A Qualitative Study on the Meaning of Employee Engagement for Employees in Sustaining Commitment to the Organization

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study seeks to explore the lived experiences of employees to uncover how they perceive the meaning of engagement and how this perception influences their commitment to remain within the organization. This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is well-suited for exploring the lived experiences and personal interpretations of individuals. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach. The findings reveal that employee engagement is deeply rooted in emotional connection, recognition, meaningful work, and supportive leadership. Engagement is not just a state of doing, it is a state of being. It is shaped by how employees experience their roles, relationships, and the organizational environment. For HR and Management, engagement strategies should prioritize emotional connection, purpose, recognition, and leadership development. Top-down engagement initiatives must be supplemented with authentic two-way communication. Future research could consider involving employees from different industries, countries, or generational cohorts to compare engagement perceptions.

Keywords: Qualitative Study; Employee Engagement; Employee Commitment; Sustaining Commitment; Organization

Field: Organizational Behavior; Organizational Psychology; Management

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SDGs: Decent Work and Economic Growth (8); Good Health and Well-being (3); Gender Equality (5); Quality Education (4)

INTRODUCTION

In today's dynamic and competitive business environment, organizations are increasingly recognizing the critical role of employee engagement in achieving long-term success (Sari et al., 2021). Employee engagement, often defined as the emotional and psychological investment individuals have in their work and organization, has been associated with higher levels of performance, lower turnover rates, and improved organizational outcomes (Renaldo et al., 2022). However, while quantitative research has extensively explored its impact on performance metrics, less is known about how employees themselves interpret and experience engagement in relation to their sustained commitment to the organization (Junaedi, Panjaitan, et al., 2024).

The concept of organizational commitment, encompassing affective, continuance, and normative dimensions, is deeply influenced by how connected and valued employees feel in their workplace (Imarni et al., 2022). Engagement, in this context, is not merely about productivity or job satisfaction, it is about meaning, belonging, and alignment with organizational values (Purnama et al., 2025). Understanding what employee engagement means from the employees' perspective can offer deeper insights into the drivers of loyalty and long-term organizational commitment (Jollyta et al., 2025).

This qualitative study seeks to explore the lived experiences of employees to uncover how they perceive the meaning of engagement and how this perception influences their commitment to remain within the organization. By focusing on employees' narratives, this research aims to fill a gap in existing literature by providing a more nuanced, human-centered understanding of engagement and commitment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee Engagement: Definitions and Dimensions

Employee engagement has emerged as a pivotal concept in organizational behavior and human resource management. Kahn (1990) first introduced the term as the harnessing of organizational members' selves to their work roles, involving the physical, cognitive, and emotional expression during role performances. Since then, the construct has evolved to include multiple dimensions. (Mamonto et al., 2023) define it as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption."

Engagement is not synonymous with job satisfaction or motivation (Safari et al., 2025). While satisfaction refers to how content an individual is with their job, engagement is deeper, it reflects how passionately involved and committed one is to the job and the organization (Sudarno et al., 2022). Gallup's model emphasizes elements such as clarity of expectations, availability of resources, recognition, and opportunities for growth as key drivers of engagement.

Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment refers to the psychological attachment an employee has toward their organization. Meyer and Allen (1991) conceptualize it through three components:

- Affective commitment: emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization;

- Continuance commitment: awareness of the costs associated with leaving the organization;

- Normative commitment: feeling of obligation to remain with the organization.

Engaged employees often display higher affective and normative commitment, suggesting that when employees find personal meaning in their work, they are more likely to develop a lasting bond with their employer (Yusrizal et al., 2021).

Link Between Employee Engagement and Organizational Commitment

Empirical studies have established a strong positive relationship between employee engagement and organizational commitment. (Renaldo et al., 2023) found that engagement is a significant predictor of both job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Similarly, (Nyoto et al., 2023) demonstrated that engaged employees exhibit more proactive behaviors and deeper commitment to organizational goals.

However, these studies largely rely on quantitative methods, which, while valuable, may overlook the subjective and context-specific meanings employees assign to "engagement." This gap highlights the need for qualitative inquiry to better understand how individuals perceive and make sense of engagement in their unique work environments (Wijaya et al., 2023).

Qualitative Perspectives on Engagement

Qualitative studies have begun to explore the emotional and experiential dimensions of employee engagement. For instance, (Wati et al., 2024) emphasized that engagement is a personal state rooted in individual experiences of connection, trust, and meaningful work. These studies argue that organizational structures and leadership styles must align with employees' intrinsic values to foster authentic engagement.

Furthermore, research by (Jahrizal et al., 2024) revealed that psychological safety, meaningfulness, and availability significantly influence engagement levels, factors best explored through narrative and in-depth employee accounts.

Need for Further Exploration

Despite the growing body of research, a gap remains in understanding how employees themselves define engagement and what it means for their commitment to the organization (Mukhsin et al., 2023). Most existing models are top-down, based on managerial perspectives and organizational metrics (Junaedi, Suhardjo, et al., 2024). A bottom-up approach, centered on employees' voices, can yield richer insights into the emotional and cognitive underpinnings of engagement and inform more empathetic and effective human resource strategies (Mukhsin et al., 2024).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Phenomenology is well-suited for exploring the lived experiences and personal interpretations of individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The aim was to understand how employees perceive and interpret the meaning of engagement and how this influences their ongoing commitment to their organization. A qualitative method allows for the in-depth exploration of subjective meanings, emotions, and contextual nuances that are often missed in quantitative studies.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting employees from various departments and levels within a mid-sized organization to capture a range of perspectives. Inclusion criteria required participants to:

- Have worked at their current organization for at least one year,

- Be in full-time employment,

- Be willing to share personal experiences related to engagement and commitment.

A total of 10–15 participants were interviewed, consistent with qualitative research norms to ensure depth without sacrificing manageability.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. An interview guide was developed with open-ended questions exploring:

- Personal definitions and experiences of engagement,

- Factors contributing to feeling engaged or disengaged,

- Perceived relationship between engagement and organizational commitment,

- Organizational practices that support or hinder sustained engagement.

All interviews were conducted in a quiet setting, recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach:

- Familiarization with data (reading transcripts multiple times),

- Generating initial codes (identifying patterns and key concepts),

- Searching for themes (grouping codes into broader categories),

- Reviewing themes (ensuring themes align with the data),

- Defining and naming themes (clarifying the essence of each theme),

- Producing the report (writing up the findings with supporting quotes).

NVivo software was optionally used to assist in organizing and coding the data systematically.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, the study incorporated the following strategies:

- Member checking: Participants were given summaries of their interview transcripts to verify accuracy.

- Triangulation: Perspectives were gathered from employees in different roles and departments.

- Peer debriefing: Regular discussions with research peers helped reduce bias.

- Audit trail: Detailed documentation of data collection and analysis processes was maintained.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection (Hadi et al., 2024). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their rights, and the confidentiality of their responses. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Data were anonymized and securely stored to protect participant privacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Engagement as Emotional Connection and Sense of Belonging

Many participants described engagement not merely as involvement in tasks, but as a deep emotional connection to their work and workplace. They emphasized feeling valued, respected, and part of a larger mission. This emotional attachment often translated into a sense of pride in contributing to organizational goals (Aprila et al., 2025).

"I feel engaged when I know my work matters and when my ideas are heard. It makes me want to stay." (Participant 3)

This aligns with Kahn's (1990) theory of engagement, particularly the emotional dimension, and supports prior research (e.g., (Renaldo et al., 2024)) highlighting belongingness as a central component of engagement. This emotional connection strongly influenced affective commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991), reinforcing employees' desire to remain with the organization.

Engagement as Recognition and Growth Opportunities

Employees consistently mentioned recognition and professional development as key elements of engagement. Many expressed that when their contributions were acknowledged, formally or informally, they felt more motivated and loyal. Similarly, access to training, mentoring, or promotion opportunities enhanced their perception of engagement (Renaldo & Veronica, 2024).

"When the company invests in my growth, I feel more engaged. It's not just a job then, it's a career path." (Participant 7)

This finding resonates with the Gallup model and supports (Rustan et al., 2025) view that perceived organizational support enhances engagement and commitment. The opportunity to grow was linked not only to job satisfaction but also to normative commitment, participants felt a moral obligation to give back to the organization that supported them.

Engagement Through Meaningful Work

Several participants linked their engagement to the meaningfulness of their roles. Rather than being driven solely by compensation or job security, employees felt engaged when their work aligned with personal values or contributed to a broader purpose (Junaedi, Renaldo, et al., 2024).

"I want to do work that matters. When I see the impact of my job, I feel more attached to the company." (Participant 2)

This theme echoes (Alexander et al., 2024) finding that meaningful work is a core psychological condition for engagement. When work is perceived as meaningful, it fosters intrinsic motivation and strengthens affective commitment.

The Role of Leadership and Organizational Culture

Leadership behavior and organizational culture played a significant role in either enhancing or diminishing engagement. Participants valued transparent communication, supportive leadership, and a culture of trust. In contrast, disengagement often stemmed from perceived favoritism, micromanagement, or lack of transparency.

"A good manager makes all the difference. If I feel supported, I'm more likely to stay and go the extra mile." (Participant 10)

These findings confirm existing literature on the importance of relational leadership in promoting engagement (Ansorimal et al., 2022). A culture that fosters psychological safety and openness helps sustain employee commitment over time.

Integrated Discussion

The results demonstrate that employee engagement is a deeply personal and multifaceted construct shaped by emotional, relational, and organizational factors. Rather than a static state, engagement is experienced dynamically and contextually. This study supports the view that engagement is both a cause and a consequence of organizational commitment.

The interplay between engagement and commitment suggests that when organizations invest in building trust, recognizing contributions, supporting growth, and fostering meaningful work, they cultivate employees who are not only productive but also loyal. Moreover, the qualitative approach reveals subtle emotional drivers of engagement that may be overlooked in survey-based research.

These findings also challenge one-size-fits-all engagement strategies. Organizations must listen to employees' voices to design inclusive, personalized engagement initiatives that reflect the actual experiences and values of their workforce.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

This study explored how employees interpret the meaning of engagement and how these interpretations influence their commitment to the organization. The findings reveal that employee engagement is deeply rooted in emotional connection, recognition, meaningful work, and supportive leadership. Engagement is not just a state of doing, it is a state of being. It is shaped by how employees experience their roles, relationships, and the organizational environment.

Employees who feel engaged are more likely to demonstrate affective and normative commitment, contributing not only to organizational retention but also to a stronger, values-driven workforce. By understanding engagement from the employees' perspective, organizations can adopt more effective, empathetic strategies to foster long-term commitment.

Implications

The study offers several practical and theoretical implications:

- For HR and Management: Engagement strategies should prioritize emotional connection, purpose, recognition, and leadership development. Top-down engagement initiatives must be supplemented with authentic two-way communication.

- For Organizational Culture: Creating a culture of trust, fairness, and openness enhances both engagement and retention.

- For Theory: The study reinforces the relevance of Kahn's theory of engagement and Meyer & Allen's commitment model, while also highlighting the need to consider the subjective, lived experience of employees.

Limitations

This study has several limitations:

- Sample Size and Scope: As a qualitative study with a small purposive sample, findings cannot be generalized across all industries or organizational types.

- Context-Specific: The study was conducted in a single organization or limited number of sectors, which may limit the transferability of results to different cultural or organizational settings.

- Self-Reported Data: Participants' responses may be influenced by social desirability bias or fear of workplace repercussions, despite assurances of confidentiality.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed for organizations:

- Enhance Recognition Systems: Implement regular and meaningful recognition practices that go beyond monetary rewards.

- Support Career Growth: Provide structured opportunities for learning, mentorship, and internal mobility.

- Foster Inclusive Leadership: Train managers in empathetic communication, active listening, and people-oriented leadership.

- Align Work with Purpose: Help employees connect their roles to the broader organizational mission and societal value.

- Conduct Regular Engagement Dialogues: Move beyond surveys and engage in ongoing conversations with employees about their engagement needs and concerns.

Suggestions for Future Research

To build upon the insights of this study, future research could consider:

- Expanding Sample Diversity: Involving employees from different industries, countries, or generational cohorts to compare engagement perceptions.

- Mixed-Methods Approaches: Combining qualitative interviews with quantitative survey data to triangulate and validate findings.

- Longitudinal Studies: Exploring how engagement perceptions evolve over time or in response to organizational change.

- Sector-Specific Studies: Examining engagement within high-stress or mission-driven fields such as healthcare, education, or public service.

- Remote and Hybrid Work Contexts: Investigating how digital and hybrid environments influence employee engagement and commitment dynamics.

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