

# Unleashing Employee Engagement: Exploring the Influence of Human Resource Practices in a Local Municipality in South Africa

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## Abstract

*This research investigates the potential of human resource policies to increase employee engagement in a South African local government municipality. The research employed qualitative naturalistic interpretive methods with semi-structured interviews as data collection tools. Data was collected from ten participants code-named P1 to P10. The study was guided by three core questions: i). What are the current HR practices within the studied Municipality, and how do employees perceive them? To what extent do these HR practices influence employee engagement levels? iii). What recommendations can be made to enhance HR practices to improve employee engagement? Findings revealed among others that recruitment and selection, training and development, performance management systems, and employee recognition influenced employee engagement in the municipality. The research suggests that the municipality should support professional development alongside transparent hiring practices and fair performance management as well as reasonable employee appreciation. It also recommends establishing positive workplace culture together with work-life balance programmes to increase employee engagement. Additionally, it was recommended that municipal managers should establish HR strategies which support all employees and fulfill their needs to build a positive workplace environment. By incorporating these elements into their HR strategy, the municipality can enhance employee engagement, leading to better performance and service delivery. This research demonstrates how HR strategies in local governments enable organisations to enhance employee morale and workplace engagement.*

**Keywords:** Employee engagement, Human Resource Practices, Local municipality, South Africa.

## Background

Employee engagement has become a pivotal component of organizational success, particularly in the public sector, where employee engagement significantly impacts the effectiveness of service delivery and the overall well-being of the community. Engaged employees are passionate, and passionate workers contribute to the achievement of organizational outcomes (Kahn, 1990). In the current study, the researchers explore how Human Resource Practices in a local municipality in South Africa can unlock employee engagement. According to Al Haziazi (2024), employee engagement is specific and can be applied differently in each organization. It is argued that an organisation and its employees have a mutual relationship where both depend on each other to achieve their respective goals. Therefore, engagement cannot be something that happens once in a while. Moreover, employee engagement can have several benefits for an organization and a municipality in the context of this study. Having happy and contented employees who are in the right jobs and are present at work is a good way of ensuring that they are engaged. As pointed out by Banhwa et al. (2024), employers have realized that their employees are critical to the success of their business.

However, in the public sector, employees are not yet recognised as valuable assets and no strategies regarding employee engagement are in place. In the public sector, employees, in so far as they view their work as calling rather than merely a job, are generally considered to be self-motivated and are thus seen as not requiring employee engagement strategies to ensure their continued engagement. Ngwane and Dachapalli (2022) argue that employees in the South African public sector and globally are crucial resources for providing services to citizens, as mandated by the constitution, despite the public sector's limited use of digital or automated services. It must be noted that public sector employees are not well paid in terms of salaries, and yet some are motivated to work. This is what Ali and Anwar (2021) refer to as intrinsic factors that motivate public service employees, which encompass the perceived meaningfulness of their job, expressed in terms of their drive towards prosocial activities and the desire to serve the public. Despite

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intrinsic motivation by public sector employees, the government must take employee wellness seriously as part of the overall strategic vision for municipalities, as intrinsic motivators are not the only source of motivation, driving employee engagement.

According to Alzyoud (2018), HRM practices influence employee work engagement. The implication is that employers must develop effective and well-structured HRM policies to achieve high work engagement levels among employees. Effective HR strategies, including selective recruitment, comprehensive training programmes, and performance management systems, can create an environment where employees feel valued and supported. According to Boxall and Purcell (2016), well-designed HR systems foster high levels of commitment and productivity, positioning employees to contribute meaningfully to their organisations. By aligning HR practices with the psychological conditions necessary for engagement meaningfulness, safety, and availability (Kahn, 1990), organisations can enhance the psychological contract between them and their employees, leading to improved organisational outcomes. Research indicates that caring HRM practices can elevate employee engagement by fostering an environment of trust and support (Saks, 2022; Lewis, 2020). Work motivation, job satisfaction, and employee performance underscore the importance of maintaining high engagement levels to enhance overall performance (Riyanto, Endri, & Herlisha, 2021). The relationship between HRM practices, employee engagement, and turnover intentions also emphasises the need for strategic alignment in HRM to improve retention outcomes (Cooke, Schuler & Varma, 2020; Sepahvand & Bagherzadeh Khodashahri, 2021). As organisations navigate the complexities of an evolving workforce landscape, recognising the factors contributing to employee engagement will be crucial for fostering a resilient and productive environment. Additionally, the impact of artificial intelligence on psychological contracts and employee trust as documented by Braganza et al. (2021) further highlights the intricate dynamics of employee engagement in a technology-driven era.

Govender and Bussin (2020) argue that the biggest challenge leaders in municipalities face is, how to construct employee engagement culture and leverage it to drive performance. How to make employee engagement effective for behavioural change and operational performance improvement. Engaged employees see themselves as capable of dealing with demanding jobs and are connected to their work activities. The connection between employer and employee gives an organisation a competitive advantage over another. The value people contribute cannot be imitated or duplicated by competitors. Given that the levels of engagement differ, organisational cultures differ, employees differ in how they adapt to change, and leadership styles are not the same from one organisation to another – all these factors must be considered to make both performance management and employee engagement work. A “one size fits all” approach to enabling engagement in the local municipality is ineffective because levels of engagement and its drivers vary according to the organisation, employee group, the individual, and the job itself.

This study investigates the influence of human resource practices on employee engagement within a local government Municipality in Gauteng, South Africa. This study intends to establish how employee engagement can be unleashed through the influence of Human Resource Practices in a Local Municipality in South Africa. The research addresses the following questions: i). What HR practices exist within Emfuleni Municipality, and how do employees perceive them? ii). How do these HR practices influence employee engagement levels? iii). What recommendations and strategies can be employed to enhance HR practices and unleash employee engagement through improved HR practices?

## **CONTEXT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC SECTOR CHALLENGES IN SOUTH AFRICA**

The available literature on employee engagement and human resource management presents a complex interplay of different factors that affect organisational dynamics. Municipalities in South Africa while trying to solve systemic problems, should know and use HR practices that work. Many studies have been done on the relationship between HR practices and employee engagement. Hence, it is argued that optimal HR practices such as communication, training and development of employees, and recognition of employees' work are key to higher levels of engagement (Karam et al., 2017; Alzyoud, 2018). For example, Cooke, Schuler and Varma (2020) argued that HR practices such as open communication and participation in decision-making enhance engagement, thus supporting the argument that HR practices are related to

employee outcomes. Moreover, the role of leadership in determining employee engagement has been recognised, and transformational leadership has been found to have a positive effect on engagement levels (Schaufeli, 2015; Ducoypere, 2019). Previous research has established that companies with high levels of employee engagement achieve better performance, customer satisfaction, and business results (Finnegard, 2021).

## Local municipality

According to the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa (2019), the government has the responsibility to make policies and laws about the rights and responsibilities of citizens and the delivery of government services. The government collects revenue (income) from taxes and uses this money to provide services and infrastructure that improve the lives of all the people in the country, particularly the poor. The spheres of government are autonomous and should not be seen as hierarchical. The Constitution says: The spheres of government are distinctive, interrelated, and interdependent. At the same time, they all operate according to the Constitution and laws and policies made by the national Parliament (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2019). The provincial or local government may not do anything that is against the laws or policies set down by the national government. The provincial government gets most of its money from the national government through Treasury. The local government also gets grants and some loans through the Treasury. The Department of Provincial and Local Government (which resides at the national level) is responsible for the national coordination of provinces and municipalities (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2019). In every province, the provincial Departments of Local Government monitor and support municipalities (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2019).

## Role, powers and functions of local municipalities in South Africa

South Africa is divided into local municipalities. There are 231 local municipalities, and each is broken into wards. The residents in each ward are represented by ward Councilors (Education and Training Unit for Democracy and Development, 2025). Each municipality has a council where decisions are taken, and municipal officials and staff implement the work of the municipality. The Council consists of elected members who approve policies and by-laws for their area. The Council must pass a budget for its municipality each year. They must also decide on development plans and service delivery for their municipal area. The work of the Council is coordinated by a mayor is elected by the Council (Education and Training Unit for Democracy and Development, 2025). The mayor with the Executive or Mayoral Committee also oversees the work of the municipal manager and department heads. In some very small municipalities, the whole Council forms the executive – called a Plenary Executive. Municipality work is performed by the municipal administration headed by the municipal manager and other officials. S/he is responsible for employing staff and coordinating them to implement all programmes approved by the Council (Education and Training Unit for Democracy and Development, 2025).

## Functions of municipalities

Municipalities are responsible for the following functions: electricity delivery, sewage and sanitation, refuse removal, municipal health services, municipal roads, street trading, parks and recreational areas, local tourism, water for household use, stormwater systems, firefighting services, decisions around land use, municipal public transport, abattoirs and fresh food markets, Libraries and other facilities (Education and Training Unit for Democracy and Development, 2025).

## Challenges within the local municipality

Innumerable challenges exist in the local municipality. For example, Gauteng's permanent delegates to the National Council of Provinces (NCOP) have urged the council of Emfuleni Local Municipality to depoliticize challenges facing the municipality and focus on ensuring that the municipality is functional. The delegation views political instability within the municipality has created a platform upon which malfeasance has occurred, leading to a lack of service delivery to the people (Parliament of the Republic of

South Africa, 2019). Regarding infrastructure challenges facing the municipality, the committee is concerned about the funding gap between what is required and available to maintain and upgrade infrastructure within the municipality. It is unacceptable that Emfuleni Local Municipality has planned only R24 million for maintenance and new infrastructure development while the town has R5 billion in road and stormwater backlogs. Furthermore, the R1.6 billion required to address the urgent maintenance of tarred roads is not available, something which will lead to further deterioration of the roads (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2019). It is also concerning that the municipality is facing debilitating shortages in compactor trucks, leading to a high rate of illegal dumps due to unreliable waste pick-up schedules. The delegation has called for an action plan to deal with the gap in the capacity of waste pick-up trucks to ease the challenge of waste disposal (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2019). Concerning community unrest, the committee has urged the municipality to revive the petition system to enable the community to participate in the municipality issues. The fact that the municipality is not adhering to the petition policy as adopted by the council is worrisome. The delegation was informed that in the past six months, they have had 14 protests to the municipality, and in the main informed by electrical outages in the areas supplied by Eskom supplied by new electrification projects, human settlement issues including housing backlogs, flat rate issues and marches against crime and corruption. The delegation indicated that the revitalisation of the petition system would alleviate some of the protests (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2019). The imposition of government restrictions necessitates that HR practices be adaptable and compliant with national regulations. We argue that our specific research question: How do these HR practices influence employee engagement levels, is important to address the gaps that exist in the literature on unleashing employee engagement through the influence of Human Resource Practices in a local municipality in South Africa.

The unique context of local government in South Africa, particularly amidst challenges such as corruption, resource scarcity, and socioeconomic disparities, necessitates a focused approach to HR practices and employee engagement. Local municipalities are often pivotal in delivering essential services to communities; thus, their operational effectiveness is closely linked to employee engagement and morale. However, challenges such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, diminished trust in leadership, and limited resources can stifle employee motivation and engagement (Cooke et al., He & Morrison, 2021). In navigating these complexities, municipalities must develop robust HR strategies that prioritise engagement as a fundamental component of their operational framework. By fostering an environment that supports employee involvement, communication, and recognition the local government can unleash employee engagement for organisational success. Drawing upon insights from previous research, leaders within the local government can devise targeted strategies that optimise employee engagement and enhance their capacity to serve communities effectively amidst ongoing challenges. Continued exploration of this field will ensure that employee engagement remains a critical focus, propelling municipalities toward sustainable success. For the local municipality, where limited resources often create challenges, fostering high levels of employee engagement becomes essential in ensuring that services are delivered effectively to the public. Thus, enabling human resource practices is crucial in unleashing employee engagement.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The literature presents a complex tapestry of definitions and measurement approaches associated with employee engagement. Variations in theoretical perspectives and conceptual frameworks have contributed to a deeper understanding yet simultaneously created confusion (Fernandez & Hameduddin, 2019; Shen & Jiang, 2019). Notably, the shift in focus from mere employee satisfaction and commitment in the late 20th century to a more dynamic view of engagement marked a pivotal moment in organizational behavior research (Boccoli et al., 2023). This evolving understanding encourages a wide-ranging exploration of employee engagement, particularly within the unique socio-economic challenges of local governments in South Africa. Employee engagement is increasingly recognised as a vital factor in organisational success, particularly within the context of municipalities in South Africa. Defined as a positive psychological state characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption in one's work (Boccoli et al., 2023), employee engagement encompasses an individual's emotional and cognitive commitment to their organization. Engaged employees exhibit high energy levels, enthusiasm, and a deep commitment to their roles, leading

to enhanced performance and organizational effectiveness (Bakker & Albrecht, 2014; Boccoli et al., 2023). The concept gained prominence in the early 1990s, largely attributed to Kahn's (1990) pioneering research into personal engagement and disengagement. Since then, extensive studies evolved exploring the manifold dimensions of employee engagement and its implications on organisational outcomes.

## Definition and Dimensions of Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is commonly understood through three primary dimensions: “vigor”, “dedication”, and “absorption”. Vigor refers to high energy levels and mental resilience while working; dedication reflects a sense of significance, enthusiasm, and inspiration derived from one’s work; and absorption denotes deep focus and immersion in job activities (Boccoli et al., 2023). These dimensions collectively illustrate the multifaceted nature of engagement, emphasizing the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components that contribute to a highly engaged workforce. Current research has also highlighted that employee engagement is not static and can fluctuate based on varying circumstances and organizational contexts (Reina-Tamayo, Bakker & Derks, 2017; Boccoli et al., 2023). Understanding these dimensions is a precursor to designing effective human resource practices that foster a culture of engagement.

## Human Resource Practices and Employee Engagement

Human Resource (HR) practices play a pivotal role in shaping employees' engagement within an organization. These practices comprise numerous strategies and policies designed to optimize workforce effectiveness, satisfaction, and commitment. By carefully deploying these HR strategies, organisations can foster an environment conducive to high levels of employee engagement. The following are key HR practices that significantly influence employee engagement:

### *i) Recruitment and Selection*

Recruitment and selection encompass the processes organisations utilise to attract and choose candidates who possess the required skills and qualifications and align closely with the organisation's culture and values. Effective recruitment strategies begin with understanding the organisational needs and desired employee profile. Comprehensive job descriptions and effective outreach methods can attract diverse candidates. The impact of well-implemented recruitment and selection practices on employee engagement cannot be overstated. When organisations hire individuals, whose values align with those of the organisation, there is a greater sense of belonging and engagement from the outset (Agwu & Nwoke, 2019; Ismail et al., 2021). A study by Ismail et al. (2021) indicates that the thoroughness of recruitment processes affects employees' psychological commitment to their roles. Furthermore, hiring for cultural fit promotes a cohesive workplace atmosphere where employees feel understood and valued, fostering higher levels of engagement.

### *ii) Training and Development*

Training and development represent essential HR practices that focus on enhancing employees' competencies and fostering their professional growth. Organisations that invest in continuous learning and skills development, enhance employee performance and cater to employees' intrinsic motivations for personal and professional growth, thereby significantly improving engagement levels (Mampuru, Mokoena, & Isabirye, 2024). Providing tailored training programmes and development opportunities creates a culture of learning, allowing employees to feel supported and valued by their employers. Research indicates that when employees perceive opportunities for advancement and skill enhancement, they are more likely to be engaged with their jobs (Bakker & van Wingerden, 2021). Thus, effective training initiatives can help employees feel confident in their roles, further solidifying their commitment to the organisation.

### *iii) Performance Management*

Performance management systems are crucial for maintaining employee motivation and aligning individual contributions with organisational goals. This practice involves regular performance appraisals, ongoing feedback, and recognition mechanisms that help employees understand their roles and performance



expectations (Isabirye and Moloi, 2023). Regular feedback fosters a culture of open communication and continuous improvement, enabling employees to adjust their efforts and align with the organization's objectives (Lartey, 2021). Moreover, recognition of practice through formal awards or informal appreciation enhances employee morale and creates a sense of accomplishment, which are fundamental for sustaining high levels of engagement (Riyanto, Endri, & Herlisha, 2021).

#### *iv) Rewards and Recognition*

The reward and recognition practice entails providing material and non-material incentives to express gratitude for employees' work. An effective way to increase employees' morale and ensure that they work to the best of their abilities is through recognition. Cash awards are the most common motivators to enhance production; however, non-cash awards, such as appreciation, learning opportunities for growth, or new challenges, can be just as effective (Kumar, 2022). Thus, the employees' efforts are recognised, which creates a culture of appreciation where everyone feels valued and understood, increasing their level of commitment to the organization (Clack, 2021).

#### *v) Two-Way Communication*

The communication process that involves open information between management and employees is referred to as two-way communication. The application of this practice is a precursor to the development of a culture of engagement. The participation of employees in the organisation and the ability to express themselves promote voluntary engagement. It has been established that effective internal communication is related to the levels of employee engagement within the organisation (Dhanesh & Picherit-Duthler, 2021). When employees have a way of expressing themselves, it means that they own the organisation and thus the level of engagement is high. Furthermore, leaders who engage in two-way communication are in a better position to comprehend and address the needs and wants of employees, thus resulting in high engagement through a sense of belonging and vision (Abu Dalal et al., 2022).

From the previous sections, it is evident that HR practices are equally important in creating a good workforce. However, the effectiveness is not only a function of the practices themselves but also the leaders' capacity to convey, buoy, and foster a positive work environment. In this case, it is critical to create a workplace where employees are appreciated and motivated to deliver their best results. In South Africa HR engagement practices impact service delivery and harmonious relations with the community. During organisational changes, particularly during periods of economic instability, the role of HR practices is critical and central to the organisational strategy for sustaining employee engagement. Organisations must appropriately demonstrate empowering HR practices that encourage employee engagement.

Human Resource (HR) practices encompass strategies and policies to optimise employee engagement and organizational effectiveness. Key HR practices include: i). Recruitment and Selection: Effective recruitment and selection processes ensure that organizations attract and hire individuals who align with their goals and values, enhancing their likelihood of engagement from the outset. ii). Training and Development: Continuous opportunities for professional growth through training and development initiatives are critical, as they enhance employee skills and fulfill employees' intrinsic motivations for growth. iii). Performance Management: Regular performance appraisals, feedback mechanisms, and recognition practices are essential in sustaining employee motivation and reinforcing alignment with organizational objectives. Iv). Rewards and Recognition: Monetary and non-monetary rewards enhance employee morale significantly and signal appreciation for contributions, thereby nurturing a culture of engagement. v). Two-Way Communication: Effective communication frameworks that allow for feedback and dialogue between management and employees create a sense of belonging and value among staff, fostering greater engagement. These HR practices can play a vital role in creating an engaged workforce, and their effectiveness often hinges on leaders' ability to communicate, motivate, and cultivate an environment that promotes engagement.

## Methodology

The research used a qualitative, naturalistic, exploratory design to gather data from subjects on certain complex issues where current knowledge is limited (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). This design enables the recognition of important factors that lead to employee engagement and allows for the possibility of collecting data from respondents on factors that are not set in the questions (Stevens et al., 2012). Qualitative methodology, which is based on the interpretation of subjective data rather than on its numerical analysis, helped to gain a more detailed view of the participants' experiences and perceptions in relation to the research question (Ofiazoglu, 2017).

## Study Population and Sampling Method

The target population for the current study comprised 2,500 employees at a local Municipality in South Africa. All contributed enormously to the insights on employee engagement. Considering that qualitative research is conversational, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to select a representative sample of ten subjects, code-named P1 to P10, from the Human Resource Department (Fouche & De Vos, 2002).

This corroborates with recommendations for data saturation, where no new themes emerge with an increase in the number of participants (Dworkin, 2012; Braun & Clarke 2019). Participants were intentionally selected for their knowledge of human resources and engagement strategies within the municipality, to ensure that the insights gained were relevant and rich (Saunders et al., 2018).

## Data Collection Techniques

The primary method used for data collection was in-depth semi-structured interviews. This approach allows for standardised questions along with the ability to probe further, depending on the respondent's answers, to generate more meaningful conversation and discovery (Cassim 2024). The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions to gather information on biographical information, employee motivation levels, engagement strategies, and their perceptions of recognition, communication, and development (Khoa et al. 2023). All interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred settings, face-to-face, to increase the participants' comfort and openness, and all discussions were recorded to ensure the accuracy of the data collected (Renjith et al. 2021).

## Data Analysis Methods

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data collected from the participants (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Rutishauser et al., 2019). This approach involved a process of identifying, analysing and reporting themes from the data set to help understand common experiences and meanings of employee engagement. The analysis was first done by reviewing the transcripts and then using systematic coding of potentially relevant segments to generate overall themes that related to the research questions. The researcher also applied reflexive thematic analysis, which focuses on the context and the data collection process as subjective (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were made a primary concern in the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, that participation was voluntary, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences for so doing (Mirza, Mirza, & Bellalem, 2023). This was done with informed consent, such that participants knew how their contributions would be used. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely, and all participants were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. These ethical practices were important to ensure that any harm was minimized and that the research process was transparent (Pilbeam et al., 2022). To this end, this study employs a comprehensive qualitative methodology to explore the specifics of employee engagement

practices in the local governmental context and provide practical suggestions for policymakers and stakeholders on how to improve workplace engagement strategies.

## Presentation And Discussion of Findings

Data analysis revealed critical aspects of how human resource practices influence employee engagement in the local municipality in South Africa. Through qualitative analysis of participant interviews, six major themes, with sub-themes, emerged highlighting the interconnectedness of effective HR practices and employee engagement levels. These themes and sub-themes are captured in Table 1 below and discussed in the ensuing paragraphs.

**Table 1:** Themes, sub-themes, and operational definitions of the themes

Theme	Sub-themes	Operational definitions
Recruitment and Selection Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transparency in Recruitment</li> <li>• Alignment of Skills and Job Roles</li> <li>• Impact of Nepotism and Connections</li> </ul>	Attracting and choosing the right candidates for the local municipality.
Training and Development Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to Professional Development</li> <li>• Availability of training programmes and workshops</li> <li>• professional growth opportunities</li> <li>• Participants' views on their professional growth opportunities</li> </ul>	Improving employee capabilities and supporting career growth within the local municipality
Performance Management Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarity of Performance Expectations</li> <li>• Feedback Mechanisms</li> <li>• Equity in Performance Evaluation</li> </ul>	A structured approach to assessing and enhancing employee performance in the local municipality
Employee Recognition and Rewards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal Recognition Programmes</li> <li>• Informal Recognition Practices</li> <li>• Alignment of Rewards with Performance</li> </ul>	Acknowledging and rewarding employees for their contribution and achievements.
Organizational Culture and Employee Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership Style and Its Influence</li> <li>• Work Environment and Team Dynamics</li> <li>• Communication Practices within the Municipality</li> </ul>	The essence of fostering a positive organizational culture while actively promoting employee engagement.
Work-Life Balance and Employee Well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policies Supporting Work-Life Balance</li> <li>• Impact on Employee Engagement</li> <li>• Well-being Initiatives and Support Systems</li> </ul>	Supporting employees in achieving a balance between their professional and personal lives while promoting overall well-being.

### Theme 1: Recruitment and selection practices

Data analysis revealed the importance of appropriate recruitment and selection procedures to enhance employee engagement. All participants agreed that job roles should be assigned to people based on their skills and values and that organizational fit contributes to motivation and commitment. This was something



that P1 expressed clearly, saying, “When I can see myself in my job, I ensure that I give my best every day.” This statement is in sync with the views of Abbasi et al. (2022), who stated that recruitment and selection are key processes that influence organisational performance and employee happiness. Having a good fit between people’s abilities and job descriptions is not only useful; it creates conditions for engagement and performance.

Nevertheless, the analysis also revealed widespread problems concerning the sufficiency of the recruitment practices of the municipality. Although the effectiveness of recruitment is recognized, the participants complained about the existence of practices that are characterized by nepotism and the use of personal connections to secure jobs. P3’s frustration— “It’s frustrating to see people who don’t know what they are doing get positions because they know the right people”—shows how such practices can result in engagement. This view corroborates Kirya (2020) who stated that transparency is key in recruitment because it builds integrity. As a result, when employees believe that the recruitment process is based on preferential treatment rather than merit, it reduces their motivation and, makes them feel like they do not belong in the organisation.

Nepotism was also mentioned as a bad practice by P5, who said “It makes for a culture of hopelessness; we feel that we are working for nothing.” This feeling of disillusionment can be partly understood through the lens of job characteristics theory, which suggests that employee motivation and performance increase with skill variety, task identity, and task significance (Khalid Salaudin, et al., 2022). When people believe that nepotism was used to employ friends or relatives, they will resist and not perform according to the organisational goals and expectations.

In addition, the effects of poor recruitment practices are not limited to the morale of individuals but affect the effectiveness of organizations. According to Hamza et al. (2021), recruitment is directly related to the effectiveness of an organisation, which means that nepotism-related poor practices are detrimental to the organisation’s effectiveness. Therefore, as more hiring decisions are made on relationships rather than competence, the possibility of poor organisational performance is heightened, and it can lead to a cycle of low engagement that could be difficult to change.

## **Theme 2: Training and Development Opportunities**

The data analysis also revealed a critical theme related to training and development opportunities, which was identified as playing a critical role in enhancing employee engagement. From the participants, there was a consensus that well-designed training programmes are a good way of enabling learning and development and, thus, for enhancing performance and learning. For instance, participants often stated that lack of appropriate training is a key driver of job satisfaction, and therefore, more skilled employees are more engaged in their work. This link was summarized effectively by P6, who said, “When I get proper training, I feel capable, and that leads to my engagement.” This result corroborates Kuruppu et al. (2021) who stressed the importance of specific training in improving employees’ output in different industries such as public firms.

Nevertheless, the analysis also revealed some problems concerning the absence of formal policies that define training management. About half of the interviewees had complaints about the availability of training and development options, which were rather random, and there were no established procedures for such programmes, which, in turn, affects individual and organisational results. P7 summed up this feeling, saying, “Development chances emerge, but they are a guess, and we never get them mentioned to us when we can prepare for them.” Such opinions capture the feelings of employees, between individual and corporate goals, which are frustrated by the unavailable career development opportunities provided by the municipality. As stated by P9, “I do want to grow, but I feel like there is some sort of glass ceiling stopping me from moving up.” This is in line with Sypniewska et al. (2023) who pointed out that lack of direction in the development processes reduces employee satisfaction and commitment.

The discrepancy between what the municipality offers for training and what employees expect can diminish the effectiveness of the organisation resulting in employees not being fully committed to their duties. This

is in line with Ahsan (2025) who notes that a learning culture cannot be developed by leadership that does not support investment in developing employees. Without aggressive measures in place thorough and well-defined training policies, the municipality continues with the trend of low employee engagement.

These findings support the idea that training and development are not just additional factors that contribute to employee satisfaction but are vital to creating an engaged and performing workforce. According to Burhan Ismael et al. (2021), proper training and development programmes increase the effectiveness of an organisation, thus supporting the need for local municipalities to have regulated training programs that not only address employees' needs but also address organizational objectives. Therefore, the improvement of training and development opportunities within the municipality should be recognized as an important measure for increasing the level of employee engagement and the organisation's performance.

### **Theme 3: Fair Performance Management Systems**

As a theme, performance management was analysed, and the data reveals that performance management systems are a key driver of employee engagement in the local municipality context. Based on the views of the participants, it is important to have a clear performance management system with set goals, regular feedback, and proper appraisals to create a working environment where employees are valued for their input. Participant P8 exemplified this sentiment when stating, "I thrive on feedback; it shows me where I stand and how I can improve." Such statements reflect the type of intrinsic motivation that can be tapped by a good PMS, as supported by Aguinis and Burgi-Tian (2021) argued that strong performance management systems can increase employee commitment, particularly, during difficult periods.

However, the study also reveals a significant discrepancy between theory and practice. Some of the respondents indicated that the municipality's PMS was more like a show than the real thing, and the implementation was just for the sake of it. For instance, P10 said, "it feels like we're just going through the motions" which shows a general concern about the effectiveness of performance appraisals. This divide is characteristic of other organisational challenges where performance management goals are not achieved, which in turn results in demoralisation of the workers. Schleicher et al. (2018); Isabirye and Moloi (2023) have argued that the effectiveness of performance management systems depends not only on their conception but also on their effectiveness. A system that cannot link strategic objectives to practical and meaningful assessments is likely to demotivate rather than enable.

Furthermore, the participants wanted a performance review process that goes beyond praising their efforts. Employees mentioned the need for feedback mechanisms that are clear on how individuals can perform better in their roles and how they can develop on a personal and professional level. Such feedback not only improves production but also creates a culture of learning which is important in retaining and satisfying employees (Robert et al., 2022). Therefore, by establishing a PMS that focuses on developmental feedback and performance reviews, organizations could build a more engaged workforce than what many employees in this study experienced.

In general, this theme supports the idea that performance management systems are closely related to employee engagement. If the employees are not motivated by the evaluation processes that are incorporated by the organization, then there are low chances of engagement as mentioned by Riyanto et al. (2021). Therefore, to eliminate the gap between the theory and practice of performance management, the local municipality needs to revisit and revise its performance management systems to make sure they are not just empty gestures, but tools for growth, recognition, and real engagement of the employees.

### **Theme 4: Employee Recognition and Rewards**

To this end, Employee Recognition and Rewards were seen to be an important factor. Recognition not only applies to the efforts of employees but also has a significant impact on their engagement levels and job satisfaction. This theme encompasses three subthemes: Formal Recognition Programmes, Informal Recognition Practices, and Alignment of Rewards with Performance. Each subtheme helps to explore

different aspects of recognition and rewards for employee engagement. This research looked at the formal recognition initiatives implemented within the municipality. P5 stated, “The certificate programmes are a good touch; they show management cares about our hard work.” However, some participants pointed out shortcomings: P3 said, “Sometimes the formal recognitions are just a box-ticking exercise”. This last perception reveals the importance of commitment to employee recognition processes.

The emotion connected to recognition was also identified as important, with several participants explaining how recognition affects their work motivation. For instance, P7 said, “When my efforts are recognised, I feel valued, and it makes me try to do even more.” This validates Chan and Hooi (2023) who assert that appropriate recognition has a positive effect on motivation and performance of employees. Moreover, it was concluded that informal recognition is an important factor in creating a work environment that is more engaging. P9 said, “A simple ‘thank you’ from my team leader makes my day.” Such observations are consistent with the effects of spontaneous acknowledgment on morale and are consistent with the findings of Ampofo et al. (2023) that informal recognition improves job embeddedness and service orientation.

Participants also discussed how informal recognition helps to promote a positive workplace culture. P2 said, “We often celebrate small wins together and it builds our team spirit significantly”. This shows that informal recognition practices generate a supportive community that can improve engagement and performance.

This was an area of focus for participants, who analysed the linking of rewards to actual performance metrics. P6 said: “I haven’t understood how my excellent work is linked to the rewards I get”. This discrepancy points to the need to ensure that reward systems are properly linked to performance outcomes, as suggested by Kurniawan and Anindita (2021) who argued that such linkage is likely to increase job satisfaction and involvement.

P8 provided some useful recommendations for improving recognition and reward systems: “We also require more specific recognition that takes into account the work of an employee instead of just recognizing the achievements of the team”. This shows a desire for a more personalised approach to recognition, like the findings of Kwarteng et al. (2024), who recommended visually appealing and personalised recognition programmes that speak to each employee’s efforts.

The results of the study on Employee Recognition and Rewards can help to understand their potential impact on employee engagement in the local municipality. Based on the participant’s feedback, the mismatch between the formal and informal recognition practices and the need for better reward linkage have implications for HR practices seeking to improve engagement. The participants’ voices present a clear picture of the present recognition practices, and good recognition will increase the level of engagement and, in turn, enhance productivity.

## **Theme 5: Organizational Culture and Employee Engagement**

Organizational Culture and Employee Engagement as a theme addresses the important aspect between the organisational culture of a local municipality in South Africa and the engagement of its employees. This theme is important in the attainment of the objectives of the study because it examines how different aspects of organisational culture, such as leadership styles, work environments, teams, and communication, affect employee engagement. The participants’ experiences provided insights into the importance of these elements in creating a culture that supports high levels of engagement among municipal employees.

When interviewing the participants, it was observed that Leadership styles in the municipality influenced the engagement of the employees as perceived by the employees. The qualitative data show that management characterised by support and openness is necessary. For example, participant P1 said, “When my supervisor encourages me to express my ideas, I feel my work is valued.” This shows how open management can increase the perception of the employees on their role, which is in conformity with Pakpahan and Siregar (2022) who have established a positive relationship between participative leadership and employee engagement. The experiences that employees shared regarding the type of leadership they

have received also helped to elaborate on this sub-theme. For instance, participant P4 said, “There have been times when we have had leaders who would just give orders, and we would not feel appreciated.” This is the opposite of what happened with P9 who said, “My current leader respects our ideas; it makes me want to achieve our goals.” This confirms Abdullahi et al’s. (2021) assertion that engaging leadership produces a better level of commitment to their work.

Support at work and engagement were also discussed. A supportive work environment is crucial for increasing employee engagement. Participants also shared their views on the effectiveness of such environments. P3 stated, “It does make a difference when I can have the tools and support that I need to be motivated.” According to Bhardwaj and Kalia (2021), a positive work environment can increase employee engagement and performance. This is due to the positive experiences they have from their work.

Moreover, team dynamics was also seen as having a great influence on the level of motivation of an individual. This was also a view that was echoed by P7 who said, “I work in a small team, and this motivates me to work hard as we help each other.” The data show that high level of team cohesion increases the overall level of engagement, as postulated by Ababneh (2021) who argued that organizations with good teamwork have higher-performing and satisfied employees. Furthermore, it was found that communication is also a critical factor that determines the level of employee engagement. Participants had both positive and negative experiences with internal communication. P2 said, “I like it when management provides updates often, it makes me feel like I am part of the company.” This shows that proper communication channels are vital in enhancing employee engagement, in line with the work of Abdullahi et al. (2021) on the role of communication in enhancing engagement through transparency.

Hence, communication was identified as a factor that determines the overall level of engagement. P8 said, “I think that without feedback from my work, I am not very engaged.” This reflection shows how communication failures can lead to negative effects on engagement. However, P10 said, “Getting feedback from time to time tells me where I stand in the organisation and that is why I remain motivated.” Such findings are in concordance with Pakpahan and Siregar (2022) who pointed out that internal communication is crucial for forming engaged and responsive teams.

Therefore, it can be claimed that organisational culture and employee engagement identify crucial roles of different aspects of the organisation, such as the type of leadership, the kind of work environment, teamwork, and communication in enhancing employee engagement in the local municipality. The participants’ accounts give weight to the importance of these factors and their effects on motivation and perception of the contribution of employees.

## **Theme 6: Work-life Balance and employee well-being**

The theme of work-life balance and employee well-being was observed to be an important factor affecting employee engagement in the local municipality context; and was expressed in three sub-themes; namely: policies that support work-life balance, effects on employee engagement, and Well-being initiatives and support systems. Each subtheme is backed up by participant testimonies, which connect their views to the broader theoretical framework of employee engagement. The study showed that the existence (or lack thereof) of policies that support work-life balance affects the employees’ organisational support perceptions. Many participants mentioned that there are flexible work arrangements and P3 said, “Having options like remote work has made a big difference for me.” This was also the case with P6 who said, “The municipality has my family and personal life in mind, I appreciate that.” However, not all employees felt that they were being supported. P5 provided a different perspective and said, “Although we have the policies, I have not seen many people using them, especially because of the fear of being judged by colleagues.” The participants’ accounts reveal that a gap exists between the provision of policies and their implementation and the cultural factors that prevent employees from taking leave that is available to them.

The literature also indicates that such policies are important in enhancing employee perceptions of support as noted by Nabawanuka and Ekmekcioglu (2022) who stated that perceived supervisor support is important in enhancing work-life balance and well-being of employees. This statement is consistent with

the findings of this study where employees stated that organisational support can greatly improve their engagement levels.

The effects of work-life balance on employee engagement were evident; a number of participants explained that achieving the balance between their personal and professional lives could have a major impact on their engagement levels. P8 said, “When I am able to manage my work and home life I will be more willing to contribute to the team goals.” On the flip side, P9 said, “The constant pressure causes burnout, which in turn makes me uninterested and resentful of the job.” This is consistent with the previous studies that have been conducted which show that a poor work-life balance results in stress and decreases the levels of organisational commitment (Marecki, 2023). Furthermore, the study revealed participants’ views on stress management, and P10 said, “I have to take time for myself, for myself, outside of work, so I don’t burn out.” Such findings also reveal that municipalities need to understand that it is not only about work demands on their employees and how it affects engagement.

Finally, the discussion on well-being and support systems provided another dimension of understanding of employee engagement. Although the participants of the study mentioned some programs aimed at enhancing well-being, such as EAP and wellness seminars, there was a difference in the awareness and uptake of the programs. For instance, P4 said, “There are programmes, I know, but I don’t know how to go about it.” This means that there is a gap between the programs provided and the employees’ participation in them, as supported by Kurnia and Widigdo (2021) who stated that such wellness programs are not well embraced by employees unless they are well explained and encouraged to take them. Furthermore, P2 mentioned the importance of managerial encouragement in enhancing well-being initiatives: “If our supervisors were keen on these resources, I think more of us would use them.” This supports the idea of organizations developing policies, actively advocating for and enabling the uptake of well-being activities to improve employee engagement. In conclusion, the theme of the “Work-Life Balance and Employee Well-being” philosophy provides crucial insights into how policy, employee perception, and engagement are obtained in the specific context of local municipalities. Through discussing the sub-themes of policies that support work-life balance, the effects on employee engagement, and well-being initiatives, this study presents a complex approach to enhancing the employee experience. To fully unleash the power of employee engagement, organisations must eliminate the gap between policy intention and practice, so that employees feel supported in managing their professional and personal lives. Local municipalities can effectively address the needs of employees and create a successful and effective workforce by engaging in the theoretical framework of employee well-being and satisfaction.

## Managerial Implications

This research provides important insights that can help today’s managers to improve employee engagement and organisational performance. The results of the study, the identified themes, and sub-themes suggest several possible recommendations for management practices that may impact employees’ job satisfaction and performance significantly. i). Strengthening Employee Voice and Involvement Managers should pay attention to the design and preservation of proper mechanisms for feedback from employees to make them feel that they are listened to and appreciated. The results of the study reveal that when employees believe that their work is significant, they are more likely to be engaged in their work. Organisations can hold frequent feedback meetings, suggestion boxes, and an open-door policy to ensure that there is an ongoing channel of communication. Furthermore, when management listens to the employees’ feedback and includes them in the decision-making process, then the employees will feel more motivated and tend to work harder.

ii. Improving Training and Development Opportunities The study also established that training and development opportunities are quite vital. Managers should therefore consider reviewing the existing learning and development strategies within the municipality and suggest possible improvements. Some of the ways through which organisations can achieve this are by offering specific training, mentoring, and incentives for continued learning and development. This helps to improve employee skills and demonstrate



the organization's commitment toward their growth which in turn may lead to increased motivation, job satisfaction, and reduced turnover.

iii. **Creating a Culture of Transparency and Trust** The concept of an open environment underscores the importance of employee support in enhancing workplace camaraderie. Managers must increase the level of communication and decision-making transparency to make employees comfortable sharing their ideas. Some ways include regular team meetings, team-building activities, and trust-building workshops. Thus, the level of trust is increasing which results in employees being more engaged and possibly improves their morale and performance.

iv. **Performance Management Systems: A Review** The outcomes of the research confirm the requirement for adequate performance management systems, within the organisation. Managers must develop effective and efficient systems and implement these to assess the performance of employees. These systems must be aligned with the organisational and employee goals. This entails setting goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, applicable, and time-framed, performing appraisals, and providing feedback frequently. It is important to acknowledge the efforts of employees to enhance their productivity and encourage them to deliver their best.

v. **Engagement in Decision Making** This research also confirms that allowing employees to participate in the strategic decision-making process enhances their commitment to the organisation's goals and objectives. Managers should involve employees in matters that affect them and represent the employees in various committees or working groups. This shared decision-making process empowers employees and recognises their ideas and experience to make better decisions. These managerial implications amplify the critical role that HR practices play in enhancing employee engagement within a local municipality. In this regard, management can devise a set of strategies geared at amplifying employee voice, training and development, trust, performance management, and decision-making to have an engaged, motivated, and productive workforce. These implications guide organisational leaders to achieve the best output for their employees and simultaneously achieve business results.

## Conclusion and Suggestions for the Future Study

This research opens new possibilities for understanding the link between HR practices and employee engagement. The results of the study reveal that there are several key themes, which appear to be the most crucial factor that influences engagement. The sub-themes—employee feedback mechanisms, participation in decision-making processes, and encouraging openness and trust at the workplace—reveal the complex interrelationships affecting how employees engage with their work and the organisation. The study also establishes among several other things the significance of feedback, participative decision making and trust as critical factors in the workplace. These themes suggest that for municipalities desiring to achieve higher levels of engagement, these aspects should be addressed to produce a more motivated and committed workforce.

**Suggestions for Further Research** The following recommendations are proposed for further research based on this study: i. **Longitudinal Studies:** It is suggested that future researchers explore the effects of transformations in HR practices on employee engagement over time in the municipality. It would be possible to learn about the impact of ongoing HR practice changes through longitudinal research. ii. **Comparative Analysis:** It is also suggested that cross-case studies be undertaken across other municipalities or areas to compare the problems and the best strategies for employee engagement. This could enable distinct strategies to be distinguished as applying to different settings within the local government environment. iii. **Quantitative Validation:** Additionally, future researchers are encouraged to apply quantitative methods to corroborate the qualitative data. Questionnaires that determine employee engagement based on certain HR practices can offer quantitative evidence for the themes discovered in this study. iv. **The impact of Technology on Engagement:** Given the emergence of the 4IR which is characterized by the integration of technology, it is advised that in the next study, the authors should explore how the integration of technology into HR practices, such as digital feedback mechanisms and e-

learning platforms, impacts employee engagement, especially in the post-COVID-19 world, when remote work is becoming more common. v. Theories of Diversity and Inclusion: It is also essential to investigate how diversity and inclusion strategies incorporated in the human resource management practices influence employee engagement within the organisation, especially in a diverse market like South Africa.

This article offers a more nuanced understanding of employees' experiences considering their backgrounds and insights into engagement. By addressing these recommendations, subsequent research could expand the findings of this study and make a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge on how human resource practices impact employee engagement in different work settings. This will add to existing knowledge and provide practical recommendations that practice managers could use to improve employee engagement through effective and efficient HR management.

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