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FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AMONGST TEACHING STAFF IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT
This study focused on investigating the factors that determine employee engagement, using the job characteristics variables among 350 employees of selected Nigerian Tertiary Institutions. An insight on how employee engagement is influenced by factors such as job characteristics is important in understanding the dynamics of employee engagement. In this study, Job performance feedback, job autonomy, and organizational communication have been investigated as critical factors that influence employee engagement. The use of quantitative research method was employed in this study with specific use of survey method, and inferential statistical analyses on SPSS 21 package were performed. The correlational analysis revealed significant and positive relationships between, job characteristics (job autonomy, organizational communication, job performance feedback) and employee engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The current state of education in Nigeria even in this 21st century leaves much to be desired. There is a general neglect and decay of educational facilities at all levels of education in Nigeria occasioned by the long standing culture of poor funding of education by successive governments in Nigeria. Analysis of the situation point to the extreme level of infrastructural as well as pedagogical deficiency in Nigerian Universities, this being the result of underfunding of public universities (Nwakanma, 2010). Trinh (2023) noted that in recent times, the development of humanity has depended on knowledge economy given the crucial role played by education in driving the economy and the realization of socio-political stability. Tertiary education is a production chain that produces qualified human resources as output that serves as the basis for the formation and development of innovative capacity to contribute to nation building. Based on this perspective, tertiary education should be strengthened and positioned to support national development. However, this has not been achieved by the Nigerian government as well as the tertiary institutions; rather, there has been drastic reduction in the performance of the tertiary institutions due to a variety of factors (Ogunode & Lere, 2023). The recent findings on the state of higher education in Nigeria as conducted by researchers (e.g. Musa, Abdullahi, Jings, & Abubakar, 2024; Adewale, 2029; Nwajuiba, 2020; Omorogieva, 2024) had confirmed the degradation of the Nigerian educational system.

The problems associated with the Nigerian tertiary education have been a subject of discussion, research and debates in the academia. Researchers have carried out different researches, focusing on numerous aspects of the Nigerian tertiary education. Some of such studies have focused on examining the role of the tertiary education in national development through reviews (Lukman, & Nyah, 2022); identifying the factors militating against the successful management of tertiary educational institutions in the country and the role of stakeholders (Ogar, Asuquo, Onyekachi & Nwapka, 2023; Olubanji & Akinwande, 2019), examining the challenges of research activities in tertiary institutions (Kadikilo, Nayak, & Sahay, 2024; Velasco 2021; Nwakpa, 2015), challenges and productivity of researchers in Nigerian academic institutions without funding (Igiri, 2021).

Despite the amount of researches focused on the Nigerian tertiary education, there is a gap in terms of investigating the performance of the Nigerian tertiary education from the human resource angle as empirical evidence has shown that researchers have studied the phenomenon of the bad performance of the Nigerian tertiary education from different perspective without investigating employee engagement in tertiary institutions (Okodugha, Olusi, & Adomeh, 2024; Imo, Ekpe, & Terfa, 2024; Jacob, Ibidiran, & Ibidiran, 2022; Aina, Abdulrahaman, Sunday & Tayo, 2021; Olubanji & Akinwande, 2019; Nwakpa, 2015). The engagement of employees is one of the driving forces of organizational performance, and as such, it becomes necessary to understand the factors that determine employee engagement. This way, the engagement of employees can be boosted to support the performance of the tertiary education. For this reason, this study focused on investigating the the factors that determine the engagement of employees in Nigerian higher institutions. Understanding this, will enable the reformation of the

higher institutions in Nigeria by providing key stakeholders with human resource development factors that can support the improved performance of the tertiary education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee Engagement

Budriene & Diskene (2020) noted that, one of the goals of an organization is to achieve competitive advantage in the marketplace, and one of the ways through which this can be achieved is through employee engagement, because employee engagement with their organization helps them to build good relationships with their colleagues, and it also enables the working environment. With these in place, there is a higher chance that the employees will be more satisfied, and motivated to be more productive. High levels of engagement in turn, results in higher organizational performance, and enhances customer retention (Budriene & Diskiene, 2020). Given the struggle for survival by organizations across the globe and the desire to perform above the stiff competition, employee engagement has emerged as a powerful instrument for attaining competitive advantage, particularly in the tempestuous times companies.

The importance of employee engagement has been established in the past decade, as organization regard engaged employee as strategic partners (Kular et al., 2008). The discovery of a wide range of drivers of employee engagement has helped in increasing the prominence of the concept of employee engagement. Also, the concept of employee engagement is that which has found a place in different domains amongst organizations, academics, researchers, and consultants. Consequently, it has been defined and described in different ways.

Similarly, Janetius, Padmanabhan, and Mini (2016) defined it along the lines of commitment. According to these researchers, employee engagement is the emotional attachment an employee has for his or her job, organization and colleagues that has a profound influence on the levels of loyalty, commitment, and performance of the employees. In a study by Rothbard (2001), employee engagement was defined as the attention and employees to their job and how much time they spend thinking about the task they perform at their places of work. This author noted that there are two kinds of employee engagement, which are job and organizational engagement, where organizational engagement is seen as the degree to which an employee identifies with the values and goals of the organization, and their willingness to put in efforts for the achievement of the organizational goals (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). In the same fashion, Muthuveloo and Rose (2005) defined employee engagement in terms of organizational engagement, noting that it is the employees' willingness to accept an organization's values and goals, and to make efforts towards achieving those achievement of these goals.

Organizational Communication and Employee Engagement

It is clear that engagement begins with the employee being informed of the workings of the organization and the department which is evidenced in the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), (2006) survey, i.e. The two most crucial supporters of employee engagement are the opportunity to provide upward feedback and to be well-informed about the organization's workings by Basbous, (2011); Holton, (2009); Kang &Hyun, (2012); Ruck & Welch, (2012). Further, Freitag & Picherit-Duthler, (2004), stated that the Effective employee communication helps employees to comprehend their role in the food and beverage department, thus leading to organizational success. Additionally, Gruman &Saks, (2011) added with the view of Stein, (2006) when employees are well-informed and are provided with a clear set of goals, they will be more inclined to make good use of their time, assets, and budgets. Consequently, employees remain on track when it comes to making decisions regarding priorities and they are sure of their actions.

Parsley (2006) revealed that the effective communication as a significant driver of employee engagement. A part of effective communication, enhancing the communication skills of managers and making communication as part of performance against organization goal are also vital. Communication becomes more critical resource under certain and stressful circumstances. Management and along with managers and supervisors should play a role to ensure that employees and their jobs are associated to mission and vision of the concern organization.

The significant role of communication is achieving optimum engagement levels has also been highlighted by Watson Wyatt (2008) in his study, analysis of employee engagement and its drivers, the consulting firm underlined communication as holding a key role in affecting the overall engagement level of employees. Communication also makes a positive difference in engagement. According to the report, highly engaged employees receive communication from their supervisors and senior management far more frequently than low engaged employees. Every employee should be kept informed with any changes that can affect their groups and they are not confused or argued any changes happened. Besides that, organizations also have to play role to provide a clear instruction or information to all employees.

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In a study conducted by Krishnan and Wesley (2013), the impact of employee communication on employee engagement was investigated. The study was conducted among 163 employees of different categories of hotels in Coimbatore, India. They used the Employee Engagement Scale (Gallup 2011) to measure employee engagement among the study respondents, while Employee Communication was measured using the Institute for Employment Studies (IES), 2003). Findings of their study showed that the correlation between employee communication and employee engagement is statistically significant meaning that, the impact of employee communication on employee engagement is high.

Balakrishnan and Masthan (2013) carried out similar study among drivers working at Delhi International airport. The aim of their study was to find ways through which employee engagement could be improved. In this study, the authors analysed the relationship between internal organizational communication and employee engagement, and they found that there is positive relationship between the two variables. In their work, they focused on exploring the commitment, meaningfulness of employees' work, and discretionary effort dimensions of employee engagement. The research was an action research, and hence the findings of the research were applied in improving the level of engagement of the airport drivers.

Based on the findings of previous studies presented in this literature review, it is hypothesized that: H1: There is a significant relationship between organizational communication and employee engagement.

Job performance feedback and Employee Engagement

A review of the extant literature on the relationship between job performance feedback and employee reveals that only few studies have explored this kind of relationship. Majority of the studies focused on investigating the relationship between job performance appraisal rather than the job performance feedback itself. Consequently, it is hoped that this study will address this gap by exploring the relationship between the two variables. This will provide insight on high employee engagement is influenced or not influenced by job performance feedback. However, a statistically insignificant relationship has been found in one of the few studies that have examined the relationship between job performance feedback and employee engagement. In a study carried out by Ajibola, Mukulu, and Simiyu (2019), performance appraisal and performance feedback were investigated as determinants of employee engagement. The study was conducted quantitatively among employees in South-West Nigeria. The sample of 250 respondents was drawn from a state university, oil and gas sector, and wire industries. To ascertain the relationship between performance feedback and employee engagement, a regression analysis was performed, and findings of the study revealed that the relationship between job performance feedback was statistically significant. Based on the findings review, this study hypothesizes that: H2: There is a significant relationship between job performance feedback and employee engagement.

Job Autonomy and Employee Engagement

Muecke, Linderman-Hill and Greenwald (2020) investigated the link between job autonomy and employee engagement. The study was conducted among 267 employees of the Federal Government in the United States. The authors investigated the relationship based on three dimensions of job autonomy which are decision-making autonomy, scheduling and method autonomy. They hypothesized that higher employee engagement can be achieved through job autonomy. They also reported that the relationship between decision-making and employee engage was mediated by feelings of responsibility, while cognitive demands mediated the relationship between method autonomy and employee engagement. Based on the findings of their study, they concluded that job autonomy should not be viewed from a general single-faced perspective, rather it should be measured based on the three dimensions because it does not influence employee engagement as widely perceived. In other words, the different dimensions of job autonomy have varying effect on employee engagement.

Ade-Adeniji. Adeniji, and Imhonopi (2022) examined the extent to which job autonomy influences employee engagement among employees in the Nigerian banking sector. These authors used a mixed method to study the phenomenon. They studied employee engagement based on the previously mentioned dimensions of employee engagement (cognitive, emotional, and physical). A total of 3683 bank employees participated in the quantitative survey, the use of structural equation modeling was employed analyzing the data, and the results showed that cognitive engagement and emotional engagement are strongly related with job autonomy as compared physical engagement. Their results showed that, though employee engagement was significantly influenced by job autonomy, the dimensions of scheduling work and making decisions were weakly correlated to employee engagement. They concluded by recommending that there is need for a rethink in terms of decision-making given the tilt of the banking sector to more flexible and dynamic culture coupled with digital innovation.

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In the work done by Sheoran, Goyal, and Sharma (2022) investigated the link between job autonomy, employee voice, and employee engagement among 180 employees in the Indian service sector. They also studied the mediating effect of employee voice in the relationship between job autonomy and employee engagement using the job-demands resources model to explain the relationship between the variables. The model was evaluated using structured equation modeling. The findings of their study revealed that the relationship between job autonomy and employee engagement is partially mediated by employee voice. They found that the correlation between job autonomy and employee engagement is significant. They concluded that the engagement of employees can be improved by granting autonomy to employees. Ali (2014) focused on the relationship between job autonomy and work engagement among 250 faculty members of private and public-owned universities in Pakistan. The findings of their study revealed that job autonomy is positively and significantly related to employee engagement.

Similarly, the relationship between job autonomy and employee engagement was examined by Kidane and Xuefeng (2021). Their work focused on investigating how employee engagement can be achieved through job autonomy among 317 employees of Ethiopian commercial banks. The findings of their study revealed that there is a significant correlation between job autonomy and employee engagement. Their study findings suggest that allowing job autonomy can help organizations to achieve employee engagement.
Based on the findings of previous studies examined here, it can be hypothesized that:
H3: There is a relationship between job autonomy and employee engagement.

METHODOLOGY

In this study the use of quantitative research paradigm was employed, specifically correlational research design. In total, the researcher selected four tertiary institutions in the South to participate in this study. Out of the four, two are universities, while the other two are polytechnics. A sample of 350 teaching staff was drawn from the study population using simple random sampling. Data was obtained using a survey questionnaire. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested using SPSS Alpha Crobach's, and the coefficients ranged between 0.746 and 0.825 for the study variables including job performance feedback, organizational communication, job autonomy, and employee engagement. The Shapiro-Wilk Test of Normality was used to test the normality of the data. The results of the aforementioned test revealed that Sig. values of the Shapiro-Wilk Test for the variables were greater than 0.05, implying that the data was normal. Therefore, in this study, the normality assumptions were not violated.

FINDINGS

To determine the factors that influence employee engagement, relationships between organizational communication, job performance feedback, job autonomy, and employee engagement were tested. The results are presented below.

Relationship between Organizational Communication and Employee Engagement.

To determine the correlation between the organizational communication and employee engagement of the respondents, Pearson's bivariate Correlation analysis was performed. The result showed a positive statistically significant linear relationship ($p < .001$) between the organizational communication and employee engagement of the respondents, as the Pearson correlation coefficient of (r=.531) was obtained. This means that as the organizational communication improves, higher level of employee engagement can be achieved, and vice versa. More so, according to the Guilford's rule of thumb, the strength of this relationship is moderate. Table 1 below shows the result of this correlation.

Table 1: Relationship between Organizational Communication and Employee Engagement

Correlations

		Scorejobperf	Scoreenga
Scoreorg	Pearson Correlation	1	.531**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	350	350
Scoreenga	Pearson Correlation	.531**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	350	350

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

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Relationship between Job Autonomy and Employee Engagement.

To determine the correlation between the job autonomy and employee engagement of the respondents, Pearson's bivariate Correlation analysis was performed. The result showed a positive statistically significant linear relationship ($p < .001$) between the job autonomy and employee engagement of the respondents, as the Pearson correlation coefficient of (r=.671) was obtained. This means that as the job autonomy improves, the employee can achieve higher levels of employee engagement, and vice versa. More so, according to the Guilford's rule of thumb, the strength of this relationship is strong. Table 2 below shows the result of this correlation.

Table 2: Relationship between Job Autonomy and Employee Engagement

Correlations

		Scorejobaut	Scoreenga
Scorejobaut	Pearson Correlation	1	.671**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	350	350
Scoreenga	Pearson Correlation	.671**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	350	350

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Relationship between Job Performance Feedback and Employee engagement

To determine the correlation between the job performance feedback and employee engagement of the respondents, Pearson's bivariate Correlation analysis was performed. The result showed a positive statistically significant linear relationship ($p < .001$) between the job performance feedback and employee motivation of the respondents, as the Pearson correlation coefficient of (r=.471) was obtained. This means that as the job performance feedback improves, the employee can achieve higher levels of engagement, and vice versa. More so, according to the Guilford's rule of thumb, the strength of this relationship is moderate. Table 3 below shows the result of this correlation.

Table 3: Relationship between Job Performance Feedback and Employee Engagement

Correlations

		Scorejobperf	Scorenga
Scorejobperf	Pearson Correlation	1	.471**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	350	350
Scoremotiva	Pearson Correlation	.471**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	350	350

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results of the study showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between organizational communication and employee engagement. This finding is similar to that of Ufuophu-Biri and Ayewumi (2022) who found that there is a positive and significant relationship between organizational communication and employees engagement through a study carried out amongst employees of broadcast stations in Delta State. The same result was also recorded by (Rajhans, 2009; Damanik & Alfikri, 2022) who found that there is a positive and significant relationship between organizational communication and employee engagement. This means that when there is higher organizational communication, there will be higher engagement amongst employees. This means that organizations must establish effective organizational communication strategies that can yield higher engagement in employees. Employee could be more engaged if their roles and achievements are communicated to them effectively. This can encourage them to be more engaged in carrying out their tasks in a manner that is desired by the organization. Effective communication can increase employee engagement, boost workplace productivity, and drive business growth. The critical role played by Communication has been emphasized by communication scholars and regarded as the cornerstone of an engaged workforce (Kaur & Jain, 2020).

Secondly, the relationship between job performance feedback and employee engagement is positive and significant, therefore supporting the findings of previous studies such as that of Ajibola, Mukulu, and Simiyu (2019), who carried out a study where performance feedback was investigated as a determinant of employee engagement. They also found that performance feedback is positively, but insignificantly related to employee engagement. This finding implies that higher level of performance feedback can yield higher engagement, and this could be attributed to the fact that employees are happy when they get feedback about their performance, especially if the feedback is positive. Consequently, it becomes important for organizations to put a performance appraisal system in place that will support the effective appraisal of employees to enable the provision of feedback to the employees with the aim of driving employee engagement.

Thirdly, the Pearsons correlation test showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between job autonomy and employee engagement. This finding is similar to those in previous studies, therefore supporting the findings of previous studies. For example, a similar study which was carried out in private and public tertiary institutions in Pakistan by Ali (2014) revealed that job autonomy and employee engagement are positively and significantly correlated. Similarly, the findings of this study support the findings of the study by Ade-Adeniji. Adeniji, and Imhonopi (2022) who examined the extent to which job autonomy influences employee engagement among employees in the Nigerian banking sector, and found that employee engagement was significantly influenced by job autonomy. However, they reported that the correlation was weak.

This means that the importance of job autonomy in achieving employee engagement cannot be underestimated, because job autonomy allows employees the flexibility and independence to perform their work-related tasks with little or no supervision (Dodd & Ganster, 1996; Lin & Ping, 2016).

Recommendation for Future Research

Firstly, the phenomenon under study was investigated through a quantitative approach. In the future, the use of a qualitative approach can be employed so that deeper insight can be gained through rich data that can be obtained through qualitative research methods.

Secondly, the study only focused on tertiary institution in Southern Nigerian. Thus, better insight about the phenomenon can be gained by conducting a large scale study, involving more universities from other regions of the country so as to be able to draw solid conclusions that can be generalized to the larger tertiary population. Such insight can help the government and local authorities in designing better strategies enhancing employee engagement.

Thirdly, in this study, the variables covered include organizational communication, job autonomy, performance feedback and motivation as factors that influence employee engagement. Future studies can examine newer variables and other variables from the job characteristics model.

CONCLUSION

The engagement of employee in tertiary institutions has been found to be abysmally low due to lack of motivation and the absence of other factors that influence employee engagement. This has in turn affected the quality of output given by the lecturers to the students. Thus, this study focused on investigating factors that influence employee engagement by studying the correlation between job characteristics and employee engagement. The findings of the study revealed that there are positive and significant correlations between job characteristics and employee engagement.

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