

The Influence of Pandemic-Induced Workplace Changes on Employee Engagement: A South African Company Case

Sambil Charles Mukwakungu, Ncedo Khoza and Charles Mbohwa

Department of Quality and Operations Management

University of Johannesburg

South Africa

sambilm@uj.ac.za

Abstract

This study examines how pandemic-induced workplace changes affect employee engagement at Company X in South Africa. Global work structures have changed dramatically due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The University of Johannesburg's Sambil Charles Mukwakungu, Ncedo Khoza, and Charles Mbohwa studied remote work and organizational resilience's effects on employee engagement. All 24 Company X employees are interviewed for the grounded theory study. Majority of employees understand the company's goals, but retention strategies and the work environment can be improved. The COVID-19 pandemic has hurt employee engagement, necessitating customized solutions. Transparent communication, leadership support, and a positive work environment boost employee engagement and resilience, according to the study. Company X should prioritize leadership, openness, and safety and interaction. Development of skills and international exposure are suggested to strengthen the emotional and intellectual bond between employees and the company. The study recommends industry-wide comparisons and demographic diversification to better understand employee engagement dynamics during health crises. Triangulation methods like surveys and observations can improve future findings.

Keywords

Employee engagement, Remote work, Employee performance, Organizational resilience and COVID-19 impact.

1. Introduction

According to Kelly (2011), pandemics, which are characterized by fast and widespread increases in disease incidence, have historically imposed substantial consequences on the economy and people of many countries across the world. Among the most notable instances are the Black Death, which occurred between the years 1352 and 1374 and wiped out a sizeable section of the population, and the Spanish Flu, which occurred between 1918 and 1919 and corresponded with the conclusion of World War I and affected roughly 500 million people (Dean et al., 2017; Matthews, 2014; Garrett, 2007). Shereen et al.'s (2020) research highlights that the ongoing pandemic, caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome and belonging to the family of Coronaviridae viruses, serves as a notable illustration of a comparable worldwide health catastrophe. This epidemic has been responsible for enormous changes in the structures of society and the economy, and technology has played a vital role in the management and adaptation of these changes (Adnan Shereen et al., 2020).

Employee engagement (EE), which is sometimes misunderstood as only employee happiness, is a more profound psychological commitment in which workers are inspired to accomplish extraordinary achievements and contribute to the goals of the organization (Kincentric, 2019). Although its significance is widely acknowledged, the levels of global involvement continue to be low, with just 13% of the workforce being actively involved (Mann and Harter, 2016). The arrival of a pandemic makes these difficulties much more difficult to manage, which may have the potential to have long-term repercussions for the dynamics of the organization and the level of employee engagement (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020).

According to the Disaster Management Act of 2002, the South African government was required to implement revisions to the Disaster Management Act of 2002 because of the COVID-19 epidemic. These amendments-imposed limits on both the commercial activities and the mobility of individuals. The shift to remote work, which offers unique issues for sustaining employee engagement and productivity, particularly in industries where remote work is not possible (Nghiem et al., 2020), has been one of the key operational changes that has resulted from these key operational changes have been brought about by this for many firms. As a result of the pandemic, businesses have been forced to adopt novel ways to their operations, which highlights the significance of the 4IR and the technologies that are linked with it in terms of maintaining the continuation of corporate operations (McIntosh, 2018).

1.1 Problem Statement

A deep and multidimensional catastrophe has been caused because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has profoundly altered the operating landscape for firms worldwide. Company X has been forced to traverse a complicated array of adjustments that the South African government has enforced because of the amendments that have been made to the Disaster Management Act of 2002. This is one of the extraordinary challenges that the company has faced. A large amount of disruption has been caused to traditional company models and income sources because of these adjustments, the most notable of which being the switch to remote employment and stringent adherence to legislative rules. Because of this, the necessity of preserving the engagement and motivation of workers in an environment that requires them to do most of their job remotely has become an important problem. The dynamics between coworkers and management are fundamentally altered because of this situation, which provides a one-of-a-kind and demanding task. This scenario is characterized by less interpersonal connections and reduced direct oversight. Considering the aforementioned circumstances, it is imperative that engagement practices undergo a strategic reevaluation in order to guarantee the resilience of the organization and the maintenance of its productivity in the face of these continuous challenges.

1.2 Research Aim, Objectives, and Questions

This research aims to examine the effects of recent worldwide health emergencies on the level of employee involvement inside Company X, a multinational supplier of laboratory instruments operating in South Africa.

The primary objective of the study is to ascertain the effects of the recent global health crisis on EE within Company X. This main objective has led to the development of the following specific research objectives (SRO): (SRO1) Determine methods for measuring EE within the organization; (SRO2) Identify strategies to maintain EE during times of widespread health emergencies and (SRO3) Explore how EE can sustain the organization through such challenging periods.

The central research question is: What are the impacts of recent global health crises on EE in Company X? This main research question is supported by the following specific research questions (SRQs): (SRQ1) What is the significance of EE during and after times of widespread health emergencies? (SRQ2) How can EE be maintained during such periods? And (SRQ3) In what ways can EE contribute to the sustainability of organizations during these challenging times?

1.3 Scope and Limitations of the Study

The study focuses on Company X's operations in South Africa, encompassing its branches in Cape Town, Durban, Port Elizabeth, and Johannesburg. It examines EE during the COVID-19 pandemic. Limitations include the study's focus on a medium-sized business in a specific sector, potentially limiting generalizability. Interviews were conducted using digital communication tools, with participation rates and the novelty of the pandemic's impact on EE posing additional challenges.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study aims to underscore the critical role of EE, especially during a pandemic. Engaged employees, who are more productive and committed to organizational goals, can significantly enhance a company's performance and customer satisfaction (Agrawal and Katha, 2018; Evans and Lindsay, 2017). The study seeks to provide insights into maintaining engagement during crises, thereby contributing to organizational resilience and success.

1.4 Background of Company X

Instruments for international laboratories initiated Company X in Limena, Italy in 1978, positioning it as a global leader in the development of electro-analytical equipment. During the 1980s, the company set out to create a pH-meter that was not only accurate and easy to use but also affordable. This led to the innovation of the pH Electronic Paper (pHep), which utilized an integrated circuit to measure the voltage response of pH electrodes in a compact, pocket-sized meter. This development marked a significant transition from the less accurate litmus paper and chemical indicators to a more economical, precise, and user-friendly approach to pH measurement, thereby democratizing electro-analytical pH measurement within the industry. Following its international success, Company X expanded its operations to South Africa in 1991 (Hanna Instruments; 2023).

M. Rameshkumar (Rameshkumar, 2019) notes that the concept of EE initially emerged from role theory, characterized by spontaneous role involvement, and evolved into a more holistic experience encompassing fully engaged employees. Such employees are not only informed and devoted but also exhibit loyalty and passion towards their organization. This aspect is crucial for companies as employees represent key resources (Motyka, 2018), and they can be the most delicate, volatile, and expensive assets to manage if not handled properly. EE is a concern of global significance in both the business and academic realms, as a decline in job performance directly impacts the organizational bottom line. This research study focuses on examining the dynamics of EE during periods of global health crises at the aforementioned company and proposes straightforward strategies for sustaining EE during and beyond such challenging times.

2. Literature Review

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a global reevaluation of workplace dynamics, necessitating an exploration of its profound impact on EE. In this context, the literature reveals a compelling narrative surrounding the origins of the pandemic, its global repercussions on employment, and the ensuing need for organizational adaptation.

2.1 Literature Gap Analysis

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, EE is crucial to business success. Understanding EE dynamics is crucial as firms face increasing difficulties. This literature review summarizes 2021–2023 studies on EE, its causes, and remedies. The articles span varied regions, sectors, and organizational sizes, offering a worldwide perspective.

The researchers used Mukwakungu, Mabasa, and Mbohwa's (2018) research framework's inclusion and exclusion criteria to conduct this study's literature gap analysis. The criteria were carefully chosen to pick papers that fit the research's aim. First, research was required to be published between 2021 and 2023 to capture the latest and most relevant material on the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, research on EE, particularly in the context of the worldwide epidemic, was prioritized. Third, the literature needs to come from respectable journals in Scopus, ScienceDirect, Emerald, IEEE Xplore, and SpringerLink. This criterion ensured the chosen books' scholarly rigor and credibility. Finally, the researchers considered only papers that had not been previously reviewed by other writers to ensure a fresh viewpoint on the issue. This systematic and rigorous application of inclusion and exclusion criteria forms the basis of a robust literature gap analysis, identifying studies that meaningfully contribute to the understanding of employee engagement factors during the COVID-19 pandemic and filling knowledge gaps. The result of this process is shown in Table 1 below with COVID-19 referred to as C-19:

Table 1. Gap Analysis Results

Authors (Year)	Summary Findings and Suggestions for Future Studies	Location
Saks, A.M. (2022)	Caring Human Resources Management (HRM) practices enhance workplace and boost employee engagement (EE).	Global
Kaliannan, M. and Adjovu, S.N. (2015)	MNT Ghana's employee EE strategies are satisfactory. Address electricity inconsistencies.	Ghana, Africa
Coffie et al. (2023)	EE significantly affects MSMEs' C-19 performance. Suggests longitudinal, mixed-methods research.	Ghana, Africa
Nguyen and Nguyen (2022)	Employer attractiveness (EA) increases EE and employee performance (EP) for Vietnamese employees. Survey of 937 employees from 37 companies. Explore dimensions of EA's impact.	Vietnam, Asia

Authors (Year)	Summary Findings and Suggestions for Future Studies	Location
Myeza et al. (2023)	Transparent reporting, CSR, and stakeholder inclusivity during C-19. Study in South Africa. Examine long-term impacts on stakeholder relationships.	South Africa, Africa
Nkansah et al. (2023)	EE is a significant predictor of EP in Ghana's MSMEs. Use survey data from employees. Compare findings with other sectors or regions.	Ghana, Africa
Fynn and Van Der Walt (2023)	High burnout among South African online university faculty. Work engagement decreases burnout. Focus on interventions to mitigate burnout and enhance work engagement.	South Africa, Africa
Botha, Van Dijk and Marais (2023)	Working-From-Home (WFH) support boosts engagement. Study in South African higher education. Investigate long-term effects of WFH on EE and EP.	South Africa, Africa
Southgate et al. (2023)	Transformational and transactional leadership (TFL and TSL) impact EE in South African university staff. Explore impact of leadership styles in different contexts.	South Africa, Africa
Mustikawati and Ernawaty (2023)	Factors influence healthcare workers' engagement during C-19. Conduct scoping review and target sustaining healthcare workers' engagement.	Global
Mukhlis et al. (2022)	Religious beliefs correlate with job engagement in Malaysian Muslim nurses amid C-19. Explore aspects of religious capital and its interaction.	Malaysia, Asia
Yaqub et al. (2023)	Employer and employee-driven factors impact hospitality EE during C-19. Examine workplace fun strategies.	Pakistan, Asia
Botha and Coetzee (2022)	WFH support and EE examined in South African debt collection company. Investigate lasting effects of WFH on engagement and wellness.	South Africa, Africa
Mhlanga, Denhere and Moloi (2022)	C-19 lessons from South African higher education. Examine digital transformation and bridge the digital divide in higher education.	South Africa, Africa
Mdhlalose (2023)	HRM practices during C-19 enhance EE. Explore post-pandemic effects in different industries.	Global
Tao et al. (2022)	Motivational communication during crises improves EE. Apply findings to diverse organizations and study long-term effects.	United States of America, America
Mahomed, Oba and Sony (2022)	Autonomy, communication, and social support increase well-being. Examine causality between job demands, resources, and well-being.	South Africa, Africa
Padmanabhanunni et al. (2023)	Teacher burnout linked to C-19 fear. Conduct longitudinal study on pandemic effects on teacher burnout and resilience.	South Africa, Africa
Ronnie, Bam and Walters (2022)	C-19 lockdown increases emotional stress for South African women academics. Assess long-term effects on women academics' careers and well-being.	South Africa, Africa
Fourie (2022)	Remote work and digitalization affect work engagement and well-being. Explore links in diverse cultural settings and assess long-term effects.	Namibia, Africa
van der Ross et al (2022)	Organizational support affects academic staff engagement during C-19. Use longitudinal studies to examine long-term effects.	South Africa, Africa
Ngobeni, Saurombe and Joseph (2022)	Psychological contract in South African banking amid technology and C-19. Qualitative study on psychological contracts' impact on banking engagement.	South Africa, Africa
Tang et al. (2022)	Job security affects work engagement for nurses in China. Explore interventions and long-term effects of pandemic-induced changes.	China, Asia
Parent-Lamarche (2022)	Teleworking affects work engagement and intention to quit. Explore teleworking effects across cultures and organizations.	Canada, America
Padmanabhanunni and Pretorius (2023)	Teacher burnout, C-19 fear, and role ambiguity affect mental health. Find coping and organizational support methods.	South Africa, Africa
Sanhokwe et al. (2022)	Teleworking affects employee health and finances. Study long-term effects of teleworking and on-site interaction on work engagement and productivity.	Eswatini and Zimbabwe
Irwin (2022)	SAPS employees have moderate secondary traumatic stress. Improve SAPS health and wellness programs.	South Africa, Africa
Emberci et al. (2022)	Job resources boost EE and EP in Ghana's MSME sector during C-19. Use longitudinal mixed methods for accuracy.	Ghana, Africa
Uru, Gozukara and Tezcan (2022)	Organisational identification positively correlates with work engagement. Explore moderation by different work modes.	Turkey, Europe

Authors (Year)	Summary Findings and Suggestions for Future Studies	Location
Skhephe (2022)	C-19 pandemic negatively affects accounting students in South African high schools. Conduct in-depth studies on pandemic effects on different subjects.	South Africa, Africa
Sypniewska, Baran and Kłos (2023)	Job satisfaction affected by employee well-being and engagement. Explore individual-level factors and conduct longitudinal studies.	Poland, Europe
Zhu et al. (2023)	The four-box business model strongly affects EE. Examine its impact in various industries.	China, Asia
Szilvassy and Širok (2022)	Job resources' importance in employee engagement validated. Examine impact of cultural and service characteristics.	Slovenia, Europe
Makumbe (2023)	Autonomy, convenience, and a psychologically safe atmosphere boost EE during C-19. Research WFH impact in Sub-Saharan Africa.	Zimbabwe, Africa

The literature review examines employee engagement from various angles. Saks (2022) claims caring HRM boosts global EE. Kaliannan and Adjovu (2015) address telecom engagement strategy weaknesses in Ghana. Coffie et al. (2023) examine how COVID-19 affects Ghanaian MSMEs' engagement, emphasizing the need for longitudinal and mixed-methods research.

Mdhloshe (2023) examines HRM practices and digital platforms during COVID-19, emphasizing industry-wide post-pandemic research. Botha, Van Dijk, and Marais (2023) find that WFH support in South Africa increases engagement but disrupts work. Fynn and Van Der Walt (2023) study online faculty burnout in South Africa, while Southgate et al. (2023) study Cape Town leadership and engagement. Yaqub et al. (2023) examine Pakistani COVID-19 hospitality EE. Nguyen and Nguyen (2022) link employer attractiveness, engagement, and performance in Vietnamese companies, suggesting more dimensions are needed. Malaysian Muslim nurses' job engagement is influenced by religion (Mukhlis et al., 2022). Studies on pandemic effects emphasize well-being. Mahomed, Oba, and Sony (2022) say autonomy, communication, and social support affect South African remote workers. Parent-Lamarche (2022) finds that emotional intelligence and self-esteem affect teleworking and engagement.

Despite valuable insights, gaps require further study. HRM, WFH, and leadership may affect engagement over time. Understudied cultural and industry factors warrant study.

2.2 COVID-19: A Catalyst for Workplace Transformation

The literature clarifies that the COVID-19 virus, which emerged in Wuhan, China, has not only presented substantial health risks but has also triggered an unparalleled disruption in worldwide commercial relations. Alberola et al. (2020) emphasize the significance of national employment policy responses that are customized to address individual crisis characteristics, highlighting the necessity for contextual adjustment based on income levels, fiscal capacity, and labor market structures. The pandemic had a significant effect on poor nations and sensitive industries, such as manufacturing, resulting in closures, decreased production, and limitations in satisfying public demand (Estrade et al., 2020; Morris & Weidenkaff, 2020).

2.3 Remote Work and Engagement in the New Normal

As a result of the pandemic, traditional work paradigms were reshaped, and industries began to adopt models of work that were virtual and remote. Within the context of maintaining business operations, Crummenerl et al. (2020) highlight the cultural shift from daily interactions to virtual collaboration, highlighting the critical role that trust, integrity, and clear communication play in maintaining business operations. This shift highlights the necessity for organizations to quickly adapt to new modes of operation, which will help to foster an environment that is resilient in the workplace.

2.4 Employee Engagement: Beyond Satisfaction

The literature distinguishes employee engagement from mere satisfaction, emphasizing its nuanced nature. Kelly (2019) defines employee engagement as the emotional and psychological commitment employees exhibit towards the organization and its goals. Engaged employees invest themselves wholeheartedly, taking ownership, demonstrating responsibility, and consistently outperforming expectations (Rameshkumar, 2019).

Despite the recognized significance of employee engagement, global statistics indicate that only 15% of employees are engaged, with over 33.3% actively or casually seeking alternative employment (Smarp©, 2020). Koekemoer

(2019) reveals that, in South Africa, 33% of respondents feel companies neglect positive employee experiences, emphasizing a critical need for enhanced engagement strategies. The literature underscores the positive correlation between employee engagement and business outcomes, including increased productivity, lower turnover, lower recruitment costs, heightened customer satisfaction, and improved bottom-line performance (Bizimply, 2018).

2.5 Factors Influencing Employee Engagement

There is a significant correlation between leadership and employee engagement, with various leadership styles having a significant impact on how employees perceive their work environments and how they perceive themselves. According to Osborne and Hammoud (2017) and Miller (2017), two of the elements that are identified as contributing to the development of trust and positive relationships between employees and management are effective communication, integrity, and fair pay. It is widely acknowledged that positive work environments, inclusive cultures, and learning opportunities are significant contributors to employee engagement. This highlights the significance of organizational support (Hanaysha, 2016; Saxena et al., 2015). It is evident that the diagram below is a convenient representation of the factors influencing EE from the review of the literature in Figure 1:



Figure 1. Factors Influencing EE

2.6 The Impact of COVID-19 on Employee Engagement

The literature highlights the dual impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employee engagement. On one hand, the shift to remote work has allowed for improved employee well-being, increased transparency, and heightened engagement in some sectors (Bersin, 2020). On the other hand, industries like manufacturing, hospitality, tourism, agriculture, and mining faced significant challenges, leading to job insecurities and potential disengagement (Business Tech, 2020). Integrity, authentic leadership, and wellness programs emerge as crucial mitigating factors during such unprecedented times (Leroy et al., 2011; Kruger, Jacobs, 2019).

3. Methods

3.1 Epistemological Foundation

Having an epistemological understanding that qualitative data are not ethereal constructs but are intricately tied to specific contexts is the foundation upon which this qualitative study is built (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.20). Within the framework of this paradigm, data are regarded as individual accounts that are generated by participants who are situated within specific contexts. Braun and Clarke (2013, p.20) state that the production and interpretation of qualitative data are shaped by this approach, which acknowledges the influence of the participants' backgrounds and the contexts in which they operate. The purpose of this study is to provide a nuanced understanding of the impact that

the Covid-19 pandemic has had on employee engagement at Company X in South Africa by capturing the richness of these situated accounts.

3.2 Research Design

Grounded Theory is a method that is both systematic and flexible, and it involves the collection of data, the coding of that data, and the generation of theories (Mohajan and Mohajan, 2023a; Mohajan and Mohajan, 2023b). According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), grounded theory is a methodical collection of procedures that are executed in order to develop an inductively derived theory from the data. The research design adheres to this method. The Grounded Theory approach steers clear of preconceived notions and instead enables data to shape emerging theories based on the responses and experiences of individuals (Chiu et al., 2022; Naeem et al., 2023). A continuous comparative analysis was performed on the data, which was primarily gathered through interviews. This was done to ensure that emerging themes were continuously refined.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Due to the company's workforce consisting of 24 employees, there was no necessity to select a smaller subset as a sample. Therefore, the entire workforce was considered for the analysis or study. When collecting data, interviews were the only method that was used. During these interviews, stringent measures were implemented to ensure that respondents remained anonymous (Naeem et al., 2023). These measures included the removal of personal identifiers and the use of pseudonyms (Khoa, Hung and Hejsalem-Brahmi, 2023). Consent from Company X was obtained and approved, ensuring that ethical standards were maintained throughout the process.

Interview questions covered company goals, teamwork, skills, and retention. Strategic objectives, how their work fit organizational goals, and how the COVID-19 pandemic affected company goals were discussed with employees. The study examined individual preferences (working alone or in a team), team satisfaction and motivation, and pandemic effects on team dynamics. Employee abilities were assessed by questions about relevant knowledge and skills, organizational processes, and the pandemic's impact on normal functioning. Career development, work-life balance, untapped talents or interests, and feedback preferences were examined to retain employees. Executives were asked about employee engagement strategies, new engagement activities, engagement plan changes, onboarding new hires, and Covid-19 pandemic challenges. This extensive interview set sought nuanced insights into Company X employee engagement dynamics during Covid-19.

An inductive approach was taken to thematic analysis, and there was no previous research to serve as a point of comparison. The process included becoming familiar with the data, coding phrases and sentences, generating themes through pattern identification, reviewing themes to ensure that they were accurate, and defining and naming themes. A comprehensive discussion was presented to shed light on the results of the study, which was the final step, which involved writing up the findings. This approach made it possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of employee engagement at Company X, as well as the variations that were brought about by the pandemic.

4. Results and Discussions

The research sample consisted of 24 employees who occupied various positions within the company, as previously stated. The composition comprised 15 individual contributors, 2 team leaders, 6 managers, and 2 senior managers,

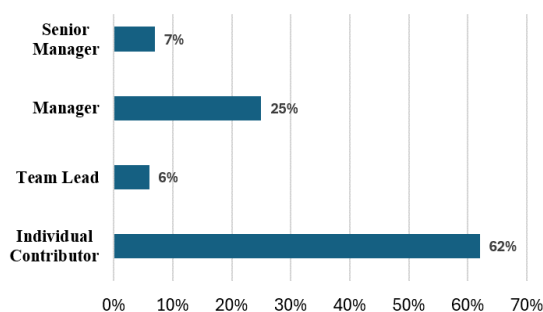


Figure 2. Participants Percentage Distribution

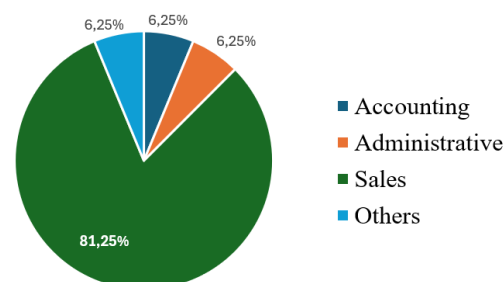


Figure 3. Participants Department Percentage Distribution

effectively reflecting the diverse hierarchy and organizational structure of the workforce under investigation. Figures 2 and 3 below illustrate the proportional distribution of the survey participants and their respective departments.

Comprehension of Organizational Goals: A significant majority of employees, specifically 66.7%, strongly acknowledge their understanding of the strategic goals of the organization. Furthermore, an additional 13.3% express agreement with this understanding. The favorable reaction indicates that Company X has implemented a successful communication plan, which promotes a mutual comprehension of the company's objectives. Nevertheless, a total of 6.6% express disagreement or strong disagreement, suggesting the necessity to delve deeper into the specific domains where comprehension may be deficient or misaligned.

Impact of Covid-19 on Team Interaction: The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on team interaction, as indicated by a substantial 65% of respondents who agree or strongly agree. This suggests a potential change in the way teams collaborate. Significantly, 28.2% of individuals maintain a neutral stance, suggesting a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. The qualitative data reveals a favorable pattern in team adjustment amidst the pandemic, however, the neutral responses necessitate a thorough examination of the subtle elements of these modifications and potential areas for enhancement.

Employee Training Amidst Covid-19 Restrictions:

Although a significant 60.6% of individuals express agreement or strong agreement regarding the company's provision of training during Covid-19 restrictions, the 25.3% who remain neutral suggest a range of differing viewpoints among employees. The positive feedback highlights the perceived importance of training programs, while the neutral segment suggests a chance to provide customized or supplementary training options to meet individual requirements and preferences.

Company's Retention Strategies: Company X's retention strategies are examined in the study, providing a detailed understanding of their effectiveness. Approximately one-third, or 33.3%, hold a neutral position, while a combined total of 46.1% express agreement. The qualitative insights indicate a variety of experiences. Those who agree may benefit from current strategies, while those who disagree or are neutral may indicate areas that need improvement or diversification in the retention approach.

Interplay Between Management and Employees: Around 53.4% of participants concur or strongly concur that a favorable interplay exists between management and employees. The substantial proportion of individuals who responded neutrally, amounting to 37.5%, highlights the necessity for a more thorough investigation into the specific experiences and expectations of each individual within this context. Favorable responses may suggest successful leadership, transparent communication, and accessibility, whereas neutral responses indicate opportunities for improving various aspects of this vital relationship.

Negative Impact of Covid-19 on Employee Engagement: The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant detrimental effect on employee engagement within Company X, as confirmed by 84.4% of employees who agreed or strongly agreed. Although this is consistent with worldwide patterns, the presence of 2.9% neutral responses suggests a need to investigate the resilient or adaptive strategies that employees may have utilized. The qualitative data emphasizes the widespread difficulties while also emphasizing the significance of comprehending individual coping mechanisms and identifying specific areas for focused assistance or enhancement.

5. Conclusion, Recommendations and Proposed Improvements

5.1 Conclusion

As a conclusion, the findings suggest that Company X has successfully established a system for communicating organizational goals. This is demonstrated by the fact that the majority of respondents have an understanding of the strategic objectives. This positive trend in Teamwork and Skills Development reflects the company's commitment to fostering collaboration and enhancing employee capabilities during the challenging times of the Covid-19 pandemic. During these times, the company has been working to improve employee capabilities. On the other hand, the fact that the Work Environment and Management Relationship sections were observed while maintaining a neutral stance draws attention to potential areas for improvement. It is possible that the neutrality is the result of a number of different factors, such as a lack of clarity on certain issues or a reluctance among employees to fully express themselves. It is

essential for Company X to address these nuances and establish a work environment that is more open and communicative in order to improve employee engagement and retention rates.

There is no denying the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on employee engagement, as evidenced by the widespread consensus that the pandemic had a negative impact. The restrictions imposed by the lockdown, the sudden changes in procedures, and the uncertainties brought about by the pandemic presented significant challenges for Company X and its employees, which hindered their ability to pursue organizational goals in a seamless manner. Moving forward, it will be essential to acknowledge the complexities of these challenges and tailor strategies to address specific concerns identified in the data analysis. This will be an important step in strengthening employee engagement and resilience in the face of ongoing uncertainties.

5.2 Recommendations

Company X has strengths and weaknesses, as shown by data analysis. The positive response is due to clear company goals that foster consensus. However, impartiality in Retention methods and Work Environment suggests improvement. Company X should prioritize leadership, support, autonomy, growth culture, recognition, fair treatment, and communication to improve retention. Transparent and fair policies foster a positive workplace. Company X can improve workplace efficiency by communicating policies clearly and eliminating presumptions.

The Skills and Development program received positive feedback, but it could improve employee engagement with international opportunities. The research suggests that exchange programs and encouraging further studies, which would expose students to international branches, can improve skills transfer. This initiative will enhance the work environment and strengthen the emotional and intellectual bond between employees and Company X, increasing employee engagement and retention. These initiatives will boost innovation, customer satisfaction, and revenue growth, ensuring Company X's global viability.

Company X must prioritize management-employee relations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Opening doors and creating a safe, interactive environment through Team Building can boost positivity. Company X can survive the pandemic and build resilience by recognizing great employees, providing strong managerial support, and creating a positive work environment.

5.3 Proposed Improvements

Further research on similar themes in different organizational settings, sectors, or dimensions would help us understand employee engagement dynamics during health crises. To overcome the study's limitations and improve its academic relevance, an integrative approach is needed (Rajasinghe, Aluthgama-Baduge, & Mulholland, 2021). Comparative analyses of companies of different sizes and industries improve the study's generalizability (Shahzad et al., 2021; Schreier, 2020). Diversifying the sample to include people from different demographics and organizational roles is necessary to understand how the pandemic affected employee engagement. Triangulation strategies, where interviews are supplemented by surveys or observational inquiries, can strengthen findings (Natow, 2019; Torrance, 2012).

References

- Adnan Shereen, M., Khan, S., Kazmi, A., Bashir, N., and Siddique, R. COVID-19 infection: origin, transmission, and characteristics of human coronaviruses, *Journal of Advanced Research*, [online] 24(24), pp.91–98, 2020, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jare.2020.03.005>.
- Agrawal, L. and Katha, H. *Your handy guide to decoding and driving employee engagement*, HR Katha. Available: <https://www.hrkatha.com/special/employee-benefits-and-engagement/your-handy-guide-to-decoding-and-driving-employee-engagement/>, 13 December 2023.
- Botha, D. and Coetzee, R., Covid-19 Pandemic: Perspectives on Employee Engagement, Work From Home and an Employee Wellness Programme in a Debt Collection Organisation in Gauteng, South Africa, *African Journal of Employee Relations*, 46(1), pp.1–28, 2022 doi:<https://doi.org/10.25159/2664-3731/9235>.
- Botha, D., Van Dijk, G. and Marais, A., The COVID-19 pandemic: Perspectives on work engagement and work-from-home in a higher education institution, *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 21(0), p.a2131, 2023, doi:<https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v21i0.2131>.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V., *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*, 1st ed. London: Sage, p.20, 2013

- Chiu, P., Thorne, S., Schick-Makaroff, K., and Cummings, G.G., Theory utilization in applied qualitative nursing research, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 78(12), 2022, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.15456>.
- Coffie, R.B., Gyimah, R., Boateng, K.A., and Sardiya, A., Employee engagement and performance of MSMEs during COVID-19: the moderating effect of job demands and job resources. *African Journal of Economic and Management Studies*, 14(2), pp.238–251, 2023, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1108/ajems-04-2022-0138>.
- Dean, K.R., Krauer, F., Walløe, L., Lingjærde, O.C., Bramanti, B., Stenseth, N.Chr. and Schmid, B.V., Human Ectoparasites and the Spread of Plague in Europe during the Second Pandemic. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115(6), pp.1304–1309, 2018, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1715640115>.
- Donthu, N. and Gustafsson, A., Effects of COVID-19 on Business and Research. *Journal of Business Research*, [online] 117(1), pp.284–289, 2020, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.06.008>.
- Emberci, M., Civelek, M., Veysel, A., Id, E., Naz, P. and Mert, C., The Relationship of Work Engagement with Job experience, Marital Status and Having Children among Flexible Workers after the Covid-19 Pandemic. *PLoS ONE*, 17(11), p.e0276784, 2022, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0276784>.
- Evans, J.R. and Lindsay, W.M., *Managing for quality and performance*. Estados Unidos ; Mexico: Cengage Learning, 2017.
- Fourie, L., *The Influence of New Ways of Working on Work Engagement and Employee Well-being during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, Dissertation, 2022.
- Fynn, A., Academic burnout among Open Distance e-Learning students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Perspectives in Education*, 44(4), pp.70–88, 2022, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.38140/%20pie.v40i4.6298>.
- Fynn, A. and Van Der Walt, H., Examining staff burnout during the transition to teaching online due to COVID-19 implications. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 21(0), p.a2062, 2023, doi:<https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v21i0.2062>.
- Garrett, T.A., Economic Effects of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic, Implications for a Modern-day Pandemic. *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis*, 26, pp.74–94, 2007.
- Hanna Instruments, *South Africa: Hanna Profile*. [online] hanna.co.za. Available: <https://hanna.co.za/about-us>, 13 December 2023.
- Irwin, J.F., *The Relationship between Traumatic Stress, Mental-Wellbeing, and Work Engagement in the South African Police Service*, Master of Art in Clinical Psychology - Mini-Dissertation, 2022.
- Kaliannan, M. and Adjovu, S.N., Effective Employee Engagement and Organizational Success: A Case Study, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 172(2015), pp.161–168, 2015, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.01.350>.
- Kelly, H., The Classical Definition of a Pandemic Is Not Elusive, *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 89(7), pp.540–541, 2011.
- Khoa, B.T., Hung, B.P. and Hejsalem-Brahmi, M., Qualitative research in social sciences: data collection, data analysis and report writing, *International Journal of Public Sector Performance Management*, 12(1-2), pp.187–209, 2023, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1504/ijpspm.2023.132247>.
- Kincentric, *The Engaging Leader EXPERIENCES, BELIEFS AND BEHAVIORS*. Available: <https://www.kincentric.com/-/media/kincentric/2019/december/the-engaging-leader.pdf>, 16 August 2023.
- Mahomed, F., Oba, P. and Sony, M. (2022). Exploring employee well-being during the COVID-19 remote work: evidence from South Africa. *European Journal of Training and Development*, 47(10), pp.91–111. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1108/ejtd-06-2022-0061>.
- Makumbe, W., Working from Home and Employee Engagement in the Covid-19 Context. *SN Business & Economics*, 3(10), 2023. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s43546-023-00559-5>.
- Mann, A. and Harter, J., The worldwide employee engagement crisis. *Gallup Business Journal*, 7(1), pp.1–5, 2016.
- Mathews, J., *World War One's role in the worst ever flu pandemic*. [online] The Conversation, 2019. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/world-war-ones-role-in-the-worst-ever-flu-pandemic-29849>.
- McIntosh, S., *AI and automation: The benefits for business and industry | Sage Advice United Kingdom*. [online] Sage Advice United Kingdom, 2018. Available at: <https://www.sage.com/en-gb/blog/ai-and-automation-business/> [Accessed 13 Dec. 2023].
- Mdhlalose, D., Effect of human resource management practices on employee engagement: COVID-19 and digital platforms as moderating and mediating variables, *New Applied Studies in Management, Economics & Accounting*, 6(4), pp.44–60, 2023.
- Mhlanga, D., Denhere, V. and Moloi, T., COVID-19 and the Key Digital Transformation Lessons for Higher Education Institutions in South Africa, *Education Sciences*, 12(7), p.464, 2022, doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12070464>.

- Mohajan, D. and Mohajan, H.K., Families of Grounded Theory: A Theoretical Structure for Novel Researchers, *Studies in Social Science & Humanities*, [online] 2(3), pp.56–65, 2023a.
- Mohajan, D. and Mohajan, H.K., Classic Grounded Theory: A Qualitative Research on Human Behavior, *Studies in Social Science & Humanities*, 3(1), pp.1–7, 2023b, doi:<https://doi.org/10.56397/sssh.2023.01.01>.
- Motyka, B., Employee engagement and performance: a systematic literature review, *International Journal of Management and Economics*, 54(3), pp.227–244, 2018, doi:<https://doi.org/10.2478/ijme-2018-0018>.
- Mukhlis, H., Ibraheem Shelash Al-Hawary, S., Viet Linh, H., Rasool Hani, I. and Adnan, S., Religious capital and job engagement among Malaysian Muslim nurses during the COVID-19 pandemic, *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 78(1), 2022, doi:<https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7830>.
- Mukwakungu, S.C., Mabasa, D. and Mbohwa, C., A REVIEW ON THE IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP IN HEALTHCARE: SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT, In: D. Delener and C. Schweikert, eds., *20th Annual International GBATA Conference*, 20th Annual International Conference of the Global Business and Technology Association (GBATA), New York, USA: GBATA, pp.428–436, 2018.
- Mustikawati, E.I. and Ernawaty, E., Work Engagement of Healthcare Workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Unnes Journal of Public Health*, 12(2), 2023, doi:<https://doi.org/10.15294/ujph.v12i2.67079>.
- Myeza, L., Kok, M., Lange, Y. and Maroun, W., Stakeholder engagement during the COVID-19 crisis: perspectives from South Africa, *Social Responsibility Journal*, 2023, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1108/srj-04-2022-0193>.
- Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K.E. and Ranfagni, S., A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research, *International journal of qualitative methods*, 22, 2023, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205789>.
- Natow, R.S., The Use of Triangulation in Qualitative Studies Employing Elite Interviews, *Qualitative Research*, 20(2), pp.160–173, 2019.
- Nghiem, L.D., Morgan, B., Donner, E. and Short, M.D., The COVID-19 pandemic: Considerations for the waste and wastewater services sector, *Case Studies in Chemical and Environmental Engineering*, [online] 1, p.100006, 2020, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cscee.2020.100006>.
- Ngobeni, D.A., Saurombe, M.D. and Joseph, R.M., The influence of the psychological contract on employee engagement in a South African bank, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 2022, doi:<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.958127>.
- Nguyen, H.M. and Nguyen, L.V., Employer attractiveness, employee engagement and employee performance, *International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management*, 72(10), pp.2859–2881, 2022, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1108/ijppm-04-2021-0232>.
- Nkansah, D., Gyimah, R., Kwasi Annan, J. and Agyemfour-Agyemang Sarpong, D., The Effect of Employee Engagement on Employee Performance in Ghana's MSMEs Sector During Covid-19: The Moderating Role of Job Resources, *Journal of Social Science*, 4(3), pp.677–697, 2023, doi:<https://doi.org/10.46799/jss.v4i3.453>.
- Padmanabhanunni, A. and Pretorius, T.B., Teacher Burnout in the Time of COVID-19: Antecedents and Psychological Consequences, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(5), p.4204, 2023, doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20054204>.
- Padmanabhanunni, A., Pretorius, T.B., Bouchard, J.-P. and Stiegler, N., Facing Your Fear of COVID-19: Resilience as a Protective Factor Against Burnout in South African Teachers, *Annales Médico-psychologiques, revue psychiatrique*, 181(2), pp.119–127, 2023, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amp.2022.05.001>.
- Parent-Lamarche, A., Teleworking, Work Engagement, and Intention to Quit during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Same Storm, Different Boats? *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(3), p.1267, 2022, doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19031267>.
- Rajasinghe, D., Aluthgama-Baduge, C. and Mulholland, G., Researching entrepreneurship: an approach to develop subjective understanding, *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print), 2021, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1108/ijebr-10-2019-0601>.
- Rameshkumar, M., Employee engagement as an antecedent of organizational commitment – A study on Indian seafaring officers, *The Asian Journal of Shipping and Logistics*, [online] 36(3), 2019, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajsl.2019.11.003>.
- Ronnie, L., Bam, A. and Walters, C., Emotional Wellbeing: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women Academics in South Africa, *Frontiers in Education*, 7, doi:<https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.770447>.
- Saks, A.M., Caring human resources management and employee engagement. *Human Resource Management Review*, 32(3), p.100835, 2022, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2021.100835>.
- Sanhokwe, H., Takawira, S., Kunene, Z. and Maunganidze, F., Impact of COVID-19 Induced Teleworking Arrangements on Employees in NGOs: Implications for Policy and Practice for Leadership, *SAGE Open*, 12(2), p.215824402210799, 2022, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440221079908>.

- Schreier, M., Janssen, M., Stamann, C., Whittal, A. and Dahl, T., Qualitative Content Analysis: Disciplinary Perspectives and Relationships between Methods—Introduction to the FQS Special Issue ‘Qualitative Content Analysis II’, *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, [online] 21(1), 2020, doi:<https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-21.1.3454>.
- Shahzad, M., Qu, Y., Zafar, A.U. and Appolloni, A., Does the interaction between the knowledge management process and sustainable development practices boost corporate green innovation? *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 30(8), pp.1–17, 2021, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.2865>.
- Skhephe, M., The Effect of COVID-19 Pandemic on Accounting Classrooms, South Africa, *Jurnal Penelitian dan Pengkajian Ilmu Pendidikan: e-Saintika*, 6(2), pp.93–107, 2022 doi:<https://doi.org/10.36312/esaintika.v6i2.675>.
- Southgate, G., Aderibigbe, J., Balogun, T. and Mahembe, B., Leadership styles as predictors of employee engagement at a selected tertiary institution, *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 21(0), p.a2238, 2023, doi:<https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm>.
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J.M., *Basics of Qualitative Research*, SAGE Publications, Incorporated, 1990.
- Sypniewska, B., Baran, M. and Klos, M., Work engagement and employee satisfaction in the practice of sustainable human resource management – based on the study of Polish employees, *International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal*, 19(3), pp.1069–1100, 2023, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11365-023-00834-9>.
- Szilvassy, P. and Sirok, K., Importance of Work Engagement in Primary Healthcare, *BMC Health Services Research*, 22(1), 2022, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-022-08402-7>.
- Tang, Y., Dias, M., Wang, S., He, Q. and Huang, H., The impact of nurses’ sense of security on turnover intention during the normalization of COVID-19 epidemic: The mediating role of work engagement, *Front. Public Health*, 10, 2022, doi:<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.1051895>.
- Tao, W., Lee, Y., Sun, R., Li, J.-Y. and He, M., Enhancing Employee Engagement via Leaders’ Motivational Language in times of crisis: Perspectives from the COVID-19 outbreak, *Public Relations Review*, 48(1), p.102133, 2022, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2021.102133>.
- Torrance, H., Triangulation, Respondent Validation, and Democratic Participation in Mixed Methods Research, *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 6(2), pp.111–123, 2012, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689812437185>.
- Uru, F.O., Gozukara, E. and Tezcan, L., The Moderating Roles of Remote, Hybrid, and Onsite Working on the Relationship between Work Engagement and Organizational Identification during the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Sustainability*, 14(24), p.168282022, doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/su142416828>.
- van der Ross, M.R., Olckers, C. and Schaap, P., Engagement of Academic Staff Amidst COVID-19: The Role of Perceived Organisational Support, Burnout Risk, and Lack of Reciprocity as Psychological Conditions, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 2022, doi:<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.874599>.
- Yaqub, R.M.S., Daud, M., Kausar, S. and Rehman, A., Navigating Workplace Fun in the Midst of Crisis: A Study on Employee Engagement Strategies in the Hospitality Industry Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic, *Bulletin of Business and Economics (BBE)*, 12(3), pp.410–416, 2023, doi:<https://doi.org/10.61506/01.00049>.
- Zhu, Z.N., Ramendran SPR, C., Wong, L.S., Alcalá, R.F. and Garcia-Martí, E., The Influence of Four-Box Business Model on Employee Engagement in Post-COVID-19: Company Performance as the Moderator, *Journal of the Knowledge Economy*, 2023, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13132-023-01636-8>.

Biographies

Sambil C. Mukwakungu, an award-winning academic, has taught first-year Operations Management, Food Production, and Quality Management at the University of Johannesburg. His love of teaching and learning has changed at least one student's life each year. Service Operations Management, Lean Operations, Continuous Improvement, business innovation, and higher education innovation are his research interests as a young researcher. He and his team from the IEOM UJ Student Chapter received the 2018 IEOM Outstanding Student Chapter Gold Award for their exceptional chapter activities and contributions to industrial engineering and operations management. He also won Best Track Paper Awards at the 2016 and 2018 IEOM Conferences in Rabat, Morocco, and Paris, France. While pursuing his PhD at the University of Johannesburg, he supervises Operations Management master's students.

Prof. Charles Mbohwa is a Professor at the University of Johannesburg. He has a D Eng. from Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Technology, MSc in Operations Management and Manufacturing Systems from the University of Nottingham and a BSc (honors) in Mechanical Engineering from the University of Zimbabwe. Prof. Mbohwa has been a British Council Scholar, Japan Foundation Fellow, a Heiwa Nakajima Fellow, a Kubota Foundation Fellow and a Fulbright Fellow. His research interests are in operations management, engineering management, project management, energy systems and sustainability assessment. He has published books and more than 400 academic papers.

Ncedo Khoza is a scholar and mother who is currently pursuing an MBA with the University of Suffolk in the United Kingdom. She has previously served as the president of the Black Management Forum Young Professional in the Vaal region in Gauteng. Ncedo is deeply passionate about ethical leadership and the development of young people. Ncedo Khoza possesses more than a decade of industry experience in both laboratory and sales roles. He has obtained a qualification in Analytical Chemistry from Tshwane University of Technology and a qualification in Quality from the University of Johannesburg. She currently holds the position of Regional Sales Engineer at HACH, a globally renowned company. Additionally, she is actively involved in entrepreneurship and investment ventures.