they impact you?
14. Did your manager/supervisor's engagement affect your own during the Covid-19 pandemic? If so, how?
15. What do you think are the critical factors in the workplace that drive employee engagement for millennials? Did this change during the pandemic?

Glossary of terms

SME - Small medium sized enterprise (company with less than 250 employees)

Millennial - An individual born between 1981-1996

Employee engagement - It can be seen as a combination of commitment to the organisation

and its values. For the employer it means efficiency, productivity, and profitability when the staff is engaged.

Actively engaged - These employees are passionate about what they do in their role and fully committed to the company mission.

Not Engaged - Employees who put in their time and fulfil their job responsibilities, but they are more neutral about the company.

Actively disengaged - These employees are negative and resentful about the company and are often under-performers.

Work-life balance - An aspect of employee well-being related to the employee's ability to manage both personal and professional responsibilities with adequate time for rest and leisure.

List of Tables

Table 1: Overview of Participants