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Employee engagement at a private higher education institution during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Orientation: During the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, organisations, including higher education institutions, had to shift their thinking regarding traditional work models to new ones conducive to the lockdown.

Research purpose: This study investigated employees' levels of engagement during work-from-home (WFH) within a private higher education institution in South Africa in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Motivation for the study: While some studies have looked at the effect of WFH on employee engagement, few studies could be located that look at this phenomenon within a private higher education setting.

Research approach/design and method: This study adopted the positivistic research paradigm using a quantitative research approach. The target population included 133 personnel. Total population sampling was used, and the data were collected by administering an online survey using the 17-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES). Descriptive statistics, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), independent sample *t*-tests, analysis of variance (ANOVA) and effect sizes were used to analyse the data. A satisfactory response rate of 79% was realised.

Main findings: The study found that despite the difficulties and anxieties brought about by the radical shifts to WFH, the personnel could still thrive and show high levels of engagement. This was attributed to positive drivers of engagement such as autonomy, psychosocial safety, convenience, social union, and most importantly, organisational support.

Practical/managerial implications: Work-from-home is regarded as a viable work arrangement for the foreseeable future. Private higher education should take note of the suggestions put forward to improve, sustain and manage employee engagement successfully.

Contribution/value-add: This study contributes to the body of knowledge surrounding employee engagement in the WFH context within the private higher education sphere.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; employee engagement; private higher education; South Africa; work-from-home.

Introduction

The prolonged social lockdown caused by the threat of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has resulted in the reorganisation of work globally. Organisations, including higher education institutions, had to shift their thinking regarding traditional work models to new ones conducive to the lockdown (Liu et al., 2021; Mehta, 2021). The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020) reported that close to 93% of organisations around the globe had to shift their traditional work arrangements to work-from-home (WFH). This work format or model allowed employees to perform the duties they once performed at their office/s at their places of residence (ILO, 2020).

The adjustment of working from home impacted work and employee engagement (Romero-Martín et al., 2022). This was because of the sudden shift to unchartered territories experienced by employees, as well as the level of preparedness of organisations to successfully implement the WFH model (Mehta, 2021; Tušl et al., 2021). Organisations globally were required to determine innovative and efficient ways to encourage employee engagement during the pandemic (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021), sustaining employee success and business productivity.

After the implementation of WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers (Adhitama & Riyanto, 2020; Botha & Coetzee, 2022; Botha et al., 2023; Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021; Manjaree & Perera, 2021; Mehta, 2021) began to give precedence to understanding how employee engagement

has been affected through the recently implemented WFH model. Kossen and Van der Berg (2022) emphasise that employee engagement is now a key priority for human resource practitioners because of the COVID-19 pandemic and its related changes to work. At this point, it would be important to note that the influence of employee engagement by WFH has been reported to be two-fold. While some studies show that WFH has led to better engagement because of flexibility and freedom of work planning (Society for Human Resource Management, 2021; Yu & Wu, 2021), other studies show that this work arrangement has a significant effect on the personal lives of employees, leading to exasperation, anxiety and exhaustion (Riyanto & Adhitama, 2020; Romero-Martín et al., 2022; Society for Human Resource Management, 2021). Research conducted during the pandemic reported that employees working from home experienced increased workload and working hours, ineffective communication, procrastination, social isolation and alienation, work–home conflict, fatigue, increased health and wellbeing issues such as body aches because of the lack of movement, stress and depression, among other issues (Botha & Coetzee, 2022; Botha et al., 2023; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Chanana, 2020; Oakman et al., 2020; Romero-Martín et al., 2022; Savic, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). When left unattended, these influences hamper employees' performance, dedication, willingness to work and relationships with colleagues and family, resulting in poorer levels of engagement (Riyanto & Adhitama, 2020; Tušl et al., 2021). Furthermore, the results of research conducted pre and during the global COVID-19 pandemic revealed an association between socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, marital status, level of education and tenure and employees' engagement levels (Botha et al., 2023; Mvana & Louw, 2020; Romero-Martín et al., 2022). It is believed that when employees are engaged, they are generally more efficient and productive, more creative or innovative and more likely to remain within their jobs at the organisation, which has been known to add value to business prosperity (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Work-from-home, as a foreseeable future work arrangement, is a topic that is not fully explored yet, and this study aims to add new insights to this emerging topic by reporting on the results of a study conducted during the global COVID-19 pandemic focussing on employees' levels of engagement during WFH within a private higher education institution in South Africa.

Research objectives

The key research question the study aimed to answer was: What are the engagement levels of personnel working from home in a private higher education institution in South Africa in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how are they affected by socio-demographic variables? Therefore, the objective of this study was firstly, to assess the levels of engagement of personnel working from home in a private higher education institution in South Africa in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; secondly, to explore the association between selected socio-demographic variables and employee engagement; and thirdly, to suggest recommendations, based on the literature review and empirical results, to assist higher education institutions, generally, and specifically, in the private space, to improve the engagement levels of personnel.

Literature review

Employee engagement conceptualised

Employee engagement is a term that has attracted considerable debate regarding its conceptual definition. The concept has evolved, providing more insight into contemporary thinking around defining employee engagement in the workplace (Shuck & Wollard, 2009). Because of the recent inclusion of positive psychology and a focus on work engagement in recent management practice, there has been a greater focus on rethinking what employee engagement refers to (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019). The concept of employee engagement was first introduced by Kahn (1990), who saw engagement as harnessing workers' selves towards their duties and cognitively investing in their work as a form of dedication. However, over the years, many researchers believed there is more to employee engagement than harnessing oneself towards work. As a result, the contributions made towards the understanding of employee engagement are discussed further in the text.

Employee engagement as a multi-faceted construct

Researchers believed that employee engagement should extend beyond cognitive ability and dedication and include the application of emotions and behaviours (May et al., 2004). Others believed it is even more multi-faceted and should be considered a fusion of employee commitment, loyalty, productivity and ownership (Wellins & Concelman, 2005). Li and Chanchai (2019) stated that 'employee engagement of a knowledge worker is composed of five dimensions: organisational identity, dedication, absorption, vigour, and pleasant harmony'. Organisational identity refers to how a worker can identify with the organisation employed at and the extent to which the workers feel a sense of belonging to the workplace (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019). Dedication refers to the extent to which an employee is committed to tasks and the organisation. Engaged employees tend to extend beyond their scope of work (Li & Chanchai, 2019). Work is regarded as important and is a source of 'enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge' (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 47). Absorption refers to how engrossed an employee is in their work, showing strong levels of engagement and productivity (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019). Employees tend to lose their sense of time and find it difficult to detach from their work (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Vigour refers to the level of energy and enthusiasm reflected by employees in their work. Employees that show vigour are generally more physically and mentally engaged, and can sustain and resolve challenging circumstances that may surround the workplace (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019). Pleasant harmony refers to an emotional state where employees balance their emotions at the workplace. Employees who achieve this balance experience greater levels of wellness, work satisfaction and overall happiness in the workplace (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019).

Employee engagement includes a dedicated willingness

While multi-faceted, employee engagement should also be considered as the degree to which an employee is willing to remain within a company and the extent to which they are willing to dedicate themselves to the company (Sun, 2019). The terms 'say, stay and strive' are commonly used to describe an employee's willingness to remain in a company. In brief, 'say' refers to employees using positive communication to describe their company, 'stay' refers to employee ambition of becoming a permanent member of the company for a long time and 'strive' refers to the willingness to devote extra personal resources such as time and hard work towards the success of the company (Guillen & Martinex-Alvarado, 2014).

Employee engagement as a positive state of mind

Zeng and Han (2005) indicated that employee engagement must be seen as a positive state of mind that has a positive and fulfilling feeling in employees' minds. Work should have a long-lasting impact, a good emotional sense and motivation towards the devotion of an employee to a task and is accompanied by pleasurable, gratified and encouraging feelings, which ultimately uplift an employee's experience of their work (Zeng & Han, 2005). In this regard, Schaufeli (2017) mentioned that employee engagement is 'a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption'. Schaufeli (2017) looks at how employees are motivated, committed and focussed on their work and can bring the best version of themselves to work. Schaufeli's conceptualisation of employee engagement has been extensively alluded to and remains very persuasive in the academic field of the concept (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014).

Employee engagement is the opposite of employee burnout

Some authors believe that employee engagement is the opposite of burnout. While burnout refers to the feelings of tiredness in one's task, engagement is the opposite and refers to the extent to which an employee is immersed in their work (Shuck & Wollard, 2009). Engaged employees show a sense of energy when approaching tasks. Hence, one can denote that employee engagement posits a positive connotation to work (Guillen & Martinex-Alvarado, 2014).

Thus, in broad terms, employee engagement comprises emotional and cognitive facets that drive employees to show vigour, dedication and absorption in their work. The emotional side relates to employees' feelings about their work, and the cognitive side refers to employee convictions and perceptions of the organisation, its management and staff and its working climates (Riyanto & Adhitama, 2020).

A theoretical framework to understand employee engagement

Two influential frameworks have been used to understand employee engagement: the social exchange theory and the job resources demand model. These theories offer insights into the factors affecting employee engagement and how it can be enhanced during WFH.

Social exchange theory

The social exchange theory, developed by George Homans in the 1950s, is often regarded as one of the more robust theoretical perspectives to understand employee engagement (Eisenberger et al., 1986). The theory supposes that work should be considered as a transaction between worker and employer, including labour, loyalty and employee interest, and rewards (including social rewards) (Levinson, 1965). It is a reciprocal relationship where a party expects a return in the future for the provision of services to the other party. The party that receives something of value is then expected to show a sense of responsibility in the exchange of services (Levinson, 1965). Once value is recognised in terms of rewards, employees will show commitment and continue performing to expect further value and rewards. The theory highlights the fact that employees remain dedicated and loyal to organisations to exchange economic benefits and social reward schemes (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Organisational support plays an essential role in the relationship between employer and employee, as appropriate organisational support from the employers is crucial to employees' commitment to their tasks. Employees repay organisations with positive behaviours and attitudes conducive to success (Masterson et al., 2000). Researchers such as Saks (2006) argued that employees repay organisations primarily through their engagement, implying that employees choose to be engaged with the organisation to differing extents depending on the resources they receive, both financial and supportive.

Job Demands-Resources model

The Job Demands-Resources model, developed in the early 2000s by Gerard Frederik Rutgers and Wilmar Schaufeli, postulates that while organisations may differ in terms of their environments and modes of operation, all organisations are characterised by an environment that can be classified into two common categories: job demands and the job resources (Salanova et al., 2005; Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). The term 'job demand' refers to aspects of the organisation and work that require employees' physical and psychological dedication to perform tasks. It is thus associated with physical and mental trade-offs (Crawford et al., 2010). For example, huge work pressure, heavy work demands and poor and unconducive environments are characteristics of job demands that may impact employees' physical and mental wellbeing. On the other hand, job resources refer to physical, psychological and social resources required to perform a task to allow the functional fulfilment of work goals, eradicate job demands and negative impacts on wellbeing and promote the personal development of employees (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019). Employee engagement is related to the Job Demands-Resources model, as the dedication, absorption and vigour displayed by an employee towards work depend on the job's demands and the provision of resources to fulfil that task (Salminen et al., 2014).

Employee engagement during work-from-home in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

Because of the rapid implementation of the WFH model during the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations have begun

to provide insight into how well the model works. A key variable within this success was employee engagement. The drivers of engagement that were identified are discussed further in the text.

Autonomy

Autonomy at work refers to the level of freedom that an employee has to make decisions regarding the manner and timing of which a task should be completed (Mehta, 2021). Autonomy is a driver of employee engagement even before the COVID-19 pandemic, where previous studies have denoted a strong relationship between these two constructs (Amabile & Kramer, 2011; Christian et al., 2011; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Studies by Jaafar and Rahim (2022), Jamal et al. (2021) and Mehta (2021) found that during WFH, employees had greater levels of freedom in deciding on the timing and methodology of performing their work tasks and experienced greater levels of autonomy which ultimately, enhanced their engagement levels.

Psychosocial safety

Psychosocial safety refers to an employee's freedom or security regarding psychological and social risks or threats (Mehta, 2021). Jamal et al. (2021) concur that there is an association between WFH and psychosocial safety, where employees experienced higher levels of psychosocial security during WFH, thereby enhancing employee engagement. Mehta (2021) found that employees displayed a greater sense of psychosocial safety as being at home gave them a great sense of self-security, security and family security, resulting in positive engagement within their work. Mehta (2021) assessed the relationship between WFH and employee engagement in the information technology (IT) sector.

Convenience

Wiese et al. (2020) examined how commuting strain affects daily self-control capacities at work and home. They found that commuting to a physical office leads to employees exhibiting irritation or negative behaviour, as commuting is regarded as an inconvenience to employees. Burch and Barnes-Farrell (2020) explained that commuting to the place of work represented not only a physical transaction but also the need for a mental transition from home to the place of employment, leading to degrees of irritability, poorer levels of concentration and dedication and anxiety of commuting back to places of residence in terms of time and safety. Hence, the convenience of WFH and redeeming on the cost and time of commuting has shown to have a positive impact on engagement levels to an extent where employees, in certain respects, were willing to accept lower wages if allowed the convenience of working from home (Mas & Pallais, 2019).

Happiness

Mehta (2021) found that WFH has led to greater levels of happiness, which can be defined as:

> [*A*] state of mind in which an individual experiences a sense of joy, satisfaction, and positive thinking and a feeling that one's life is good and carries meaning and is worthwhile. (p. 3)

Cheng and Zhang (2022), Lunde et al. (2022) and Mehta (2021) found that WFH enhances employee levels of happiness, resulting in superior levels of employee engagement.

Social union

Riyanto and Adhitama (2020) add the concept of a social union as a driver of employee engagement. Their study concluded that when managers make concerted efforts to allow employees a sense of belonging by sharing information with employees, communicating shared visions, enhancing employee trust and displaying constant attempts of communication, then employees show greater levels of self-esteem as they feel regarded, which subsequently enhances their engagement (Riyanto & Adhitama, 2020). In their respective study, Tooren and De Jong (2014) also reported an association between social union and employee engagement. Unlike Riyanto and Adhitama (2020), their studies were conducted in physical office settings, not remote working environments.

Organisational support

Organisational support was cited as another driver of employee engagement (Burch & Barnes-Farrell, 2020). Support also refers to degrees of assurance related to communication. Employees must be provided with assurances regarding the future of their jobs (i.e. job security) and their salaries. Organisations have found that employee engagement is reduced if employees are not provided with the necessary IT and infrastructural support (such as computers, webcams and internet access). This results from the stress of being unable to perform their duties effectively, which causes employees to be withdrawn from their tasks (Burch & Barnes-Farrell, 2020; Singh, 2020). Anxieties surrounding the possibility of losing their jobs and experiencing a salary reduction have also been noted as key drivers of engagement (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021).

Practices to enhance employee engagement during work-from-home

Many organisations, given the importance of engagement and its subsequent impact on employee and organisational productivity, have devised innovative ways to counteract the effect of WFH on engagement. This section briefly elaborates on the practices used.

Organisational support

One of the prominent practices of modern organisations to enhance employee engagement is to ensure that employees are well-equipped with the requisites to work effectively. Managers need to guarantee that all WFH requirements (such as ICT, social support and constant communication, to mention a few) are provided to employees before the commencement of remote work to remove any anxieties that employees may have about performing their duties effectively (Sarkar, 2020). Talukar (2020) suggests that employers should invest in technologies that allow employees to conduct their work effectively and replace the lack of physical relations that were

once experienced with other colleagues before the lockdown. This will allow for activities such as hosting virtual team building. Goswami (2020) further stated that technologies should also allow for learning and development as the new work models require new sets of skills. Virtual learning platforms would assist in 'right-skilling' employees to withstand the requirements of new and future business trends.

Communication

Communication is a critical practice that needs to be adequate to ensure that organisations have engaged employees. Chanana and Sangeeta (2021) emphasise the need for the management to ensure constant communication with virtual teams, ensuring that teams are aware of the company's vision and shared values, are given decision-making capabilities, are acutely aware of their expectations, are provided with feedback from time to time on performance, host podcasts on business operations, provide feedback on their growth opportunities, and be given some degree of job and salary security. Effective communication strategies require using information and communications technology (ICT), such as intranets and sharing information through various multimedia channels. Given that WFH relies on virtual rather than physical teams, key reliance is placed on technologies to ensure that communication methods are effective and on-demand (Nair, 2020). This allows for promoting virtual communities among staff (Sarkar, 2020).

Employee wellbeing

The *focus on employees' personal wellbeing* has been cited as one of the most creative yet effective strategies to encourage engagement during WFH periods (Fan et al., 2020). Fan et al. (2020) mentioned five ways in which organisations can promote engagement through support for their wellbeing:

- *Healthy workspaces*. This refers to organisations encouraging employees to create dedicated and practical workspaces that are healthy and ergonomical within their places of residence.
- *Routine*. Managers and superiors should participate in assisting employees in creating work and personal routines to ensure that a work–life balance is achieved. Remote working has been accused of invading employees' private space and time. Hence routines are effective in separating work and personal lives.
- *Socialisation*. Organisations are encouraged to promote healthy and constant communication with and between employees or colleagues. This was found to be a key factor in reducing work anxiety and stress.
- *Wellbeing practices*. Organisations should also devise practices that promote the wellbeing of their employees. For example, online exercise classes could be offered to guarantee employee health maintenance. This was found to reduce employee absenteeism and promotes dedication and performance.
- *Technology investment*. Organisations should invest in communication technologies such as messaging services and video conferencing to promote constant communication and remove social alienation among employees. A recognition software platform is also advised as this will allow employees to be recognised in terms of their efforts and recognise others.

Socio-demographic variables and employee engagement

Pre- and during the COVID-19 pandemic, research suggests that socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, marital status, level of education and tenure may influence the levels of employees' engagement (Botha & Coetzee, 2022; Botha et al., 2023; Chaudhary & Rangnekar, 2017; Mvana & Louw, 2020; Romero-Martín et al., 2022).

Cascio et al. (2014), Botha and Coetzee (2022), Botha et al. (2023), Mvana and Louw (2020), and Romero-Martín et al. (2022) in their respective studies found that age influences the engagement levels of employees. Mvana and Louw (2020) found that younger teachers are less engaged in their work than older teachers. Cascio et al. (2014) mentioned that when educators reach the age of 50, they can become disengaged from their work as they are less likely or capable of dealing with stressful circumstances. In the WFH context, Romero-Martín et al. (2022) found that younger employees displayed greater levels of engagement compared to older employees. Romero-Martín et al. (2022) conducted their study among active workers in the United Kingdom during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interestingly, Botha et al. (2023) found in their study conducted among employees within higher education in South Africa, that older employees showed more dedication, vigour and absorption when working from home during the pandemic, than the younger employees. A study conducted by Botha and Coetzee (2022) also revealed that older employees displayed higher levels of absorption than the younger employees. The authors conducted their study during the COVID-19 pandemic among employees working in a debt-collection organisation in South Africa.

The study conducted by Botha et al. (2023) revealed that gender affects the engagement levels of employees; the results showed that the male employees displayed higher levels of engagement than the female employees during the WFH period. The study conducted by Romero-Martín et al. (2022) confirmed the results. However, Botha and Coetzee (2022) found no significant differences between the genders in employee engagement during WFH.

Earlier studies suggested that married people are more engaged in the workplace (Rigg et al., 2014; Zeng et al., 2009). Romero-Martín et al. (2022), whose study was conducted during the pandemic, showed that employees within the UK who were married or lived with a life partner showed greater engagement in their work during the WFH period. However, Sungmala and Verawat (2021) and Botha et al. (2023) did not find that marital status does affect employee engagement.

Mvana and Louw (2020) and Sungmala and Verawat (2021) found that the level of qualification influences employees' engagement levels, where employees with higher qualifications were less engaged in their work than their counterparts with lower qualifications. However, the studies conducted by Botha and Coetzee (2022) and Botha et al. (2023) revealed no association between the level of qualification and the engagement levels of employees during WFH.

Mvana and Louw (2020) found that employees, particularly teachers with more experience, displayed lower levels of engagement. Klassen and Chiu (2010) explained that educators show greater engagement and psychological capital at their career's commencement and mid-stages. This would decrease as they mature in their career, which could explain why younger teachers are more vibrant and display greater engagement.

Earlier studies (Avery et al., 2007; Coetzee & Rothmann, 2005; Montes & Irving, 2008) revealed an association between tenure and employees' engagement levels, where engagement tends to decline the longer the employee's tenure is within the organisation. However, in the COVID-19 context, Botha and Coetzee (2022) and Botha et al. (2023) found no significant relationship between tenure and employee engagement. According to Robinson et al. (2007) the kind of experience the organisation offers may influence employees' engagement levels.

Despite the differences in the results of the studies mentioned earlier, it can be deduced that socio-demographic variables may influence the engagement levels of employees. This will further be explored in this study.

Research methodology and design

The following section discusses the research methodology and design adopted for this study.

Research approach

Four research approaches are commonly utilised in research: positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism, and critical theory. These paradigms reference different views of the world, allowing researchers to perceive, quantify and realise the unique and social experiences of individuals (Bryman & Bell, 2018). This study adopted the positivist paradigm and quantitative method of inquiry to measure employees' engagement levels at a private higher education institution and to determine its association with selected socio-demographic variables (Bryman et al., 2021; Dawson, 2019).

Research methods

The target population of this study comprised individuals from a private higher education institution in South Africa who were employed at different categories or levels of employment. Thus, the target population (133) comprised management (16), academics lecturers (27) and academic administrators (i.e. support staff) (90). The total population was targeted. Total population sampling is a form of purposive sampling which utilises or surveys a total population based on specific traits (i.e. academic personnel in this regard) (Dawson, 2019). The population received the invitation to participate in the study via email. A total of 105 responded, signifying a satisfactory response rate of 79% ($N = 105$).

Measuring instruments

Data were collected from respondents via an online administered survey that utilised the 17-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) questionnaire. The questionnaire contains six items that measured academic personnel's vigour, five that measured personnel's dedication, and six that measured personnel's absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Various existing studies supported the fact that these three scales' internal consistency and validity are good. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients are equal to or exceed the critical value of 0.70 (Botha et al., 2023; Goliath-Yarde & Roodt, 2011; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Storm & Rothmann, 2003). A socio-demographic section was included in addition to the UWES questionnaire.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive, inferential and multivariate statistical analyses were conducted on the data gathered from respondents, utilising SPSS AMOS version 27 as the statistical software. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the characteristics of the sample or data set. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to verify the factor structure of the UWES. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to determine the internal consistency and reliability of the scales (vigour, dedication and absorption). Field (2009) suggested that Cronbach's alpha coefficient should preferably be 0.7 and above. Independent sample *t*-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to determine whether there were significant differences between the means of independent groups. Cohen's *d*-values were used as effect sizes to determine whether the differences in means have an effect in practice, where $d = 0.2$ indicates a small effect, $d = 0.5$ a medium effect and $d = 0.8$ a large effect (Cohen, 1988). Spearman's rank–order correlation determined the direction and strength of the association between two ranked variables.

Research procedure and ethical considerations

A permission letter was obtained from the institution under investigation, granting permission to conduct the study. An invitation email was sent to the study's target population, comprising management, academics lecturers and administrators (i.e. support staff). The email explained the purpose and nature of the study and the respondents' rights. Informed consent was included on the first page of the online survey that respondents were required to sign. By signing the form, the respondents provided informed consent and agreed that their data may be used for research and publication purposes. Respondents' anonymity and confidentiality were ensured during data collection, analysis and reporting.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC), North-West University (ethics number: NWU-01253-21-A4).

Results

This section presents and discusses the results of the primary research conducted and aims to discover patterns or trends that may have implications for practice and future research regarding the topic under investigation.

Socio-demographic information

Table 1 reflects the socio-demographic information collected from the participants.

The data collected indicate that all of the respondents included in the study are South African, represent a young adult population with over 65% of respondents being between the ages of 20 years and 39 years and have been employed at the institution at varied tenures (i.e. 6 months to over 10 years) and are predominantly female (i.e. 62.9%). The data also represented all employment levels (i.e. management, academic and support staff). Support staff was expected to represent the larger population because of the South African higher education requirement of a 30:1 support staff-to-student ratio (Kosie, 2022). Most respondents have a university degree or postgraduate degree (72%), and a large proportion (47%) indicated they were married. All respondents mentioned that they pursued WFH for specific periods during the COVID-19 pandemic, inferring they can offer significant insight into this study.

Employee engagement measurement model

The confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) conducted on the UWES found that the three-factor structure (i.e. vigour, dedication and absorption) has a good fit to the data derived from the respondents (see Figure 1). Six items loaded on vigour (ranging from 0.465 to 0.726), five on dedication (ranging from 0.293 to 0.858), and six on absorption (ranging from 0.546 to 0.697). All factor loadings were found to be statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Arguably, item QB11 (with a loading of 0.293) did not load adequately on dedication. Field (2009) suggested that a factor loading of 0.3 is regarded meaningful and that for a sample of 100, the factor loadings should be preferably greater than 0.5. Botha and Coetzee (2022) also suggested omitting this item from future studies.

Cronbach's coefficient alpha determined the reliability and internal consistency of the three factors. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were satisfactory ($\alpha \geq 0.70$) for vigour (0.786), dedication (0.797) and absorption (0.812) (Field, 2009). An alpha coefficient should ideally exceed the value of 0.7 to achieve reliability and internal consistency (Field, 2009). Thus, the data and the questionnaire scales are considered reliable and internally consistent.

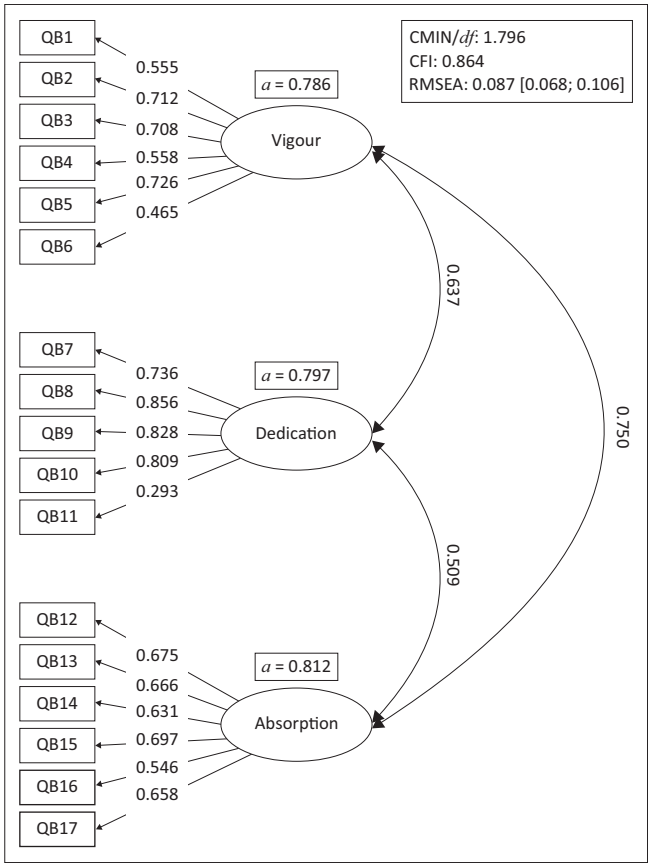
TABLE 1: Socio-demographic information.

Question	Category	*N*	%
Biographical information			
With which gender do you identify yourself?	Female	66	62.9
	Male	38	36.2
	Prefer not to answer	1	1.0
In which country do you reside?	South Africa	102	97.0
	Other	3	3.0
What is your nationality?	South African	99	94.3
	Other	6	5.7
What is your age in years?	20–29	26	24.8
	30–39	52	49.5
	40–49	16	15.2
	50–59	8	7.6
	60 and older	3	2.9
What is your marital status?	Single or not in a relationship	25	25.3
	Unmarried and in a relationship	21	21.2
	Widowed	4	4.0
	Married	47	47.5
	Divorced or separated	2	2.0
What is your highest qualification?	High (secondary) school graduate	23	22.3
	Completed technical or vocational training	6	5.8
	College or University degree	43	41.7
	Postgraduate degree	26	25.2
	PhD	5	4.9
How long have you been working at the institution?	0–6 months	16	15.2
	7–12 months	6	5.7
	1–2 years	14	13.3
	3–5 years	33	31.4
	6–10 years	24	22.9
	More than 10 years	12	11.4
What is the nature of your employment at the institution?	Management	-	17.1
	Academic (i.e. teacher, lecturer, researcher, postdoctoral fellow, etc.)	-	19.0
	Support (i.e. administrative, technical, etc.)	-	46.7
	Other	-	17.2
How long have you been working from home since the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020?	0–3 months	24	25.0
	4–7 months	37	38.5
	8–11 months	25	26.0
	12 months and longer	10	10.4
Which scenario best describes your current work situation since the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020?	I have been working from home since the beginning of the pandemic, but come to the office occasionally (i.e. to attend a meeting and at my own discretion)	11	10.8
	I work remotely a few days a week as directed by management	16	15.7
	I am working from the office most of the time	30	29.4
	I am working from the office all the time	45	44.1

COVID-19, coronavirus disease 2019.

The questionnaire captured data on a five-point Likert-type scale (with responses rated between 1 and 5, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). The responses indicated that the mean scores for all the factors were 3.7 and above. The highest mean score was achieved for dedication (M = 4.1), followed by vigour (M = 3.71) and absorption (M = 3.69) on a five-point Likert scale. Thus, the results showed that the respondents displayed acceptable levels of engagement during WFH, although there is room for improvement, in particular, to increase their vigour and absorption levels.

Hancock and Mueller (2010) suggested that it is good practice to report fit indices from three broad classes. Therefore, the following three goodness-of-model-fit indices were used to evaluate the model-data fit: the Chi-square statistic divided by degrees of freedom (CMIN/DF), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The CMIN/DF ratio should be close to 1 for correct models (Bollen & Jackman, 1993). Scores below 1 indicate a poor fit between the data sampled and the hypothetical model utilised (Shadfar & Malekmohammadi, 2013). According to Kline (1998), a CMIN/DF ratio smaller than 3 indicates an acceptable model-data fit. According to Shadfar and Malekmohammadi (2013), a ratio closer to 2 is considered a strong fit, while ratios between 2 and 5 are considered appropriate. A CFI index of 1 indicates a perfect fit, while an index below 0.95 generally indicates a poor fit (Bentler, 1990). However, according to Hair et al. (2010) and Bentler (1990), an index greater than 0.9 for CFI indicates a good fit. For the RMSEA, an index of 0 indicates a perfect fit, while indices below 0.05 demonstrate a good fit. Indices between 0.05 and 0.08 are acceptable, while indices above 0.10 indicate a poor fit (Steiger, 1990). Table 2 reveals the model's ratios and indices concerning the CMIN/DF, CFI and RMSEA indexes.



Note: All factor loadings were statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

CMIN/*df*, Chi-square statistic divided by degrees of freedom; CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation.

FIGURE 1: Confirmatory factor analysis results of the employee engagement measurement model.

The three goodness-of-model-fit indices indicated an acceptable fit between the measurement model and the sampled data (see Table 2). The measurement model obtained a CMIN/DF ratio of 1.76, a CFI index of 0.864 and the following RMSEA values: 0.087; 0.068 (low); 0.106 (high).

A measurement model needs construct validity to be fit for use. Construct validity can be achieved if the model possesses both discriminant and convergent validity. The model has convergent validity if the average variance explained (AVE) value exceeds 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The results showed that the AVE of vigour = 0.466, dedication = 0.614 and absorption = 0.419. Thus, the AVE values of two of the factors were marginally below the recommended 0.5 AVE cutoff value. The dedication factor shows acceptable convergent validity, the vigour factor shows almost acceptable convergent validity, while the absorption factor lacks convergent validity. For a model to achieve discriminant validity, the square root of the AVE (√AVE) should be higher than the correlation coefficient between the two factors under scrutiny (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The results show the √AVE for vigour = 0.683, dedication = 0.784 and absorption = 0.647 (see Table 3). Table 3 shows that the criterion (√AVE > *r*) was met, and there is discriminant validity between vigour and dedication (√AVE = 0.784; *r* = 0.710), but not concerning absorption, vigour (√AVE = 0.647; *r* = 0.677) and dedication (√AVE = 0.647; *r* = 0.671). Thus, it is concluded that the model possesses some evidence of construct validity. Campbell and Fiske (1959) seminally warned that these findings are not uncommon because partial convergent and discriminant validity is common in exploratory models (such as this one). Likewise, an exploratory model could have good discriminant validity but relatively poor convergent validity (or vice versa) (Hill & Hughes, 2007). In such cases, emphasis should be on the confirmatory results showing consistency between the identified factors and the data (Cole, 1987).

TABLE 2: Goodness-of-model-fit indices for employee engagement.

Fit index	Rule	Author	Model score	Result
Goodness-of-model-fit indices				
CMIN/*df*	Close to 1; 3–5 still satisfactory	Mueller (1996); Paswan (cited by Shadfar & Malekmohammadi, 2013); Bollen and Jackman (1993); Kline (1998)	1.796	Good fit
CFI	≥ 0.09 (good fit)	Hair et al. (2010); Mueller (1996); Bentler (1990)	0.864	Acceptable fit
RMSEA	0.01 (excellent) 0.05 (good) 0.08 (mediocre) ≤ 0.10 (still satisfactory)	Hu and Bentler (1999:1); Blunch (2008); Bentler (1990); Steiger (1990)	0.087 [0.068; 0.106]	Acceptable fit

CMIN/*df*, Chi-square statistic divided by degrees of freedom; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; CFI, comparative fit index.

TABLE 3: Average variance extracted, square root of Average variance explained and matrix of correlations between factors.

Factor	AVE	Vigour	Dedication	Absorption
Vigour	0.466	0.683	-	-
Dedication	0.614	0.710†	0.784	-
Absorption	0.419	0.677†	0.671†	0.647

AVE, Average variance explained.
†, Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

TABLE 4: Association between gender and employee engagement.

Factor	Gender	Group statistics			Independent sample *t*-test	Cohen's *d*-value
		N	Mean	SD	*p*-value	Effect size
Vigour	Male	37	3.87	0.58	0.046	0.41
	Female	66	3.63	0.61	-	-
Dedication	Male	37	4.25	0.44	0.048	0.37
	Female	66	4.04	0.66	-	-
Absorption	Male	37	3.80	0.60	0.340	0.19
	Female	66	3.67	0.73	-	-

SD, standard deviation.
d = 0.2: small effect size; *d* = 0.5: medium effect size; *d* = 0.8: large effect size.

Association between gender, marital status, nature of employment, current work-from-home situation, and employee engagement

Independent sample *t*-tests determined the association between gender and employee engagement (Table 4).

The independent sample *t*-test results revealed significant differences in the mean scores of male and female respondents for vigour ($p = 0.046$; $d = 0.41$) and dedication ($p = 0.048$; $d = 0.37$); the effect sizes showed a small to medium effect. The male respondents displayed more vigour (Male: $M = 3.87$; Female: $M = 3.63$) and dedication (Male: $M = 4.25$; Female: $M = 4.04$) during WFH than the female respondents.

The ANOVA revealed the associations between the socio-demographic variables marital status, nature of employment, WFH situation and employee engagement (see Table 5).

The ANOVA indicated significant differences between the mean scores of the different marital categories for vigour ($p = 0.013$) and dedication ($p = 0.010$). The respondents who were single scored lower on vigour ($M = 3.40$) and dedication ($M = 3.78$) than the respondents who were in a relationship, widowed, divorced and separated (vigour: $M = 3.76$, $d = 0.62$; dedication: $M = 4.19$, $d = 0.52$), and were married (vigour: $M = 3.84$, $d = 0.71$; dedication: $M = 4.22$, $d = 0.56$); the effect sizes showed medium to large effects.

The effect sizes further showed that the respondents who belonged to the management category scored higher on vigour ($M = 3.83$) and absorption ($M = 3.98$) than the respondents who belonged to the academic category (vigour: $M = 3.66$, $d = 0.29$; absorption: $M = 3.69$, $d = 0.46$) and support (vigour: $M = 3.68$, $d = 0.24$; absorption: $M = 3.63$, $d = 0.46$) categories; the effect sizes indicated small to medium effects.

Furthermore, the effect sizes showed, regarding WFH situation, that respondents who were working from home but came to the office occasionally or a few days a week scored higher on vigour ($M = 3.81$) and absorption ($M = 3.78$) than respondents who were working from the office most of the time (vigour: $M = 3.64$, $d = 0.26$; absorption: $M = 3.53$, $d = 0.34$). Interestingly, the effect sizes showed that the respondents who were working from the office all the time ($M = 3.82$: $d = 0.38$) were more absorbed in their work than the respondents who were working from the office most of the time ($M = 3.53$); however, the effect was small.

Correlation of age, highest qualification, years working at the university and period working from home with employee engagement

Spearman's rank-order correlation was performed to establish the linear relationship between age, highest qualification, years working at the university and period working from home with employee engagement (see Table 6).

Spearman's rank-order correlation established medium positive correlations between age, vigour ($p = 0.00$, $r = 0.296$) and absorption ($p = 0.00$, $r = 0.278$). This indicates that the older employees were, the more vigour and absorption they displayed. In addition, a small positive correlation was found between the years working at the university and absorption ($p = 0.037$, $r = 0.205$), signifying that the longer employees were in the institution, the more they found themselves absorbed in their work.

Correlation between vigour, dedication and absorption

Spearman's rank-order correlation test determined the linear relationship between vigour, dedication and absorption (see Table 7).

Large positive correlations exist between vigour and dedication ($p = 0.00$, $r = 0.710$), and vigour and absorption ($p = 0.00$, $r = 0.677$). This indicates that the more vigour employees expressed in their jobs, the more dedicated and absorbed they are. In addition, a large positive correlation was found between dedication and absorption ($p = 0.00$, $r = 0.671$), signifying that the more dedicated employees are to their jobs, the more they find themselves absorbed in their work.

Discussion

The study explored the levels of work engagement of academic personnel during the WFH period during the COVID-19 lockdown within private higher education in South Africa. The results indicated that although a shift has been experienced in the nature of work (i.e. WFH) comprising radical and immediate shifts in 'business as usual', respondents were able to cope with the changes brought about by the WFH model. These findings suggest that despite the difficult COVID-19 environment and the anxiety regarding WFH, respondents could still thrive and display high levels of engagement.

TABLE 5: Association between marital status, nature of employment, work-from-home situation and employee engagement.

Factor and socio-demographic variable categories	Group statistics			ANOVA	Effect sizes	
	N	Mean	SD	*p*-value	A with B and C	B with C
Marital status						
Vigour						
A: Single or not in a relationship	24	3.40	0.57	0.013	-	-
B: Unmarried and in a relationship/Widowed/Divorced/Separated	27	3.76	0.54	-	0.62	-
C: Married	47	3.84	0.62	-	0.71	0.13
Total	**98**	**3.71**	**0.61**	-	-	-
Dedication						
A: Single or not in a relationship	24	3.78	0.78	0.010	-	-
B: Unmarried and in a relationship/Widowed/Divorced/Separated	27	4.19	0.55	-	0.52	-
C: Married	47	4.22	0.48	-	0.56	0.06
Total	**98**	**4.10**	**0.61**	-	-	-
Absorption						
A: Single or not in a relationship	24	3.69	0.73	0.503	-	-
B: Unmarried and in a relationship/Widowed/Divorced/Separated	27	3.60	0.75	-	0.12	-
C: Married	47	3.80	0.62	-	0.14	0.26
Total	**98**	**3.72**	**0.68**	-	-	-
Nature of employment						
Vigour						
A: Management	18	3.83	0.40	0.595	-	-
B: Academic	20	3.66	0.60	-	0.29	-
C: Support	64	3.68	0.65	-	0.24	0.03
Total	**102**	**3.70**	**0.60**	-	-	-
Dedication						
A: Management	18	4.14	0.49	0.830	-	-
B: Academic	20	4.14	0.45	-	0.01	-
C: Support	64	4.06	0.69	-	0.12	0.11
Total	**102**	**4.09**	**0.61**	-	-	-
Absorption						
A: Management	18	3.98	0.56	0.178	-	-
B: Academic	20	3.69	0.63	-	0.46	-
C: Support	64	3.63	0.77	-	0.46	0.09
Total	**102**	**3.70**	**0.72**	-	-	-
WFH situation						
Vigour						
A: I have been working from home since the pandemic's beginning, but I come to the office occasionally./I work a few days a week remotely as directed by management.	27	3.81	0.58	0.574	-	-
B: I am working from the office most of the time.	30	3.64	0.64	-	0.26	-
C: I am working from the office all the time.	44	3.75	0.57	-	0.11	0.16
Total	**101**	**3.73**	**0.59**	-	-	-
Dedication						
A: I have been working from home since the beginning of the pandemic, but I come to the office occasionally/I work remotely a few days a week as directed by management.	27	4.07	0.63	0.811	-	-
B: I am working from the office most of the time.	30	4.10	0.62	-	0.05	-
C: I am working from the office all the time.	44	4.16	0.59	-	0.15	0.10
Total	**101**	**4.12**	**0.61**	-	-	-
Absorption						
A: I have been working from home since the pandemic's beginning, but I come to the office occasionally/I work a few days a week remotely as directed by management.	27	3.78	0.59	0.212	-	-
B: I am working from the office most of the time.	30	3.53	0.71	-	0.34	-
C: I am working from the office all the time.	44	3.82	0.76	-	0.05	0.38
Total	**101**	**3.72**	**0.71**	-	-	-

SD, standard deviation; ANOVA, analysis of variance; WFH, work-from-home.
d = 0.2: small effect size; d = 0.5: medium effect size; d = 0.8: large effect size.

Interestingly, these findings concur with a study conducted by Botha and Coetzee (2022), who studied employee engagement and WFH in a debt-collection organisation in Gauteng, South Africa, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors also utilised the UWES questionnaire to quantify employees' level of engagement. They found

TABLE 6: Correlation of age, highest qualification, years working at the university and period working from home with employee engagement.

Factor	Age	Highest qualification	Years working at the university	Period working from home
Vigour				
Correlation coefficient	0.296‡	0.03	0.043	-0.103
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.80	0.666	0.322
N	104.000	102.00	104.000	95.000
Dedication				
Correlation coefficient	0.170	0.02	0.001	-0.051
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.080	0.88	0.993	0.626
N	104.000	102.00	104.000	95.000
Absorption				
Correlation coefficient	0.278‡	0.05	0.205†	-0.072
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.61	0.037	0.491
N	104.000	102.00	104.000	95.000

Note: (1) small effect: $r = 0.1$, (2) medium effect: $r = 0.3$ and (3) large effect: $r > 0.5$.
†, Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
‡, Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

TABLE 7: Correlation between Vigour, Dedication and Absorption.

Factor	Vigour	Dedication	Absorption
Vigour			
Correlation coefficient	1.000	0.710†	0.677†
Sig. (2-tailed)	-	0.000	0.000
N	397.000	396.000	397.000
Dedication			
Correlation coefficient	0.710†	1.000	0.671†
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	-	0.000
N	396.000	396.000	396.000
Absorption			
Correlation coefficient	0.677†	0.671†	1.000
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	-
N	397.000	396.000	397.000

Note: (1) small effect: $r = 0.1$, (2) medium effect: $r = 0.3$ and (3) large effect: $r > 0.5$.
†, Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

that all three factors (vigour, dedication and absorption) scored a mean above 3.7, and secondly, dedication was ranked the highest, followed by vigour and absorption (Botha & Coetzee, 2022).

Concerning this earlier stated fact, the literature review showed that employee engagement during WFH is enhanced by greater levels of autonomy achieved (Mehta, 2021), psychosocial safety experienced (Manjaree & Perera, 2021) and limiting the financial and mental cost of travelling (Wiese et al., 2020). Singh (2020) warned against poor organisational support's impact on WFH engagement. Engagement levels might be negatively affected when organisations do not provide remote employees the requisite infrastructure and support. However, it is concluded that organisational support was offered to respondents of this study, resulting in high levels of engagement.

The study's results can also be understood via the social exchange theory and the Job Demands-Resources model. Regarding the social exchange theory, it is noteworthy that employees have remained engaged through the WFH period as the reciprocal relationship between employee and organisation has been maintained. It is also concluded that academic personnel were provided with adequate organisational support and, in exchange, reciprocated with engagement and commitment to their tasks. Similarly, from a Job Demands-Resources model's perceptive, the organisational support received by the institution afforded academic personnel to work in conducive workspaces with related IT and support infrastructure, thereby enhancing or maintaining their levels of engagement.

The comparison and correlation tests conducted established that gender, marital status, nature of employment, age and tenure affect the engagement levels of personnel. Concerning gender, the independent samples' *t*-test revealed that the male respondents displayed more vigour and dedication during WFH than the female respondents. This study's result is confirmed by Botha et al. (2023) and Romero-Martín et al. (2022); both studies were conducted during the global COVID-19 pandemic. According to Mukhopadhyay (2022) and Stefanova et al. (2021), because of societal gender expectations, tasks such as childbearing, child-rearing and domestic responsibilities rest mainly on women's shoulders. Thus, women find it harder to balance home-life and work-life given their domestic commitments at home. Hence, the authors found that men were afforded greater opportunities to engage in their work than women.

Regarding marital status, the ANOVA results showed that the single respondents displayed lower levels of vigour and dedication than those in a relationship, widowed, divorced and separated and married. This result is supported by researchers such as Rigg et al. (2014) and Zeng et al. (2009), whose studies established that married individuals are more engaged in their work than unmarried individuals. Romero-Martín et al. (2022) also found that employees who were married or lived with a life partner showed higher engagement levels when working from home.

Furthermore, the effect sizes showed that the management staff displayed higher levels of vigour and absorption than the academic and support staff. This finding was interesting to note, as Mvana and Louw (2020) found in their study that employees with more experience and larger portfolios displayed lower levels of engagement (Mvana & Louw, 2020). This can be attributed to the fact that employees at the commencement of their careers

show greater levels of vigour, dedication and absorption than those who are settled or have matured in their careers (Klassen & Chiu, 2010).

Regarding age, Spearman's rank-order correlation found that older academic personnel were more engaged within their roles at the institution than their younger peers. The studies conducted by Botha and Coetzee (2022) and Botha et al. (2023) confirmed this result. However, it contradicts the results of studies undertaken by Cascio et al. (2014), Mvana and Louw (2020) and Romero-Martín et al. (2022), who found that younger employees are more engaged in their work than older employees.

In addition, this study revealed that the longer the tenure of employees in the institution, the more they absorbed themselves in their work. This result contradicts previous studies conducted before the global COVID-19 pandemic (Avery et al., 2007; Coetzee & Rothmann, 2005; Montes & Irving, 2008).

Practical implications

This study contributes to the body of knowledge surrounding employee engagement in the WFH context within the private higher education sphere. The study's results could be used to address the issue of employee engagement during WFH within private higher education in South Africa. As the WFH model has been identified as a model that would be viable for the foreseeable future, the results of this study would be beneficial to private higher education even post the COVID-19 pandemic as many institutions continue remote teaching, learning and assessment. Higher education leaders should teach and promote healthy and engaged workplace cultures in the new world of work through the appropriate adaptations of the recommendations made below.

Limitations

The study focussed on one private higher education institution in South Africa. Therefore, the results cannot be generalised to other private or public higher education institutions worldwide.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are suggested to ensure that the engagement of personnel in higher education is improved and sustained.

Organisational support

The most important engagement strategy is organisational support, given the complexities of WFH. Organisational support allows employees to successfully WFH, and is the most viable engagement strategy in the digital age. Management of organisations should ensure that employees working from home are provided with appropriate guidance on their roles, constant communication, appropriate team building, required ICT infrastructure, and meaningful deliberation is conducted to ensure that employees have conducive spaces to WFH.

Employee wellbeing

Given the anxieties and strain placed on employees working from home, a meaningful focus on employee wellbeing was noted as another viable solution to engagement. Organisations could assist employees by ensuring they are equipped with healthy workspaces, work routines, socialisation opportunities, wellbeing physical and mental practices, and investment in technologies that promote wellbeing by allowing employees to communicate and keep abreast with one another and to recognise employee efforts, for example.

Social union

Although mentioned above as communication, the emphasis on developing a social union cannot be overstated. Organisations should make concerted efforts to ensure that employees experience a sense of belonging to the organisation, are communicated with on shared visions, are confident that their input is trusted and provide them with recognition of their work.

Furthermore, as only a few studies in South Africa reported on employee engagement during the WFH context, and because it is regarded as a viable workplace model for the foreseeable future, it is suggested that the topic be further explored, not only in the private and public higher education sector but also in organisations in the private and public sector. A qualitative study could also provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to explore the levels of engagement of personnel working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown. The study focussed on private higher education personnel in South Africa. The study found that despite the difficulties and anxieties brought about by the radical shifts to WFH, the personnel could still thrive and show high levels of engagement. This was attributed to positive drivers of engagement such as autonomy, psychosocial safety, convenience, social union and, most importantly, organisational support. This helped WFH to be regarded as a viable work arrangement for the foreseeable future. Taking its iterative nature into account, it is recommended that private higher education take note of the suggestions put forward and constantly re-evaluate their strategies to improve, sustain and manage employee engagement successfully.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

N.C. performed the literature review, empirical study and article write-up. C.J.B., D.B. and C.B. contributed towards the article's study design and review.

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Data availability

The data supporting this study's results are available from the corresponding author, C.J.B., upon reasonable request.

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