Employee Engagement and the Facets of its Relationships with Four Constructs: A Study of the COVID-19 Pandemic Era

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic era, the importance of employee engagement increased considerably. Employee engagement paves the way to a high level of employee job performance and organizational financial performance within the organization. The main aim of this study was to investigate employee engagement and its relationships with four constructs which can be considered as the dynamics of employee engagement. The selected four dynamics are leadership, communication climate, information and communication technology awareness and competency, and trust. The unit of analysis in this quantitative study was the executive employees in a Sri Lankan organization whose core business involved publishing, printing, book-selling and education. Four hypotheses were tested with minimal researcher interference in a non-contrived setting as part of this cross-sectional study. Research findings indicated significant relationships between employee engagement and leadership as well as communication climate. Connections to information and communication technology awareness and competency and trust were also established. Further implications and recommendations have been discussed.

Key words

employee engagement, leadership, communication climate, information and communication technology (ICT) awareness and competency, trust

Introduction

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the work environment was gradually trans-forming with the introduction of virtual organizations and offices which allowed employees to work from home or otherwise outside of traditional offices. In 2001, 19.8 million professionals did some work from home as part of their primary job in the USA and by 2013, the number of American virtual workers had increased to more than 23 million, and 23% of all U.S.-based workers performed some work at home [U.S. Department of Labor, 2014]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this working arrangement rose to be the most popular method of carrying on business-as-usual since the rigid lockdowns imposed by most governments in March 2020 restricted all non-essential employees from travelling to their physical office spaces. Given the advantageous nature of this phenomenon, including but not limited to a significant reduction in costs such as transportation, most organizations are at-tempting to continue this practice in the post COVID-19 pandemic era. Therein lies the importance of the virtual environment at present.

Since the rapid move from physical to virtual working environments due to the pandemic, leaders have been driven to engage and build trust amongst their employ-ees primarily through enhanced communication on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Skype in addition to the typical emails, phone calls and text messages. The leader plays a very im-portant role in the creation of good atmosphere at the workplace and trust-based re-lations [Bulińska-Stangrecka and Bagieńska, 2019]. Evidence has been presented in the past about leaders influencing employee engagement levels through the quantity of time spent on communication and the perceived quality of those interactions [Ka-ranges et al., 2015] as well as the communication channel used [Mishra et al., 2014] and the form of relationship between the two parties involved [Agarwal et al., 2012]. Therefore, it stands to reason that leadership, communication climate, ICT aware-ness and competency and trust, and their evolving roles are vital to an organization's success in the post COVID-19 pandemic era.

Employee engagement is simply a strong emotional bond fostered by an em-ployee towards the employer which stimulates a willingness to commit energy and time to the work assigned [Kahn, 1990]. It has been argued that a competitive ad-vantage can be gained when employees are engaged since it tends to display a posi-tive impact on organizational and financial performance, productivity, retention and shareholder return [Iddagoda and Gunawardana, 2017; Bates, 2004; Harter et al., 2002]. A prior study determined that organizations in the top 25% on an engagement index had a greater return on assets and shareholder value compared to those in the

bottom 25% [IBM Corporation and Globoforce Limited, 2018]. However, a recent study by Gallup [2017] revealed that only 38% of employees in Sri Lanka display engagement. While this is an improvement over the 14% stated in a previous study by Gallup [2013], Iddagoda and Opatha [2020] observe that there is still a great need to increase employee engagement in Sri Lanka.

Hence, discovering the nature of employee engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic era and assessing factors that have a considerable impact on it should be prioritized by organizations. This study will aid in that endeavor by striving to identify the impact of the following factors on employee engagement within the virtual environment during the COVID-19 pandemic era: leadership i.e. the quality of relationship between direct supervisor and subordinate [Linden et al., 1997], communication climate i.e. the satisfaction of employee communication needs within an organization [Welch, 2011], ICT awareness and competency i.e. employee preference for technology used to communicate within organizations [West and Heath, 2011], and trust i.e. the extent to which subordinates can rely on their direct supervisors [Callaghan and Shaw, 2001].

This research paper endeavored to achieve the general i.e., to investigate employee engagement and its relationships with four constructs i.e. leadership, communication climate, ICT awareness and competency, and trust. Specific objectives of the study are, to identify the relationship between leadership and employee engagement; to identify the relationship between communication climate and employee engagement; to identify the relationship between ICT awareness and competency, and employee engagement; to identify the relationship between trust and employee engagement.

1. Literature review

The following literature review highlights previous research conducted in the areas of employee engagement, leadership, communication climate, ICT awareness and competency, and trust.

1.1. Employee engagement

The term 'employee engagement' was introduced and deemed an important concept in 1990 by a researcher named William Kahn while prior analyses had only considered employee morale, productivity, work ethic and motivation [Kahn, 1990]. Kahn [1990] stated that employee engagement refers to individuals within organiza-

tions who display a willingness to devote physical, cognitive, and emotional resources to achieve enhanced performance in their roles. In other words, employees who are intensely focused on completing their work even if extra effort (e.g. longer hours) must be expended because they feel like their work will make a difference are engaged employees. He defined employee engagement as the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances.

Following Kahn's [1990] pioneering work, many other definitions of employee engagement were published. Schaufeli et al. [2002] stated that it is a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind including displays of vigor or enthusiasm, dedication to the role, and absorption over extended periods of time. Dharmasiri [2010] theorized that it essentially involves an employee's head, hands, and heart in relation to work. And Iddagoda et al. [2016] mentioned that employee engagement is the extent to which employees are cognitively, emotionally and behaviourally involved in their jobs and organizations. Also, their view is that employee engagement is a combination of behaviour and attitude.

Despite such extensive academic research in the field over the past three decades, as well as growing interest from business practitioners, it has been posited that employee engagement lacks a universal definition. Therefore, the definition submitted by Iddagoda et al. [2016] with its updated collation of overlapping themes and its relevance to the Sri Lankan context will be used as the working definition of employee engagement in this study. Iddagoda et al. [2015] is also considered a local authority on the subject matter due to her numerous contributions to the employee engagement literature since 2015.

Numerous studies have touted the considerable benefits of an engaged workforce. Towers Perrin (2003) found a link to increased financial performance as engaged employees were more likely remain within the organization and focus on their customers. Salanova et al. [2005] complemented that finding by stating that when employees are engaged, there is an increased likelihood of them spending energy on interactions with clients. Saks [2006] went on to discover that employee engagement can mediate work-related attitudes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behaviour. Joo and McLean [2006] placed further emphasis by presenting a conceptual model which suggests positive relationships among business strategy, engaged employees, human resource practices, and financial performance.

A notable meta-analysis was conducted by Gallup [2013] across 192 organizations in 49 industries and 34 countries, and confirmed that engagement is related to

nine (09) performance outcomes: customer ratings, profitability, productivity, turn-over, safety incidents, shrinkage (theft), absenteeism, patient safety incidents, and quality. Christian et al. [2011] and Anitha [2014] both simply conclude that employee engagement has a significant impact on job performance. Given the mounting evidence of the effect employee engagement has on an organization's bottom line, it would be prudent for management to focus on gauging and enhancing the engagement levels within their firms, especially during unprecedented events such as the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic.

1.2. Theoretical assertions from the Social Exchange Theory (SET)

As introduced by George Homans in 1958, SET has been commonly drawn upon by various authorities, including Kahn, in their pursuit to identify the ways in which organizations may nurture employee engagement since it is touted as being "among the most influential conceptual paradigms for understanding workplace behaviour" [Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005]. Defined simply, SET refers to a series of interactions between two interdependent parties that feel obligated to reciprocate which leads to trusting, mutually rewarding transactions and relationships over time [Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005]. In essence, it is a relationship where the actions of one-party results in actions by the other party.

In an organizational context, the reciprocity emphasized by SET occurs when employees return the benefits they receive from the organization or leaders by increasing performance levels and participating in favourable behaviours that surpass the job description [Masterson et al., 2000; Wayne et al., 1997]. For example, if a line manager recognizes a subordinate's excellent performance during a virtual team meeting, he/she now feels the need to return the favour to the organization by clocking more hours at the office, that is an increase in his/her level of engagement.

In harmony with these findings, Harter et al. [2002] determined through a meta-analysis of 7,939 business units in 36 companies that employee engagement is indeed a reciprocal construct to be fostered by organizations. They examined employee engagement at the business-unit level, mediated by the relationship between managers and subordinates, and concluded that it has a significant impact on meaningful business unit outcomes including productivity, employee turnover, customer satisfaction, accidents, and profit. Across the companies evaluated, business units that scored above the median on employee engagement due to evolved management practices displayed a 103% higher success rate than those units that scored below the median. These findings imply that leadership can be used to foster employee engagement.

Variables such as communication and trust have also been identified as being critical facilitators of SET. Wu et al. [2006] asserted that good communication among team members will result in the development of smoothly functioning relationships. Other studies have deduced that high quality communication establishes or increases trust among team members while decreasing contention [Morgan and Hunt, 1994]. This communication-trust exchange held true when tested in a virtual work setting as well [Wu et al., 2006]. Moreover, SET provides an important conceptual framework connecting HR practices and trust [Bulińska-Stangrecka and Bagieńska 2018]. These discoveries build a strong foundation to surmise that communication and its components as well as trust will promote employee engagement even on a virtual platform.

1.3. ICT awareness and competency

Internal communication in organizations has been defined as the exchange of information both formal and informal between leaders and employees while also being determined as a significant contributor towards developing and maintaining optimal employee engagement [Karanges et al., 2015]. Nevertheless, information dispersal within these organizations is becoming increasingly complicated due to globalization. Shockley-Zalabeck [2002] furthers this argument by positing that the increased use of technology has caused a shift from face-to-face teams to virtual teams. Rationally, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the resulting lockdowns would only further complicate already turbulent waters.

ICT, which is defined as any communication device or application such as computer and network hardware and software, phones, radio, television, satellite systems along with communication device associated applications and services such as video conferencing, supports this transformation by providing the infrastructure [West and Heath, 2011]. A vast amount of information can be accessed and shared with thousands of employees in various locations within seconds which is both an inexpensive and efficient method of communication [West and Heath, 2011]. Shockley-Zalabeck's [2002] statement that ICT has become an important and necessary medium for communication rings especially true at present since most employees are working from their homes as a precaution given the global health crisis.

However, in order to remain competitive in such a sphere, employees are now required to increase the speed of their work, respond to queries sooner, and develop their proficiency in technology [Perera et al., 2016; Dewasiri and Tharangani, 2014; Shockley-Zalabak, 2002; West and Heath, 2002]. Consequently, ICT has been found to increase employee stress levels due to the information overload [Day et al., 2012]

which then interrupt their focus and work [Jackson et al., 2003], leading to a reduction in productivity [O'Driscoll et al., 2010; Lakshani, and Tennakoon, 2020]. Andres [2002] suggested that the delay in response due to certain ICT is a negative outcome since it removes the opportunity to seek immediate clarification. Rainey [2000] argued that virtual communication allows for a limited spectrum of verbal and non-verbal cues which typically assist in understanding messages, thus involving a great margin for error. He also insisted that virtual meetings may have become less effective and engaging in comparison to face-to-face meeting due to factors such as a lack of visual cues, technological issues, the attendees' tendency to multitask, maintaining momentum, and decreased interactivity which may progress to miscommunication or even conflict. Therefore, the need to engage employees is felt more keenly as organizations continue to operate in a dynamic and virtual environment [Watson-Manheim et al., 2012], and no other environment being as dynamic and virtual as the post COVID-19 pandemic era.

1.4. Communication climate

Welch [2011] declared that communication is a psychological need expressed by an employee which organizations have to fulfil in order to maintain and develop employee engagement. This declaration was accompanied with a model which illustrated the potential impact of communication on employee engagement at an organizational level as seen in Figure 1 below.
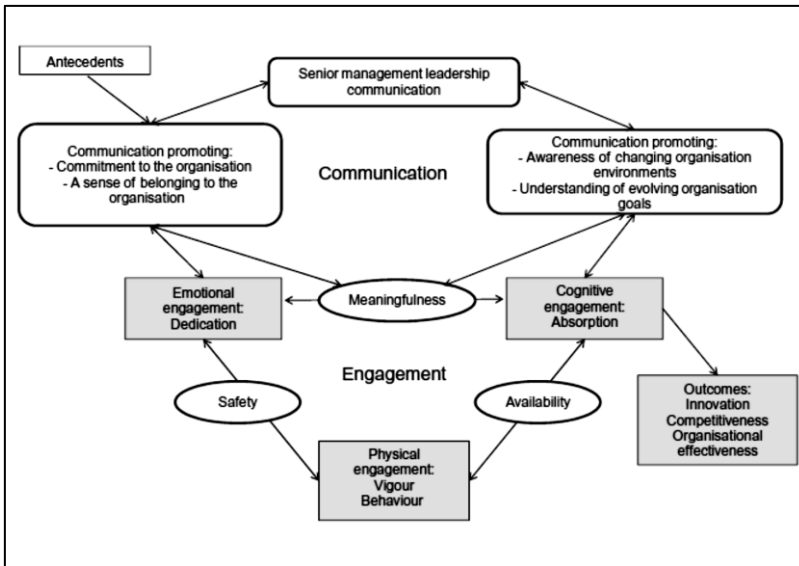
Fig. 1. A model of employee engagement from a communication perspective.
Source: Welch [2011].

Within Figure 1, Welch [2011] extracts from both Kahn [1990] and Bakker and Demerouti [2008] in identifying that communication is an essential component which enables the four (04) psychological antecedents of engagement (meaningfulness, safety, availability, and the newly introduced commitment) and promotes the six (06) physiological dimensions of engagement (emotional, cognitive, physical, dedication, absorption, and vigor).

1.5. Leadership

A leader can be defined simply as a person who essentially influences diverse followers in order to guide their focus towards achieving organizational objectives [Winston and Patterson, 2006]. The issue of leadership is an important component of current organizational science [Bulinska-Stangrecka et al., 2021]. Welch [2011] emphasized that senior leadership communication plays a key role in employee engagement. She asserted that effective leadership and corporate communication will ensure the necessary psychological conditions are created, giving rise to the physiological dimensions of engagement, which will finally spur on desirable outcomes such as innovation, competitiveness, and organizational effectiveness [Welch 2011].

Similar findings were submitted by multiple authors. Macey and Schneider [2008] proposed that leadership has an effect on engagement while also moderating the facets of the concept. Shuck et al. [2011] discovered a theme of leadership playing a key role in employee engagement. Reissner and Pagan [2013] stated that engagement is affected by two-way communication between managers and their employees. And Alfes et al. [2013] were certain that an employee's relationship with his or her immediate supervisor was a main determinant of engagement eventually leading to positive behavioral outcomes.

1.6. Theoretical assertions from the Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX)

The Leader–Member Exchange theory (LMX) theory established by Graen and his colleagues in the 1970s is rooted in SET and provides a rationale for how leadership can influence employee engagement by focusing on the relationship between a manager and subordinate is the view of Martin et al. [2010]. Linden et al. [1997] state that the central premise of LMX is that the relationships formed between managers or leaders and their subordinates or members differ within work units. In forming these relationships, the two parties tend to exchange material resources, emotional support, physical or mental effort, and information.

Those relationships that involve the exchange of material and non-material goods that extend beyond the specifications in the job description are labelled high LMX relationships or in-group exchanges [Linden and Graen, 1980]. For example, such a member may bring in a new product development idea to the company even though they themselves are an Executive in the HR department, resulting in the leader offering him/her a role as HR Lead in a cross-functional project or assigning him/her a mentor from the Marketing function. Whereas those that are limited to exchanges carried out as per the employment contract are termed low LMX relationships or out-group exchanges [Dansereau et al., 1975]. For example, such a member would produce 100 bottles of jam per month and the leader would reward him/her with the allocated monthly incentive in the Rewards Policy. This variation in relationships is largely due to members diverging in terms of needs and contributions while leaders have limited time and resources to dedicate. It has been discovered that almost 90% of all work units are differentiated according to the abovementioned LMX relationships [Dansereau, et al., 1975; Linden and Graen, 1980] so it stands to reason the LMX relationships are prevalent in the virtual work environment too.

Scandura and Pellegrini [2008] argued that the type of relationship a leader fosters with a member can have an impact on many general work outcomes including

performance, job satisfaction, trust in supervisor, willingness to contribute, and organizational commitment. High LMX relationships have been found to lead to more goal commitment [Dansereau et al., 1975; Liden and Graen, 1980] which in turn directly relates to employee engagement [Saks, 2006]. Additionally, those members who enjoy high LMX relationships are provided a wide range of benefits including premier assignments, cooperative interactions, ample resources, emotional support, and more communication [Kacmar et al., 2003; Liden and Graen, 1980] and communication has previously been illustrated as having an impact on employee engagement [Welch, 2011]. Further studies supported the significant positive association between LMX and trust i.e. high LMX relationships being characterized by more trust between parties [Wat and Shaffer, as cited in Scandura and Pellegrini, 2008] and trust has also been found to affect employee engagement as elaborated under 3.7.Thus, the type or quality of LMX can potentially play a role in employee engagement.

1.7. Trust

According to Bulińska-Stangrecka, and Iddagoda [2020] trust is a virtue. The origin of 'virtue' is the Latin virtus, which means 'strength' or 'skill' [Nowakowski, 2015]. Virtues are helpful for the development of a moral or civilized society [Iddagoda, 2020; Nowakowski, 2014; Opatha, 2010]. Trust can be defined as a reciprocal relationship between two or more actors, in the corporate sphere [Gambetta, 1990]. Callaghan and Shaw [2001] simply described trust as the element of a corporate relationship that establishes the extent to which one party is certain they can rely on the integrity of the promise offered by the other party. According to Savolainen et al. [2014], individuals contemplate adjusting their behaviour after examining each other's trustworthiness. For example, if a manager has proven that he/she will reward monthly team performance with a substantial cash prize, subordinates are more likely to make an extra effort to meet departmental KPIs. This study will focus on trust between employees and their direct leaders, such as supervisors, managers or work-group leaders [Aryee et al., 2002; Brower et al., 2000] since it has been found that leaders can facilitate employee engagement through trust [Wang and Hsieh, 2013]. Mayer and Davis [1999] based their investigation of the development of trust for top management on five-factor model of Mayer et al. [1995] viewed trust as a willingness to be vulnerable and confirmed that the level of trust for another specific party in an organization has an impact on important organizational processes and outcomes. Furthermore, two meta-analyses established that employee trust in their

leaders is also positively related to other desirable outcomes, such as job performance and negatively related to counter-productive work outcomes, such as intention to quit the organization [Colquitt et al., 2007; Dirks and Ferrin, 2002]. The positive influence trust has on employee engagement has been investigated and established through extensive research [Chughtai et al., 2015; Ugwu et al., 2014; Yıldız et al., 2017]. Additionally, Stinglhamber et al. [2006] stated that as employees increase their trust in supervisors, their favourable perceptions of the overall organization will also be enhanced.

Hence, interest in leadership, communication climate, ICT awareness and competency, and trust continues to expand in both the academic and professional communities as research displays the integral role they tend to play in employee engagement. As the COVID-19 pandemic progresses, it can generally be observed that the resulting uncertainty has transformed this interest into an urgency to investigate the best ways of moving forward.

The four (04) hypotheses derived from the conceptual and theoretical evidence are: (H1) There is a relationship between leadership and employee engagement; (H2) There is a relationship between communication climate and employee engagement; (H3) There is a relationship between ICT awareness and competency, and employee engagement; and (H4) there is a relationship between trust and employee engagement. Figure 2 illustrates the nomological network/conceptual framework with hypotheses.
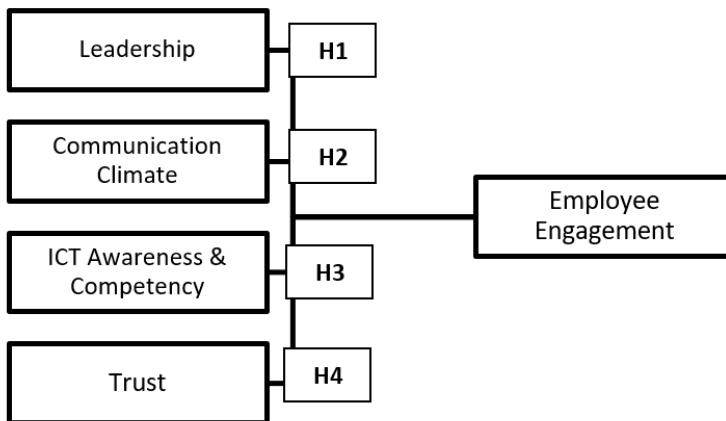
Fig. 2. Nomological network/conceptual framework with hypotheses

Source: own elaboration.

2. Research methodology

This quantitative study represented the population of employees who worked in a virtual environment within Sri Lanka during the COVID-19 pandemic induced lockdown. A sample of fifty eight (58) managerial employees was engaged through convenient sampling from a Sri Lankan organization where the core business includes publishing, printing, book-selling and education. Roscoe as cited in Sekaran, 2003 stated that when deciding the sample size, one that is larger than 30 and less than 500 is appropriate for most research. This is the sampling rule that the researchers of this study adhered to. The primary data collection method was a self-administered online survey. The five (05) variables of this study were evaluated through both established and novel measures while participant demographic data was also gathered to ensure the analysis of trends. The measurement scale used in this study was the five-point Likert-type scale. Sekaran and Bougie [2010] stated that there are six components in research design. Namely the purpose of the study, type of investigation, extent of researcher interference with the study, study setting, unit of analysis, and the time horizon of the study. The purpose of the study was explanatory or hypothesis testing. The extent of researcher interference with the study was minimum. The type of investigation was correlational. The unit of analysis was individual i.e. managerial employee (executive/manager). The study setting was non-contrived. And the time horizon of the study was cross-sectional.

3. Research results

Table 1 below presents the details of reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for the scales and sub-scales used to measure the variables. In the social sciences, values at or above .7 are considered acceptable [Nunnally and Bernstein, as cited in Tavakol and Dennick, 2011]. The Cronbach's alpha values of all variable scales and sub-scales employed in this study confirmed its reliability and validity.

Tab. 1. Reliability and Validity Tests for Variable Scales and Sub-Scales

	Variable Scales and Sub-Scales	Cronbach's α (Reliability Coefficient)
1	Employee Engagement	0.91
2	Leadership	0.89
3	Communication	0.98
	3.1. Communication Relationship	0.98
	3.2. Quality of Information	0.94
	3.3. Opportunities to Communicate	0.86

Variable Scales and Sub-Scales		Cronbach's α (Reliability Coefficient)
	3.4. Reliability of Information	0.79
4	ICT Awareness and Competence	0.89
5	Trust	0.72

Source: own elaboration.

H1: There is a relationship between Leadership and Employee Engagement

A Spearman's Correlation investigation established a significantly strong, positive relationship between Leadership and Employee Engagement ($r_s[58] = .64$, $p < 0.01$) as shown in Table 2 below. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternate hypothesis accepted. In other words, 96% of participants that displayed a high level of engagement also indicated that they had a high quality relationship with their direct supervisor and vice versa while working from home during the lockdown period.

Tab. 2. Correlation between Employee Engagement and Leadership

			Employee Engagement	Leadership
Spearman's rho	Employee Engagement	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	0.643**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.000
		N	58	58
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				

Source: own elaboration.

H2: There is a relationship between Communication Climate and Employee Engagement

A Spearman's Correlation investigation established a significantly moderate, positive relationship between Communication Climate and Employee Engagement ($r_s[58] = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$) as shown in Table 3 below. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternate hypothesis accepted. In other words, 98% of participants that displayed a high level of engagement also indicated that they perceived the communication climate within the organization to be satisfactory while working from home during the lockdown period.

Tab. 3. Correlation between Employee Engagement and Communication Climate

			Employee Engagement	Communication Climate
Spearman's rho	Employee Engagement	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	0.478**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.000
		N	58	58
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				

Source: own elaboration.

H3: There is a relationship between ICT Awareness and Competency and Employee Engagement

Despite a Spearman's Correlation investigation establishing a weak, positive relationship between ICT Awareness and Competency, and Employee Engagement, it could not be classified as significant ($r_s[58] = 0.23$, $p > 0.05$) as shown in Table 4 below. Thus, the null hypothesis is accepted. In other words, some participants who displayed a high level of engagement also showed a high level of awareness, competency, and preference for the ICT used by direct supervisors to share information while working from home but not enough to rule out a chance connection since some participants who did not prefer the ICT also appeared to be highly engaged in their work.

Tab. 4. Correlation between Employee Engagement and ICT Awareness and Competency

			Employee Engagement	ICT Awareness & Competency
Spearman's rho	Employee Engagement	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	0.226
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.088
		N	58	58

Source: own elaboration.

H4: There is a relationship between Trust and Employee Engagement

Despite a Spearman's Correlation investigation establishing a weak, positive relationship between Trust and Employee Engagement, it could not be classified as significant ($r_s[58] = 0.24$, $p > 0.05$) as shown in Table 5 below. Thus, the null hypothesis is accepted. In other words, some participants who displayed a high level of engagement also showed a high level of trust towards their direct supervisors during the lockdown period but not enough to rule out a chance connection since some

participants who did not trust their direct supervisors also appeared to be highly engaged in their work.

Tab. 5 Correlation between Employee Engagement and Trust

			Employee Engagement	Trust
Spearman's rho	Employee Engagement	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	0.241
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.068
		N	58	58

Source: own elaboration.

4. Discussion

This study aimed at evaluating Employee Engagement and its relationship with 4 other concepts namely, Leadership, Communication Climate, ICT Awareness and competency, and Trust in a virtual organizational environment during the unprecedented initial COVID-19 pandemic induced lockdown in early 2020.

In doing so, it recognized that a high level of Employee Engagement prevailed. Despite slight concern over meetings being the nature of the work frequently engaged in. This finding primarily concludes the existence of a state including displays of vigor or enthusiasm, dedication to the role, and absorption over extended periods of time [Bakker and Demerouti, 2008]. These factors are also incorporated in Iddagoda et al. [2016]'s approach, therefore it can be said that employees were cognitively, emotionally and behaviourally involved in their jobs and the organization at large too.

In line with the first objective, the findings displayed a significantly strong and positively correlated relationship between Employee Engagement and Leadership, along with an overall high level of quality relationships between direct supervisors and subordinates. Despite evidence of a concern that subordinates may not be assisted adequately or "bailed out" by their direct supervisor in the event of a challenging situation. This confirms the involvement of respect, trust, and obligation between the two parties as posited by Graen and Ulh-Bien [1995]. It also supports both the Social Exchange Theory in that a reciprocal effect exists, and the Leader-Member Exchange theory in that the type of relationship a leader fostered with a member had an impact on organizational outcomes [Scandura and Pellegrini, 2008].

With respect to the second objective, the findings directed the researcher to conclude that Employee Engagement does indeed have a significant and positively cor-

related relationship with Communication Climate, specifically the quality and reliability of information employees receive from their direct supervisors. Overall, employees perceived a good communication climate within the organization, relating to the supervisor-subordinate communication relationship and opportunities to communicate to the direct supervisor as well, in line with model developed by Balakrishnan, Masthan and Chandra in 2013. This supported the Social Exchange Theory and Welch's [2011] declaration that communication is a need expressed by an employee which organizations have to fulfil in order to maintain and develop employee engagement. However, it is important to note that the quality and reliability of information received from co-workers was a cause for concern in comparison, especially given Homans's assertion that good communication among team members will result in the development of smoothly functioning relationships and inevitably organizational outcomes [Wu et al., 2006].

Regarding the third objective, the findings determined only a weak positively correlated relationship between Employee Engagement and ICT Awareness and Competency. However, significant relationships prevailed with both Leadership and Communication Climate, supporting Welch's [2011] position that senior leadership communication plays a key role in employee engagement, in line with Social Exchange Theory as well as Shockley-Zalabeck's [2002] discovery that ICT has become an important and necessary medium for communication. Holistically, employees preferred the ICT used by direct supervisors to share information, contradicting Rainey's [2000] argument that virtual communication may have become less effective in comparison to face-to-face meetings due to factors such as technological issues. Email, mobile phone calls, and WhatsApp messenger were preferred over others in line with their frequency of use by direct supervisors, despite it being in the exact reverse order. Only employees' lack of preference for Skype and Viber either due to lack of use or awareness and competency to do so suggested a cause for concern.

Regarding the fourth and final objective, the findings presented only a weak positively correlated relationship between Employee Engagement and Trust. However, a significant relationship was discovered between Trust and Communication Climate. Additionally, corresponding with Social Exchange Theory, Trust was incorporated in the Leadership instrument as a factor that contributes substantially towards the development of a high-quality relationship between direct supervisors and subordinates [Graen and Ulh-Bien, 1995]. And overall, employees fostered a high level of trust towards the direct supervisor while working from home. Hence, identification of Mayer et al. [1995] is that trust i.e., a willingness to be vulnerable to-

wards another party has an impact on important organizational outcomes is supported. Despite the above, concern was expressed over needing to keep an eye on the direct supervisor, being open to criticism from the direct supervisor, and allowing the direct supervisor influence over personal decisions.

5. Recommendations

To begin with, the following recommendations consider the need to maintain and/or enhance the level of Employee Engagement within the organization.

The findings of this study reflect a common assertion that most employees are not satisfied with the meetings they currently engage in frequently since they tend to lack structure, constrain time allocated to other work activities, and are unproductive in general. Hence, on the surface, a virtual communication campaign can be launched stating that all virtual meetings are to be commenced with a visual or vocal reminder about the meeting agenda and a team member assigned to ensure compliance on a rotation basis. On a deeper level, it would be prudent for management to engage in executive coaching to nurture effective meeting leadership behaviour such as asking questions, summarizing, and testing for consensus more frequently rather than disagreeing, attacking opposition, and sharing information sparingly [Perkind, 2009].

Given this study's identification of email being the ICT most preferred by employees, management is encouraged to shift their focus from the current favourite of the direct supervisors i.e., WhatsApp Messenger. Besides satisfying employees, requesting most sensitive business information to be shared over email has the added advantage of privacy and confidentiality over social media. It will also prove easier to keep track of and confirm approvals and amendments in the event of a misunderstanding.

This study also discovered that co-workers are not considered reliable sources of good quality information. It is a possibility that their contrasting positive outlook on information shared by direct supervisors is related to superiors possessing more information than those lower on the hierarchy and therefore being able to provide direction during unprecedented times. A simple method of addressing this concern would be to organize team meetings on a weekly or daily basis to keep all team members informed. Town Hall meetings for the whole organization would also be beneficial as they would provide a sense of the bigger picture. Additionally, fun team activities such as quiz nights or workout challenges may also build team spirit and camaraderie outside of work responsibilities.

Such informal initiatives are also likely to improve upon the supervisor-subordinate relationship, especially the trust element, and lead to the perception that assistance will be provided during challenging times in contrast to this study's findings. One-on-one catchups with team members on a bi-weekly basis may also help direct supervisors monitor potential challenges that individual employees may need assistance with managing during such an uncertain time e.g. domestic schedules of children. Overall, the abovementioned illustrates that there are many convenient methods of maintaining and enhancing the level of Employee Engagement within the organization.

6. Limitations

The limitations of this study are as follows. The first limitation, being that only a single organization provided respondents. The second limitation, being that data was gathered from managerial employees alone. The third limitation, being that only four constructs were evaluated in relation to Employee Engagement.

These limitations can also be considered as opportunities for future academic research where Employee Engagement is evaluated in many organizations, data is collected from employees outside of the managerial cadre, and the impact of constructs other than Leadership, Communication Climate, ICT Awareness and Competency, and Trust is investigated.

Conclusion

Four hypotheses were tested in this study. The first hypothesis, there is a relationship between leadership and employee engagement, and the second hypothesis, there is a relationship between communication climate and employee engagement, are accepted. The third hypothesis, there is a relationship between ICT awareness and competency, and employee engagement, and the fourth hypothesis, there is no relationship between trust and employee engagement, were rejected. Overall, data analysis and interpretation established that Employee Engagement was significantly related to both Leadership and Communication Climate but only weakly related to ICT Awareness and Trust amongst employees who worked from home during the lockdown period at this organization. In conclusion, this study primarily established that a high level of Employee Engagement was observed amongst employees working in a virtual environment during the initial COVID-19 induced lockdown in early 2020. It also identified that the factors of Leadership, Communication Climate, ICT Awareness and Competency, and Trust made an impact on the level of Employee

Engagement during that period. Therefore, working from home can be deemed a viable alternative to working from the office in the future as organizations would not lose their competitive advantage and would continue to drive people-focused results.

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Zaangażowanie pracowników i aspekty jego relacji z czterema konstruktami: studium ery pandemii COVID-19

Streszczenie

W erze pandemii COVID-19 znaczenie zaangażowania pracowników znacznie wzrosło. Zaangażowanie pracowników toruje drogę do wysokiego poziomu wydajności pracy pracowników i wyników finansowych organizacji w organizacji. Głównym celem tego badania było zbadanie zaangażowania pracowników i jego związków z czterema konstruktami, które można uznać za dynamikę zaangażowania pracowników. Wybrane cztery rodzaje dynamiki to przywództwo, klimat komunikacji, świadomość i kompetencje w zakresie technologii informacyjno-komunikacyjnych oraz zaufanie. Jednostką analizy w tym badaniu ilościowym byli pracownicy kadry kierowniczej w organizacji na Sri Lance, której podstawowa działalność obejmowała publikowanie, drukowanie, sprzedaż książek i edukację. W ramach tego badania przekrojowego przetestowano cztery hipotezy. Wyniki badań wskazują na istotne relacje między zaangażowaniem pracowników i przywództwem, a klimatem komunikacji. Ustanowiono również powiązania ze świadomością, kompetencjami i zaufaniem w zakresie technologii informacyjno-komunikacyjnych. Omówiono dalsze implikacje i zalecenia.

Słowa kluczowe

zaangażowanie pracowników, przywództwo, klimat komunikacji, świadomość i kompetencje w zakresie technologii informacyjno-komunikacyjnych (ICT), zaufanie