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Empirical Study on the Human Resource Roles and Functions and they are Managed at a District Council Level Post-Decentralization in Malawi: Case Study of Lilongwe District Council.

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ABSTRACT

The need for fully engaged employees by the Human Resource Department especially in the public sector continues to grow with the growing world population and its demand for quality public service delivery. Public sector organizations such as local councils frequently need to deliver quality services to the citizens through committed and engaged employees. In the context of Malawi, the Local Authority Performance Assessment Report of 2020 revealed some deficiencies related to employee engagement that are contributing to poor service delivery to the communities. Therefore, the main purpose of this study was to investigate the determinants of employee engagement in local councils in Malawi. Specifically, the study investigated the job factors and organization support factors that determine employee engagement in those councils. The study had a quantitative research design with a structured questionnaire which was distributed to 229 employees from the 5 councils and managed to receive back 208 questionnaires representing a 91% response rate. Through the structured questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate their perceptions about 36 elements related to employee engagement on a 5-point Likert scale. The data was largely analysed using an ordered logistic regression, but further analysis was done using multiple regression. The findings of the study revealed that three job factors of job design, work environment and compensation as well as organisational support factors which comprise management support, communication, recognition, training & development, and leadership style all had positive correlation meaning that they have a significant relationship with the dependent variable, employee engagement. However, within these broad factors, meaningful and challenging tasks and responsibilities; collaboration and teamwork; sufficient communication channels; and finally, acknowledging and appreciating employees' efforts and contributions were revealed to have more impact on employee engagement than the rest of the elements. The study has recommended that the councils should revisit the current human resource practices and strive to improve all elements that affect the engagement of employees as revealed in this study. Further studies were recommended on employee engagement between two or more public sector institutions in the country to see if their results would support the findings of this study. Furthermore, to address the rigidity associated with quantitative research methods, future research can also be undertaken on the same with a mixed methodological approach which would enable the respondents to suggest other factors, if any, that may influence employee engagement.

Keywords: Employee engagement; job factors; organisational support factors; job design; work environment; compensation; management support.

Introduction

The need for fully engaged employees by the Human Resource Department, particularly in the public sector, continues to grow with the rapid increase in the world's population and the rising demand for quality public service delivery. Public sector organisations such as local councils are expected to provide efficient and reliable services to citizens, and this mandate can only be achieved through the efforts of committed and engaged employees. Employee engagement, therefore, has become a critical human resource management concern, as it directly influences the quality, timeliness, and sustainability of service delivery.

In the context of Malawi, issues of employee engagement have increasingly drawn attention. The Local Authority Performance Assessment Report of 2020 revealed several deficiencies within local councils, many of which were linked to low levels of employee engagement. These deficiencies have contributed to poor service delivery, undermining the ability of councils to meet community needs effectively. Such findings underscore the urgency of understanding the factors that determine engagement levels among employees in decentralised governance structures.

Against this background, the main purpose of this study was to investigate the determinants of employee engagement in local councils in Malawi. Specifically, the study examined two broad sets of determinants: job factors and organisational support factors. Job factors included elements such as job design, meaningful work, work environment, and compensation, while organisational support factors covered management support, communication, recognition, training and development, and leadership style. The study sought to establish how these factors collectively and individually influence employee engagement in the local council context.

The research adopted a quantitative design, which allowed for systematic data collection and statistical analysis. A structured questionnaire was distributed to 229 employees drawn from five selected councils. Out of these, 208 questionnaires were successfully completed and returned, representing an impressive response rate of 91 percent. This high rate of participation enhanced the representativeness of the data and strengthened the reliability of the study's findings.

Respondents were asked to provide their perceptions regarding 36 elements of employee engagement, using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This measurement scale enabled the quantification of attitudes and perceptions, making them suitable for regression analysis. The data were primarily analysed using ordered logistic regression, which is appropriate for ordinal dependent variables such as employee engagement. Additional analysis was conducted using multiple regression to assess the relative contributions of the 36 individual elements to engagement levels.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Some scholars have stated that the subject of employee engagement under the roles HR is regarded as an important area of study in management theory and practice although there are still some differences in the way they define the concept, theory, influencing factors and outcomes (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019). The concept of Human Resource has been defined by different authors in different ways. One of the main thinkers, Kahn (1990), defined it as the harnessing of organisation members themselves to their work roles. The main theme emphasised in this definition is the bond that exists between employees and their respective work roles.

With various definitions, employee is linked to the passion individuals have for their work (Truss et al., 2011). Furthermore, employee engagement is considered as a concept that portrays the amount of enthusiasm and sense of purpose on the job. This is demonstrated by employees through the level of their persistence, dedication, effort as well as attachment to the organisation and its mission and vision (Smith et al., 2020). The concept of engagement is also associated with the emotional commitment that employees feel and demonstrate in their jobs and organisations and the actions they take which result in the organisation's success (Chika & Odunayo, 2021).

All these definitions also correspond to the notion emphasised by the definition propounded by Kahn and Gallup, portraying that engagement is all about the bond that exists between the employee and the job. Therefore, an engaged employee usually produces results, has less intentions to quit the job and more importantly, is an ambassador to the organisation, advocating its goodwill to other stakeholders (Chandani et al., 2016).

Khajura and Khan (2022) presented another definition of employee engagement by researchers like Schaufeli et al., (2001) which says that engagement is a positive, rewarding and work-related state characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption. This definition presents three facets of employee engagement. The first facet is vigour and they defined it as the self-inspired enthusiasm

Applied to one's job and tasks. Vigour is also associated with one's heightened mental resilience and energy during execution of daily job tasks and is persistent no matter how difficult the situation might be. The second facet propounded in this definition of employee engagement is dedication. In this case dedication is looked at it as a feeling of being proud, worth, challenging and passionate in one's job. The third and last facet is absorption and is defined as the state of being fully focused and deeply rooted in one's work. When an employee is in this state, time passes without realizing and, in short, one finds it difficult to detach oneself from work. These three facets present another perspective of the concept of employee engagement.

However, employee engagement has many dimensional constructs (Dzimhiri & Molefi, 2022). It has proven to be a multi-faceted construct with several authors portraying in their definitions that employee engagement goes beyond an employee and their job, to covering other concepts such as loyalty to the organisation, discretionary efforts (employee behaviour), commitment (employee attitudes), enthusiasm, motivation, and job satisfaction (employee feelings), conditions of work and organisation support (CIPD, 2021). Other authors state that employee engagement occurs when people at work are interested in and excited about their jobs to such an extent that they are prepared to go the extra mile to get the jobs done to the best of their ability. Furthermore, referred to the loyalty people have towards their organisations as the organisational commitment (Armstrong, 2009).

Therefore, critically reviewing these definitions, it can be noted that in other aspects, employee engagement has been perceived as a concept that exceeds the boundary of employees and their work roles, covering organisational concepts and other human resource concepts. Thus, employee engagement is synonymous with organisational commitment, motivation, job satisfaction and discretionary efforts.

However, by critically analysing the arguments these different proponents articulated, it is well presented that the concepts are not the same, with organisational commitment denoting the attachment and loyalty employees have towards their organisations, while employee engagement is associated with the job, sometimes being referred to as job engagement (Armstrong, 2009). Other authors have stated that employee engagement is not the same as other known employee outcomes like job satisfaction which is simply an indication of the employee's well-being (Bakker,

2011). Employee engagement goes further to combine one's high excitement and activeness on the job. Engagement also differs from employee commitment, which just refers to an individual's attitude and attachment towards the organisation. Yet, employee engagement is more than attitude. It goes further to look at the level at which an employee is attentive, attached and absorbed in the day-to-day performance of the assigned tasks (Jin & McDonald, 2016).

Since engaged employees are always prepared to go the extra mile to get their jobs done, other authors have also entangled employee engagement with discretionary efforts. Armstrong (2009) argued by suggesting that there is only a close relationship between high levels of engagement and discretionary

behaviour that is positive, but these two are not synonymous. This shows that positive discretionary behaviour is perceived as a sign of engaged employees as it is more likely to happen when there is a strong bond between employees and their work. And this corresponds with what Lipman (2020) suggested in his article. The author marked good and open communication, voluntary efforts, exceeding goals and expectations, and referring friends to the organisation, as other signs of employee engagement in addition to exhibiting discretionary efforts. Therefore, with this argument, discretionary efforts and employee engagement were also disentangled.

Theoretical framework

Literature states that there is no special theoretical framework that explains employee engagement so far. As a result, different researchers have used different theoretical frameworks to explain the concept of employee engagement (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019). As such, this study was guided mostly by two related theoretical frameworks, the Social Exchange Theory (SET), and the

Organisation Support Theory (OST). However, the study was also supported by Kahn's theory of employee engagement.

Homan (1958) was the first person to propose the idea 'social behaviour as exchange' and was linked to voluntary actions of employees that are motivated by the expected returns. The assumption of the theory is that social behaviours are influenced by the expected social exchange of values. Therefore, the Social Exchange Theory is a framework that helps to explain employee engagement in the workplace. The theory suggests that employees in the workplace engage in work-related activities because they expect to receive various benefits in exchange for the efforts, such as financial compensation, career advancement, social status, recognition and respect (Eisenberger et al., 2020). This means that employee engagement is influenced by the balance of social exchange between the employee and the organisation. When employees see that their work and efforts are valued by management and that in reciprocity, they gain adequate rewards and recognition for their work, they are more likely to be engaged and committed to their work and the organisation. On the other hand, if the employees observe that their work and efforts are undervalued, or that they are not receiving adequate rewards, they become disengaged and less committed to their work and the organisation which results in poor performance of the organisation (Wushe & Shenje, 2019). Much as it has been criticised as being too simplistic with the understanding that what employees may want in a contractual relationship can be quite complex, the social exchange theory is quite relevant to the study because it corresponds to the second objective of examining the job factors that influence employee engagement. Hence, the study was aimed at examining local council employees' perceptions of their jobs to see whether they are happy or not with the job content, the work environment, compensation, rewards, and recognition.

The Organisation Support Theory is a well-established framework that explains how employees' perception of organisational support affects their engagement and job satisfaction. It was first propounded by Eisenberger et al., (1986). According to this theory, employees who have the feeling that their organisation appreciates their work and efforts, but also puts the welfare of the employees at its heart and is committed to ensuring their success are more likely to be engaged in their work (Kurtessis et al., 2017). The theory suggests that employees' perceptions of support can be influenced by a variety of factors, including the organisation's communication practices, leadership style, reward and recognition programs, training and development opportunities and overall organisation culture (Armstrong, 2009). Issues of employee coaching and mentorship programmes by their supervisors and managers also influences their perception of organisation support which has a bearing on the work engagement. The Organisation Support Theory is fully supported by the findings of the study conducted by Jangsiriwattana (2021) which was about the relationship between Perceived Organisational Support (POS) and work engagement. The study concluded that there is an association between POS and employee work engagement. Employees value the support they obtain from an organisation and the way the organisation cares about them and their wellbeing. When the employees perceive that the organisation is supportive in various ways, they are more likely to feel a sense of attachment to the organisation and the willingness to exert extra effort to achieve the organisation's goals. However, if the organisation is not supportive enough, the employees become helpless and disengaged from the organisation. Going further from an employee perspective, the Organisation Support Theory highlights the importance of creating a work environment that brings about open communication, trust and mutual respect between employees and the organisation. Employers can enhance employee engagement by investing in their workforce through training and development, recognition programs and other initiatives that demonstrate the organisation's commitment to its workforce. In summary, this theory suggests that when employees are satisfied that their efforts are valued and supported, there is more likelihood that they will be highly engaged and satisfied in their work, leading to improved performance and outcomes for both the employees and the employer. Therefore, this theory is very relevant to this study because it is related to the second specific objective which is to explore how the organisational support factors in local councils affect employee engagement.

Finally, there is also Kahn's theory of employee engagement. After defining employee engagement as the employees' ability to harness their full self at work, Kahn (1990) further developed a theory of employee engagement which argues that there are three psychological conditions that influence employee engagement. The first psychological condition is meaningfulness. According to Kahn (1990), this condition presents the notion that employees cannot engage their selves if they do not find their jobs meaningful enough to their wellbeing, organisation and the society at large. Kahn went further to explain that the second psychological condition is about safety. It presents the idea that employees engage themselves fully in their jobs when they feel safe such that they can work without any dangers of risks and negative consequences. This brings about the importance of health and safety in the workplace more especially the physical work environment which should be free from any hazard. The third and final psychological condition in Kahn's theory is availability. Under this Psychological condition, Kahn propounded that for employees to engage themselves fully in their jobs, they must feel physically and mentally stable to harness their full self at any particular moment. Henceforth, in the interview conducted in 2015, Kahn summarised that managers need to approach their employees as true partners and involve them in continuous processes and dialogues about how to design and alter their roles, tasks, and working relationships.

These three theoretical frameworks support each other, and they have provided a guide to this research study which was aimed at exploring factors that determine employee engagement in local councils in Malawi.

Literature indicates that the HR functions can be determinants and categorised into three groups: job factors of work environment, job design and participation; organisational support factors which include leadership, management support, and job resources; and finally, the individual factors which include extraversion, resilience, and self-consciousness (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019). However, this study was focused on two categories of determinants, job factors and organisational support factors. Indeed, various factors impact the levels of engagement at the workplace. Other authors refer to these factors as drivers of engagement (Chandani et al., 2016). They include but are not limited to job design, work environment, communication, management support, remuneration and other benefits, employee recognition, training, and development, as well as career development (Niraula, 2020).

Mansor et al., (2018) stated that although drivers of employee engagement are common to all organisations, the engagement level can vary depending on demographic and job-related factors. Some factors are basic or contractual to organisations and they include hygiene factors such as pay, benefits, health and safety. However, other factors are compulsory because they motivate employees to go an extra mile in performing their tasks. These factors include effective communication, leadership and cooperation. Based on these factors and the way they are being implemented in an organisation, employees can be found experiencing three levels of engagement. On the first level are employees who are engaged and will work with passion towards achieving the organisation's goals. On the second level are employees who are not engaged but can be seen to be performing their duties with little or no passion and energy. On the third level are disengaged employees who are not happy at all in their jobs and are seen demonstrating negative discretionary behaviour (Chandani et al., 2016). This study was aimed at investigating the job factors as well as organisational support factors that determine and impact employee engagement in the local councils of Malawi. Therefore, below is a detailed literature review of some of these factors.

Research Methodology

Research philosophy and approach

Positivism was the philosophy behind this research as the researcher remained independent of study and only facts were used to deduce results. As such, the research took a deductive approach linked to the conceptual framework and hypotheses provided. The study was focused on examining the Empirical Study on the Human Resource Roles and Functions and they are managed at a District Council Level Post-Decentralization in Malawi. The study's null hypotheses presented several job factors and organisation support factors as independent variables with claims that the factors do not significantly influence 'employee engagement' which is the dependent variable. The study adopted a quantitative approach such that both research questions were answered quantitatively using a 5-point Likert Scale. The quantitative approach becomes appropriate in a study that is going to use structured tools to generate numerical data (Wushe & Shenje, 2019).

Population

All items in any field of enquiry constitute a 'universe' or 'population'. A population constitutes all potential participants to whom the researcher wants to conduct the research for the study. This study focused on public employees working in the local councils in Malawi. There are 35 councils in Malawi which make up the unit of analysis and the employees working in these councils constitute the population and they were the potential participants of this study. However, it is very difficult and involving investigating the whole population due to such constraints as time, money, and energy. As such the researcher selected five councils where the study was going to be conducted. The following section explains more about the selection criteria.

Sampling design

Sampling is a process of identifying participants from the population so that conclusions can be drawn from measurements taken from the portion of that population. In other words, a sample is a subset of a larger population (Zikmund et al., 2005). Therefore, this study used a stratified random sampling procedure. As stated in the preceding section, there are 35 councils in Malawi which constitute the sampling units of this study. The councils are already categorised into two by the Ministry of Local Government. There are 7 urban councils which comprise 4 city councils, 2 municipalities 1 town council, and 28 district councils (Ministry of Local Government & Rural Development, 2020). Therefore, each category is a stratum on its own where sampling units can be drawn. In this case, the ratio between the urban councils and district councils is 1:4 (7/28). Therefore, the study needed to be carried out in at least one urban council and four district councils. The choice of the actual councils to participate in the study was based on their performance (both poor and average) as reported in the Local Authority Performance Assessment Report of 2020. Blantyre District Council and Dowa were among the six councils that had average performance while Karonga was one of the three councils that had unacceptable performance. On the other hand, Chiradzulu was one of the councils that were just between the scale (Ministry of Local Government & Rural Development, 2020). These four districts complete the selection of the district councils. For the urban councils, Blantyre City Council has been selected randomly to participate in the study. As such 5 sampling units were identified in this manner to participate in the study. The distribution of population from the 5 councils is as follows: - Blantyre District – 102 employees, Dowa – 79 employees; Karonga – 69 employees; Chiradzulu – 60 employees; and finally, Blantyre

City has 223 employees giving a total of 533 employees. Therefore, using Slovin's formula ($n = N / (1 + Ne^2)$), a sample size of 229 employees was determined to participate in the investigation. As stated earlier, sampling is a process of identifying participants from the population so that conclusions can be drawn on measurements taken from the portion of that population. Therefore, to ensure that there is a true representation of the population, the

229-sample size was distributed proportionally based on the percentages of population distribution in the 5 councils. Hence, Blantyre District had 44 respondents, Dowa had 34, Karonga got 30, Chiradzulu got 25, and finally Blantyre City had 96 respondents. Table 1 summarises this information.

Table 1: Population and sample size by council

District	Population	%	Sample Size	% of total sample size
Blantyre District	102	19%	44	19%
Dowa District	79	15%	34	15%
Karonga District	69	13%	30	13%
Chiradzulu District	60	11%	25	11%
Blantyre City	223	42%	96	42%
Total	533	100%	229	100%

Data collection method

Research is about collecting and analysing data to obtain answers to research questions. There are two types of data, primary (data obtained for the first time) and secondary data (use of already available data in the form of journals, reports, and others). In this study, the researcher collected primary data through a structured questionnaire purposively designed to capture quantitative responses using a survey method to reach out to the sample size. The quantitative approach involves the generation of data in quantitative form which can be subjected to rigorous quantitative analysis formally and rigidly (Kothari, 2004). As such, all the two research questions of this study were answered quantitatively. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire on a 5-point Likert Scale focusing on the employees' perception regarding the determinants of employee engagement in their workstations as depicted in the conceptual framework as well as the hypotheses. In total, the respondents were presented with 36 items regarding the various aspects of their jobs, work environment and organisation support. The respondents were asked to rank each item on a 5-point Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Before commencing the survey, a pilot study was conducted to test the questionnaires for reliability and validity. This is a very important exercise as it brings to light weaknesses (if any) of the questionnaire such that improvements can be made before the real study is conducted (Kothari, 2004).

Data analysis

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse data collected from the research questions through ordered logistic regression in Stata version 17 to establish how the set of variables was able to predict a particular outcome at a 0.05 significance level. Ordered Logistic Regression is used when the dependent variable is ordered but not continuous. In this study, the dependent variable which is 'employee engagement' had three values of 1, 2 and 3 indicating low employee engagement (described as disengaged employees in the literature review); then moderate employee engagement (described as 'not engaged employees'); and finally, high employee engagement (described simply as 'engaged employees'). Section A, question 1 of the questionnaire helped to collect data which was used to test the hypotheses to achieve the specific objectives of the study.

This being an ordered logistic regression analysis, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statements about a set of predictor variables (independent variables) using a 5-point Likert Scale, where 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; and 5 = strongly agree.

The study carried out further analysis of the 36 elements that contribute to engagement using multiple regression analysis. The elements were first coded properly before being fed into the regression model. The purpose of this action was to measure and see which elements were contributing more to employee engagement than others. This information assisted in bringing out the key human resource practices that the councils must maintain but also pointed out the areas that require more attention and improvement.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Respondents' characteristics

The sample size for the study was 229 respondents from the selected 5 local councils in Malawi. However, 208 questionnaires out of 229 were received from the respondents which represents a 91% response rate. For cross-sectional surveys, a response rate of 85% and above is regarded as excellent for making adequate statistical analysis because such a high rate ensures that the survey data are representative of the population being studied (Seastrom, 2001). This means the study's response rate of 91% is good enough to make meaningful conclusions. Table 2 gives a summary of the respondents' characteristics.

Table 2: Respondents' characteristics

Variable	Description	Frequency	Percentage	Total Percentage
Position	Janitor	18	8.65%	100%
	Clerk	50	24.04%	
	Senior Officer	112	53.85%	
	Manager	28	13.46%	
Department	Administration	74	35.58%	100%
	Finance	39	18.75%	
	Human Resources	24	11.54%	
	Planning & Dev	32	15.38%	
	Public works	29	13.94%	
	Others	10	4.81%	
Length of Service	1 – 5yrs	60	28.85%	100%
	6 – 10yrs	41	19.71%	
	11 – 15yrs	41	19.71%	
	16 – 20yrs	28	13.46%	
	21yrs & above	38	18.27%	
Age	18 – 25yrs	17	8.17%	100%
	26 – 45yrs	135	64.91%	
	46yrs & above	56	26.92%	

N=208

Job factors that influence employee engagement

According to the literature, three job factors influence employee engagement: - job design, work environment and compensation. The factors were analysed through ordered logistic regression using Stata version 17. From these three job factors, the study tested three null hypotheses as follows: -

1. Job design does not significantly influence employee engagement.
2. Work environment does not significantly influence employee engagement. iii. Compensation does not significantly influence employee engagement.

Below are the results for each factor: -

Job design against employee engagement**Table 3:** Job design and employee engagement

Ordered logistic regression.	Number of obs. = 208					
	LR chi2(1) = 41.57					
Log likelihood = - 419.22441	Prob > chi2 = 0.0000					
	Pseudo R2 = 0.0472					
Engagement Level	Coefficient	Std. err.	z	P> z	[95% conf. interval]	
Job Design	.3017457	.0474943	6.35	0.000	.2086587	.3948328

Table 3 indicates that the number of observations is 208. The LR Chi-squared test with a value of 41.57 (p-value = 0.000) shows that the model fits well with the data. In this case, since the p-value is less than the given level of significance (0.05) then we can say that job design is statistically significant. For one unit increase in Job Design, there is an expectation of a 0.302 increase in the log odds of a higher employee level of engagement. Furthermore, the Pseudo R² which has a value of 0.0472 indicates that the independent variable of job design explains only about 4.72% of the changes in the dependent variable, employee engagement level. The null hypothesis was:

H0: Job design does not significantly influence employee engagement.

Based on the results of the p-value, the study rejected this null hypothesis and concluded that job design significantly influences Employee engagement. This finding collaborates with the results of a study conducted by Bashawir et al. (2019) in Malaysia on the role of job crafting on employee engagement. This was quantitative research with 300 sample size. PLS-SEM version 3 was used to analyse the data. The findings of the study concluded that job crafting has an important influence on employee engagement levels.

4.3.2 Work environment against employee engagement

Table 4: Work environment and employee engagement as HR function

Ordered logistic regression.	Number of obs. = 208					
Log likelihood = - 427.03391	LR chi2(1) = 25.95					
	Prob > chi2 = 0.0000					
	Pseudo R ² = 0.0295					
Engagement Level	Coefficient	Std. err.	Z	P> z	[95% conf. interval]	
Work Environment	.1684479	.0333271	5.05	0.000	.1031279	.2337678

Table 4 shows that the number of observations is 208. The LR Chi-squared test with a value of 25.95 (p-value = 0.000) shows that the model fits well with the data. Work Environment is statistically significant. In this case, for any unit increase or improvement in the Work Environment, there is an expectation of a 0.168 increase in the log odds of a higher employee level of engagement. The Pseudo R² which has a value of 0.0295 indicates that the independent variable of work environment explains only about 2.95% of the changes in the dependent variable, employee engagement level. The null hypothesis was:

H0: Work environment does not significantly influence employee engagement.

Hence, the study rejected this null hypothesis and concluded that the work environment significantly influences employee engagement because the p-value is less than the significance level (0.05). This result fully collaborates with the findings of Niraula (2020) who conducted a study on determinants of employee engagement in Nepalese media and concluded that, amongst other factors, participatory organisation culture, working tools, equipment and facilities, and job resources which are key ingredients in the work environment were revealed as key determining factors that influence employee engagement. This is also in line with another study conducted by Hasinthan and Ali (2021) in Sri Lanka on the relationship between occupational health and safety and employee engagement which concluded that there is a significant and strong relationship between occupational health and safety and employee engagement. Health and safety being one of the dimensions of work environment. The finding is also supported by the study conducted by Mansoor and Hassan (2016) on factors influencing employee engagement in a Telecommunication Network provider in Maldives, which revealed that teamwork and collaboration, amongst others, have a positive impact on employee engagement. Teamwork and collaboration are also another dimension of work environment.

Compensation against employee engagement

Table 5: Compensation and employee engagement

Ordered logistic regression.	Number of obs. = 208					
Log likelihood = - 429.4582	LR chi2(1) = 21.10					
	Prob > chi2 = 0.0000					
	Pseudo R ² = 0.0240					
Engagement Level	Coefficient	Std. err.	z	P> z	[95% conf. interval]	
Compensation	.1590143	.0351323	4.53	0.000	.0901563	.2278723

Recommendations

From this investigative study, the findings present some take-home messages to the Management of local councils concerning the way they implement the various human resource practices in the councils. First, the findings of the study have brought to light four key elements that are more significant to employee engagement.

Firstly, the councils can assign tasks and responsibilities that are meaningful and challenging to employees and this is making a positive impact on their engagement. However, the Management of local councils in Malawi needs to do more. They should provide the employees with enough autonomy and decision-making authority in their jobs and the workload must be manageable. The employees should also be given enough opportunities to use their skills and abilities effectively.

Secondly, the councils are also doing well in fostering collaboration and teamwork amongst employees which is contributing positively to their engagement. However, the councils must improve the physical work environment in which employees operate. The employees should be given adequate office space with enough working facilities that can support their productivity.

Thirdly, much as the communication channels within the council, for example, meetings and emails are efficient, the councils must strive to provide regular and timely feedback to the employees concerning their performance as well as in all matters relating to their work. Furthermore, management should ensure that there is a smooth information flow across different levels and departments.

Fourthly, the councils are doing well in acknowledging and appreciating the employees' efforts and contributions. However, this must be coupled with recognition programs to celebrate employees' achievements. The councils should adopt fair and transparent performance evaluation systems and ensure that employees' efforts and performance are properly rewarded.

Going further, the study has shown that the councils are not doing well on variables that comprise management support. Management of councils needs to orient supervisors of subordinates so that they are aware of the need to maintain proper coordination and rapport with their subordinates. Supervisors should not be too far away from their subordinates and yet not too close to them. They should be able to maintain the distance required between a manager and the employee. In so doing, they will be able to provide clear expectations and direction for the work. Supervisors need to be approachable and supportive to their subordinates and must always provide constructive feedback and guidance for further improvement of the subordinate's performance. The support that managers give to their subordinates influences the levels of employee engagement.

Another area where councils are not doing well is the issue of training and development. Every employee wants to be given opportunities to acquire more skills and knowledge and develop abilities to reach their potential. This helps them to grow in their careers. Therefore, councils should strive within the scarce resources to provide the necessary training to the employees so that they can perform their duties effectively. Another way of training is to encourage and provide opportunities for employees to attend workshops, seminars, and conferences relevant to their duties. As Dessler (2013) stated, training and career development play an important role in engaging and retaining employees.

The study has shown that the councils are also not doing well on variables under leadership style as an organisational support factor. Currently, the employees in the councils are not adequately inspired and motivated by their managers. As a result, employees are not getting that positive influence that can push them to achieve the desired results. Therefore, management of the councils should properly use their leadership skills that enhance good relationships among employees, generate a positive organisation climate, improve service performance, and modify behavioural outcomes. Council management should ensure that they can promote open communication, empowerment, support, and shared vision to generate a positive impact on employee engagement. The successful implementation of effective strategies that promote employee engagement depends on the leadership style, managerial efforts and behaviours being demonstrated. Leadership style dictates the overall organisation climate and atmosphere which affects the employee's performance either positively or negatively depending on their perception of the organisation climate.

The adoption and implementation of these recommendations, leading to the improvement of all elements and variables under this study, will further enhance employee engagement in the councils and reduce employees' intentions to leave. Increased employee engagement levels would result in improved service delivery which is a key ingredient in the performance of local councils.

Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to investigate the determinants of employee engagement in local councils in Malawi. Within this main theme, two specific objectives guided the whole study as presented below which were to:

1. Establish the job factors that determine and impact employee engagement in the councils.
2. Examine the organisational support factors that also determine and impact employee engagement in the councils.

To achieve these two specific objectives, the study tested eight null hypotheses that were drawn from the literature review which had the claims that job design, work environment, compensation, management support, communication, recognition, training & development, and leadership style do not have any influence on employee engagement.

After testing the hypotheses, the study rejected all the eight null hypotheses and concluded that job design, work environment, compensation, management support, communication, recognition, training & development, and leadership style all have a positive contribution to employee engagement. This outcome collaborates with the findings of similar studies about determinants of employee engagement (Wushe & Shenje, 2019; Sanneh & Jaj, 2015).

However, since there were many elements (33) that constituted the job and organisational support factors being investigated, the study went further to analyse the individual elements to single out the ones that are contributing more to the engagement levels of the employees in the councils. A significant finding from this analysis revealed that one element under job design (meaningful and challenging tasks and responsibilities); another element under work environment (collaboration and teamwork); another element under communication (communication channels); and finally, an element under recognition (acknowledgement and appreciation of employees' efforts and contributions), had outstanding significant impacts on the dependent variable, employee engagement. This is a unique contribution to the study of employee engagement because most of the studies about determinants of employee engagement have just ended with broad factors without analysing the specific elements under those broad factors. However, Sun and Bunchapattanasakda (2019) stated that employee engagement practices do not necessarily work in the same manner for all employees in all countries due to cultural diversities. Therefore, for the local councils in Malawi, we can conclude that the key determinants of employee engagement are job design, work environment, compensation, management support, communication, recognition, training & development, and leadership style. However, within these broad factors, meaningful and challenging tasks and responsibilities; collaboration and teamwork; sufficient communication channels; and finally, acknowledging and appreciating employees' efforts and contributions are having more impact than the rest of the elements.

The social exchange theory, being one of the theories which guided this study, suggests that employees in the workplace engage in work-related activities because they expect to receive various benefits in exchange for their efforts, such as financial compensation, career advancement, social status, recognition and respect (Eisenberger et al., 2020). This means that employee engagement is influenced by the balance of social exchange between the employee and the organisation. In this case, because employees in councils perceive that there is meaningfulness in their work and that their efforts and contributions are acknowledged by management, they are quite engaged in their respective jobs.

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