

# **Making the Most of Employee Engagement by Utilizing the Employee Perspective**

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Abstract  <p>During the last decades, employee engagement has gained a significant position in the business world due to its notable role in the overall success of a business. Organizations have started to invest more resources in its development and given it high priority as employee engagement has been proven to strongly influence organizational performance in terms of productivity, profitability, customer loyalty, safety and employee retention.</p> <p>The objective was to study employee's possibilities to affect the level of their own engagement and how organizations could utilize their employees' views in creating and developing better conditions for engagement at the workplace. Since previous research and existing knowledge tend to focus more on the employer's role in driving engagement, the general aim of the study was to explore engagement from the employee's perspective.</p> <p>For this purpose, the study was conducted as an exploratory study with an inductive approach. As the method was qualitative research, the primary data was chosen to be collected through expert interviews. Altogether, four human resource management experts were interviewed, each with two rounds of interviews. The data gained from the interviews was analyzed throughout the interview process and finally summarized by using a process of condensation of meanings.</p> <p>According to the findings, the foundation for employees to influence their engagement consists of a few fundamental issues: motivation, open communication culture, mutual trust between the employer and employee and activeness in working towards the shared goal of achieving greater engagement. However, the ultimate effectiveness of the employee's investment in the topic is dependent on how extensively the employers decide to make use of those fundamentals.</p>		
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Tiivistelmä <p>Viime vuosikymmeninä työntekijöiden sitouttaminen on saavuttanut huomattavan aseman liike-elämässä johtuen sen merkittävästä roolista liiketoiminnan menestymisessä. Organisaatiot ovat alkaneet investoida lisäresursseja sen kehittämiseen ja asettaneet sen korkeammalle prioriteeteissaan, sillä työntekijöiden sitoutuneisuuden on todettu vaikuttavan vahvasti organisaatioiden suoritukseen tuottavuuden, kannattavuuden, asiakasuskollisuuden, turvallisuuden ja työntekijöiden pysyvyyden kannalta.</p> <p>Työn tavoitteena oli tutkia työntekijän mahdollisuuksia vaikuttaa omaan sitoutuneisuuteensa ja sitä, kuinka organisaatiot voisivat paremmin hyödyntää työntekijöidensä näkemyksiä luodessaan ja kehittäessään parempia edellytyksiä sitoutuneisuudelle työpaikalla. Koska aiemmat tutkimukset ja tietoperusta usein keskittyvät työnantajan rooliin sitoutuneisuuden kehittämisessä, tämän työn päämääränä oli tarkastella sitoutuneisuutta työntekijän näkökulmasta.</p> <p>Näitä tavoitteita varten tutkimus toteutettiin kartoittavana tutkimuksena, jossa oli mukana induktiivista päättelyä. Koska menetelmänä oli laadullinen tutkimus, primääriaineisto valittiin kerättäväksi asiantuntijahaastatteluilta. Yhteensä neljää henkilöstöhallinnon asiantuntijaa haastateltiin, jokaista kahdella haastattelukierroksella. Kerättyä aineistoa analysoitiin läpi haastatteluprosessin ja lopuksi tiivistettiin teemoittelemalla.</p> <p>Löydösten mukaan työntekijän vaikuttaminen sitoutuneisuuteensa koostuu muutamasta perusasiasta: motivaatiosta, avoimesta vuorovaikutuskulttuurista, keskinäisestä luottamuksesta työnantajan ja -tekijän välillä sekä aktiivisesta työskentelystä kohti yhteistä tavoitetta korkeammasta sitoutuneisuudesta. Työntekijän panostuksen vaikuttavuus määräytyy kuitenkin lopulta sen mukaan kuinka laajasti työnantaja sitä päättää hyödyntää.</p>		
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## 1 Introduction to the research topic and objectives

Employee engagement was first introduced by William A. Kahn (1990) who established employee engagement as an intrinsic concept in managing, retaining and making the most of workforce. Since then, employee engagement has been deployed on a larger scale in the world of business as organizations have started to place employee engagement as one of their top priorities due to its significant impact on the overall success of the business. Employee engagement strongly affects performance in terms of productivity, profitability, customer loyalty, safety and employee retention (Solomon 2010, 92). According to research findings, disengaged employees cause a massive loss in productivity of \$450-500 billion a year by having 37 percent higher absenteeism and 60 percent more errors and flaws (Hellebuyck, Nguyen, Halphern, Frtize & Kennedy 2017, 18).

As employee engagement is known to increase productivity, it also lowers high turnover rates of employees. The financial benefit of lower turnover is evident as it has been estimated that the cost of replacing an employee is about 20 percent of their annual salary and can even grow to as high as 50 percent in some vacancies (Hellebuyck et al. 18). As studies reveal that one in three hires will leave a job within two years, organizations have the pressure to switch their way of thinking in order to reduce staff turnover and replacement costs. They might need to shape the workplace to meet with what attracts and engages the best hires instead of looking for employees that fit the workplace. (Bolden-Barret 2017.)

As higher engagement has proven to positively impact on employee retention rates (Macey & Schneider 2008, 3), concepts such as employee commitment and organizational citizenship behavior have started to appear where the focus is on the employees' engagement in their jobs (Solomon 2010, 89), because no initiative can be carried out fruitfully and effectively if the employees do not commit and affiliate to it. It is the key to truly understand the core factors that lead to the said engagement since job satisfaction alone cannot be trusted to prevent "the best and the brightest" from leaving the company (ibid. 90). However, even though there is clear evidence of how widely spread the positive effects of an engaged workforce can be, a decline in employee engagement has been reported, and disengagement has been growing lately

(Saks 2006, 600). Some reports state that only < 30 percent of the workforce on a global scale is engaged. Moreover, < 20 percent of employees do not believe that their current supervisor could be able to engage them at all. (Shuck, Rocco & Albornoz 2010, 300.)

Thinking of employee engagement as a construct, it is related to, for example, job satisfaction, employee commitment and organizational citizenship behavior and even encompasses these constructs. However, employee engagement is broader in scope (Solomon 2010, 89): it is a stronger predictor of positive organizational performance compared to these related constructs because it has been proven to show the two-way relationship between an employer and employee in a clearer way. There is indication that the more engaged employees are, the more likely the organization is to top the industry's average in terms of revenue growth (ibid. 92).

The concept of performance has gained importance in the near history as technology has developed dramatically and made it possible for companies to use advanced technological solutions in their operations. The new levels of capacity and efficiency require increased professional skills from employees to run those operations. These highly skilled employees expect operational autonomy, job satisfaction and status, and, therefore, they cannot be managed with old totalitarian styles of management. (Solomon 2010, 89.) New angles to managing the most vital asset of a firm have had to be created because, in the end, the employees' willingness to perform as well as possible for the good of the company is crucial in making the business thrive.

Most of the prior research on employee engagement focus on what it is on a conceptual level and what could be done in order to improve engagement, but there is far less research on how the employees themselves feel about or react to the efforts of managers trying to create the perfect conditions for engagement (Shuck et al. 2010, 302). Many of the tips and tools for improving engagement focus on what organizations and leaders should do to achieve engagement among their employees, but Royal and Sorenson (2015) point out that unless employees take some responsibility for their own engagement, the aspirations of and input from their managers might only have a limited impact on raising the levels of engagement at the workplace. This was supported by a Forbes contributor, Larry Myler (2015), citing a book called *Influencer* (Patterson, Grenny, Switzler, Maxfield & McMillan 2013) that emphasizes the

significance of social and individual motivation as a source of engagement. Social motivation was referred to as peer influence, meaning that it is easier to become motivated if one is surrounded by people who share a similar sentiment. Individual motivation was defined as an intrinsic desire that can be developed by forgetting the self-imposed misconceptions of people's own abilities and harnessing their full potential to use. As Myler (2015) continues, having a company full of strong and confident employees "shows up on the bottom line and in engagement scores". Therefore, the purpose of this thesis was to seek answers to how and in what ways the employees themselves could affect their own engagement in their jobs and to what extent organizations make use of their employees' perceptions on the topic.

The theoretical framework of the thesis elaborates on some commonly agreed and utilized structures for developing and driving engagement, combining both employers' and employees' perspectives. For example, it describes the tools that human resource management is generally using in leading their subordinates to enhance their level of engagement. This was implemented in order to understand the nature of engagement and the factors that drive it as a whole. In addition, it was found necessary to consider how well the concept of "being engaged" and the related constructs (such as job satisfaction) were distinguished in people's minds and what the actual, terminological differences between them were. Only after recognizing the differences and understanding the distinguishing characteristics of employee engagement can both employees and employers effectively work towards improving overall engagement and focus on the right matters related to it. This theoretical framework in Chapter 2, including existing studies and theories on engagement, is followed by an empirical research part that seeks to further the existent knowledge and to explore engagement from the employees' perspective. Chapter 3 explains the methods used for this type of research, in this case, qualitative expert interviews, more closely. The key findings of these interviews are introduced and analyzed in Chapter 4, followed by a discussion and conclusion part in Chapter 5.

As mentioned above, the main focus of this thesis was on the employee, in other words, on the employee's possibilities for affecting the whole concept of employee engagement and on how the employees could take part in creating and developing better conditions for engagement at the workplace. Moreover, the thesis tried to

seek answers to if – and how – employees were taken into the development processes and discussions in organizations when making strategies for driving employee engagement and how this two-way communication could be improved. Finally, the thesis aimed to answer if active inclusion of the employee perspective in engagement-related decisions could lead to higher rates of employee engagement based on what the respondents have experienced. Thus, two research questions were derived:

- To what extent can employees influence their own engagement overall?
- In what ways can organizations utilize the employee perspective when developing the drivers for engagement?

## 2 Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Defining employee engagement and its related constructs

Employee engagement was first introduced with global recognition by William A. Kahn (1990) who identified employee engagement as a self-contained concept and made a difference between engagement and its related concepts. Kahn (1990, 692) linked engagement to people's various degrees of their selves – physical, cognitive and emotional – and to what extent employees brought in or left out these different personal selves when they executed work related tasks. He stated that an engaged person harnesses these selves to his work roles so that he expresses himself physically, cognitively and emotionally during these role performances. This investment of putting one's full presence, all of one's selves, to work results in higher levels of performance. On the other hand, in disengagement, a person extracts and departs himself cognitively, physically and emotionally during these role performances. (ibid. 694.)

Employee engagement is a concept in work relations that is widely known, written about and discussed in management matters, but the precise construct of it has raised some questions among researchers on multiple occasions (Little & Little 2006, 111). It has been contemplated whether employee engagement is an idea meaningful enough to management or whether it is redundant with existing terms, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment or job involvement, for instance (ibid. 115). However, many management professionals argue that employee engagement is a relevant term intrinsically because it combines many aspects of these common terms. According to ADP Research Institute (2012, 3), while job satisfaction refers to an employee's happiness and contentment with the current job and its conditions, an engaged employee does not only show up at work and demonstrate his responsibilities but is willing to put in extra effort to further the success of the organization rather than only his own.

Throughout this thesis the term "employee engagement" refers to "the illusive force that motivates employees to higher levels of performance" (Wellins & Concelman, 2004). Throughout this thesis the term employee engagement is also shortened to

only “engagement”. According to Wellins and Concelman (2004), this “coveted energy” of being engaged is similar to commitment to the organization, job ownership and pride, more discretionary effort (i.e. time and energy), passion and excitement, commitment to execution and the bottom line. They call it “an amalgam of commitment, loyalty, productivity and ownership” and refer to it as “feelings or attitudes employees have toward their jobs and organizations”.

As the term employee engagement is often defined by many other constructs used in human resource management and said to include many common characteristics from these related concepts and is even mixed with them, they should be qualified as well, and some difference should be made between them. The term organizational commitment can be referred to as the degree to which a worker identifies with an organization and is committed to its goals (Little & Little 2006, 116). Organizational citizenship behavior is said to be one outcome of organizational commitment, referring to a discretionary effort that an employee is willing to expend for the good of the organization and to behavior that is courteous, helpful and polite towards co-workers (ibid. 116).

The term job satisfaction, on the other hand, refers to a “positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or experiences” (Little & Little 2006, 116). Job satisfaction can also be referred to as how happy the employees are with their job and its conditions, such as the salary, employee benefits, workplace atmosphere and culture as well as advancement opportunities (ADP Research Institute 2012, 3). Employee engagement differs from employee satisfaction in that the latter does not take into account the level of extra effort that an employee is prepared to put in his work tasks to further the success of the organization. Therefore, focusing only on satisfaction levels without devoting efforts to employee engagement might not lead to as high performance that could positively impact the bottom line as well. (ADP Research Institute 2012, 3.)

Since motivation as a construct is so closely related to being engaged as a concept and since it is discussed throughout the thesis, it is referred to as factors that make an employee carry out work tasks or pursue goals, something that causes one to act in a certain way (Ramlall 2004, 53). Motivation can originate from within when an

employee is willing to execute a task simply because it is attractive and fulfilling in itself. On the other hand, it can be triggered extrinsically by a reward or punishment when an external force (such as a manager) asks or orders an employee to do something (Kittle 2015).

## 2.2 Extended impacts of employee engagement

The Global Workforce Study by Towers Watson (2014) covered more than 32 000 employees who represented populations of full time employees working in large and midsize organizations across different industries around the globe. The study found that the top three attraction drivers for an employee (the employers were looked as a separate group in the survey) when deciding to join or leave an organization were salary, job security and career advancement opportunities. Right after the top three, other attraction drivers were learning and development opportunities, challenging work, the organization's reputation as a good employer and finally, vacation/paid time off.

The top three retention drivers were, from an employee's point of view, salary, career advancement opportunities and trust and confidence in senior leadership in this order. Other retention drivers were found to be job security, length of commute, relationship with the supervisor or manager and managing/limiting work-related stress. From this it can be seen that the base salary and career advancement opportunities are the two most important drivers in both attraction and retention. If they exist, it is more likely that an employee wants to join and stay at an organization, but if they are missing or are in a bad shape, it is more likely that an employee decides to leave the organization.

However, the factors that attract potential employees to join a company or to stay there are not necessarily the factors that would drive them to be engaged, too. For example, as it was stated earlier, salary does attract potential job applicants and helps in retaining the employees but it only has a limited influence on engagement (Corporate Leadership Council 2004, 43). According to an employee engagement survey by the Corporate Leadership Council (2004), every 10 percent of enhancement in an employee's commitment to the organization can reduce the probability of the

employee departing the organization by 9 percent. The probability of leaving a company can decrease by 87 percent when an employee moves from being strongly non-committed to being strongly committed. The Corporate Leadership Council's model of engagement is based on the idea that commitment drives discretionary effort and intent to stay and leads to increased performance as well as retention. However, having a high-performing group of employees requires recruiting high-quality talent to begin with, meaning workforce with the right skill set, strong work ethic and intelligence. Once this is done successfully, engagement gives reason for around 40 percent of improvements in performance. (Corporate Leadership Council 2004, 11-14.)

Having committed workforce who want to stay at the organization they work for is crucial for businesses in terms of the financial effects that a person departing a company results in. For example, the employers need to run a recruitment campaign looking for a replacement for the missed employee, go through the received applications, interview the most potential candidates and finally train and coach the chosen replacement. The latter causes a drop in productivity by various people due to distributing their tasks while the new hire is being familiarized to the job. (Hellebuyck et al. 2017, 18.) These costs have been estimated to be in total around 20 percent (or even as high as 50 percent in some vacancies) of the employee's annual salary (ibid. 18).

In addition, organizations' competitive advantage today is defined to a great extent by the development and utilization of their intangible assets that are difficult to replicate by competitors (Teece 2000, 3). These assets include knowledge, competence and intellectual property within the company, i.e. the intellectual capital of an organization (ibid. 4). As technology develops at an immense pace and workforce is needed especially in tasks that require high skills and knowledge, the innovations and differentiation of a company are by large dependent on their intellectual capital (Leonard 2016). It is essential for organizations to seek to retain this deep know-how not only in technology-related knowledge but also in terms of softer skills like asserting important relationships with clients and other stakeholders, as well as managing projects inside the organization. Employees with many years of experience (which has further enhanced their skills and knowledge) often are responsible for key projects and innovations at the company, but at the same time they are the most

wanted employees by competitors as well. Therefore, their preservation should be addressed even at the level of corporate strategy. Moreover, it should be planned carefully how that know-how can be passed along to potential successors over time. (Leonard 2016.)

The aforementioned Global Workforce Study (Towers Watson 2014) continued their explorations to employee performance in terms of factors that have an effect on attraction, retention, engagement and productivity. Based on the responses that the employees gave in the survey, the researchers could identify three measurable elements that, when combined, lead to *sustainable* engagement (see Figure 1). These elements were traditional engagement, enablement by supervisors and energy. Having the responses categorized under each of the three elements, they could see four different engagement segments shaping: the disengaged, detached, unsupported and the highly engaged. In the 2014 survey, 24% of the respondents, meaning almost one out of four employees, were disengaged having unfavorable scores in each of the three elements. Altogether 36% of employees were either detached or unsupported, meaning that they did feel supported and/or energized but did not feel traditionally engaged or vice versa, were feeling traditionally engaged but lacking enablement and/or energy for sustainable engagement. This led to the result that only 40% of respondents were highly engaged and scored high in each of the three categories.





	 Sustainable engagement	 Engagement	 Energy	 Enablement
<b>1</b>	Leadership	Leadership	Leadership	Leadership
<b>2</b>	Goals and objectives	Image	Goals and objectives	Workload and work/life balance
<b>3</b>	Workload and work/life balance	Goals and objectives	Workload and work/life balance	Empowerment
<b>4</b>	Image	Workload and work/life balance	Supervision	Goals and objectives
<b>5</b>	Empowerment	Communications	Image	Supervision

Figure 1. Global top drivers of sustainable engagement (Towers Watson 2014, 3)

### 2.3 Drivers of employee engagement

What is employee engagement then comprised of? What factors affect the most to the level of engagement that workforce have towards the workplace? Dan Crim and Gerard Seijts (2006) researched the concept and ultimately created “The Ten C’s of Employee Engagement” summarizing some key dimensions leading to engagement. The first dimension was Connect; the authors claimed that “employee engagement is a direct reflection of how employees feel about their relationship with the boss”, that if the connection between the worker and the boss is problematic or broken, there is no amount of bonuses or benefits that can persuade the employees to perform their best at work. Second, Crim and Seijts (2006) mentioned Career, referring to it as opportunities for career advancement, job rotation and new challenging duties that managers provide their subordinates with – at the same time making sure employees have the tools and skills to face the challenges in order to prevent excessive stress and frustration. Having a work environment that supports physical, emotional and interpersonal wellbeing, i.e. focusing on the comprehensive wellness of an employee also outside workplace can further sustainable engagement (Towers Watson 2014, 3; Crim & Seijts 2006).

According to Crim and Seijts (2006), Clarity over the organization’s vision and how clearly and openly it is communicated to the people enables employees to understand the importance of their personal input to reach the goals in an organizational level. This would also create meaningfulness in terms of placing the role and actions of one employee to a wider context. This led to another dimension called Contribute, more precisely focusing on how well exactly does the employee understand “the wider context” i.e. the strategic objectives of the company and the effect of their personal input to the said company-level objectives. (ibid.) This was supported by Robinson, Perryman and Hayday (2004) who stated that an engaged employee is aware of the business context and holds a positive attitude towards the organization’s values and wants to work for the benefit of the company rather than only for the good of the employee himself.

Fifth dimension according to Crim and Seitjs (2006) leading to engagement was to Convey, which means that leaders should provide feedback for their subordinates

based on the expectations towards them that the leaders have first clearly communicated. Conveying is also closely related to establishing processes and procedures that help people master the important tasks they've been assigned and thus help them to achieve the goals set for them. Towers Watson (2014, 3) referred to this same factor leading to sustainable engagement naming it as enablement, meaning employees having the tools, resources and support to do their job effectively, usually provided by their direct-line supervisors. After Conveying, followed Congratulation for strong performance so that a manager gives recognition for good employees and does not only give feedback when the performance is poor (Crim & Seijts 2006).

Seventh factor was Control, definitely not meaning managers controlling their subordinates from the above, but referring to the control that an employee has over his job when it comes to making decisions that affect the flow and pace of his job (Crim & Seijts 2006). As the authors put it, "being in on things" creates ownership over your job, including the challenges of it and coming up with sustainable solutions to those challenges. Collaboration was eighth: teams that have trust and real cooperation among team members outperform teams that lack these traits. At the same time, according to studies, individuals who are being cared about by their colleagues stand for stronger level of engagement. A company should also make it easy for an employee to be proud of the company he works for by making business with high ethical standards and so create Credibility and Confidence, the two last C's of employee engagement, by their actions. Here, the leaders need to act as top examples and not make decisions that are somehow questionable or contradict the standards they have made themselves. (ibid.) This way organizations can also be sure they have their employees spreading a positive message of their employer. The "ten C's" for employers to drive engagement among their subordinates by Crim and Seijts (2006) are represented as a summary in Figure 2 below:

<b>Connect</b> with your subordinates	Offer <b>career</b> advancement opportunities	<b>Clarify</b> the vision and the goals	<b>Convey</b> procedures to facilitate goal achievement	<b>Congratulate</b> for strong performance
Explain how subordinates <b>contribute</b> to overall success	Enable subordinates <b>control</b> over their own job	Make subordinates <b>collaborate</b> with each other	Create company <b>credibility</b> that employees are proud of	Help create <b>confidence</b> and trust in the company

Figure 2. The ten C's of employee engagement according to Crim and Seijts (2006)

## 2.4 Employees' intrinsic motivation – the basis for engagement

Larry Myler (2015) stated that any skilful leader knows that his employees must first want to make a larger input and that the leader can't just simply make his employees become passionate about taking the company forward and engage to it. Therefore, some sort of internal desire to do these things is needed from the employee. Myler (2015) brought up social and individual motivation as two additional sources of motivation beside the normally used (but not so effective) organizational motivation practices of rewards and recognition, citing the book called *Influencer* by Patterson, Grenny, Switzler, Maxfield and McMillan (2013).

Referring social motivation to peer influence, Myler (2015) stated that it can be more challenging to be something, here motivated and engaged, if most of the others are the opposite. It can feel more attractive for an employee to engage in the company's mission and values when the others are excited about them as well. One way to advance wider motivation and positive peer pressure could be to engage the employees to give each others recognition and feedback. This can lead to employees themselves driving engagement by giving their peers appreciation for doing something really well. (Myler 2015.) Individual motivation on the other hand, was referred to as

the beliefs and unfounded misconceptions, some learned as early as in childhood, that can hold people back from utilizing their full potential and believing that they are not enough skilled or competent to achieve something. Therefore, companies should invest time and efforts in helping their employees become the best versions of themselves (ibid.), because these strong, balanced individuals are the foundation of exceptional performance and bottom line.

Intrinsic motivation means that a person has an internal desire to accomplish a thing, that a person wants to commence an activity because it is appealing and fulfilling in itself (Kittle, 2015). When a person is intrinsically motivated, he feels that he has got tasks that he wants to do, rather than have to do, and thus it is easier to get the tasks done – it all comes down to performance. Kittle (2015) introduced five intrinsic motivators of which the first one is autonomy, a feeling that you have the control over what you are doing. Mastery, meaning improving and getting better at what you do, satisfies and motivates as well as the feeling of having purpose for what you are doing; that your efforts are making a difference. In addition, Kittle (2015) listed progress, seeing something you care about progressing in the organization, and social interaction, connecting and affiliating with co-workers, as internal motivating factors.

Kenneth Thomas (2009) took intrinsic motivation as the foundation of achieving engagement a little further and examined what sort of rewards work best for driving intrinsic motivation. Thomas (2009) stated that these days, employees are asked to execute self-management to a more significant degree than before, meaning they need to utilize their knowledge and set of skills to direct their work-related activities in a way that they achieve valuable and critical organizational purposes. In order to keep the employees actively executing self-management and engage to what they are doing, they need to get motivated by the content of their work and the expectations they should meet. This is assured by intrinsic rewards that are often intangible reinforcements gained during or after pursuing the goals. (ibid.)

Thomas (2009) listed four intrinsic rewards, being sense of meaningfulness, choice, competence and progress. He created a guideline for building a culture that drives engagement and enables intrinsic rewards to take place. First, the organization should start off with a meaningful purpose that goes beyond profit but seeks to answer what the organization can offer to its customers. Developing management

training and executive coaching in the way that they include intrinsic motivation and engagement as well as aiming attention at meaningfulness, sense of choice, competence and progress in all actions inside the organization are essential, too. The managers should also focus their resources on engaging the people that are only somewhat engaged to a higher level of engagement and measuring the levels of intrinsic rewards in the company. (ibid.)

On top of these actions, perhaps the largest entirety is to provide building blocks for the intrinsic rewards that need improvement. According to Thomas (2009), sense of meaningfulness can be improved by a non-cynical environment, clarified organizational passions, an intense idea of what can be accomplished and relevant purposes in terms of having a connection between the work and the vision. Sense of choice could be developed by for example delegating authority, trust between one another, no fear of penalty for honest errors and access to relevant information. Then again, sense of competence is built by positive feedback, getting challenging tasks that are suitable for an employee's skills, and recognizing success, for instance. Finally, sense of progress can be achieved by having an environment where co-workers help each other to succeed, having milestones and celebrations to mark accomplished stages and interacting with customers who use the final product or service the employees have produced. Moreover, an organization should adopt a process for implementing and developing the intrinsic rewards that engages people as itself; including the employees as participants of identifying and seeking solutions to the intrinsic rewards. (ibid.)

## 2.5 Internal communication as a tool for employee engagement

Research has proven internal communication to have an underlying effect on employee engagement. Internal communication has two main roles: it ensures a continuous provision of information and creates a feeling of community among companies and societies (Karanges, Johnston, Beatson & Lings 2015, 129). A pilot study researching the association between internal communication and employee engagement was conducted by Karanges, Johnston, Beatson and Lings in 2015, which was

especially focusing on the internal communication by the organization and by the supervisor which, according to the researchers of the study, were the two major relationships dominating an employee's work life.

The research, having a sample group of 2000 employees, found a "significant and positive association" between employee engagement and both internal organizational communication and internal supervisor communication. This means that managers and senior leaders can achieve more optimal levels of engagement by including their employees in the communication and thus creating a feeling that the employees are part of the organization's internal community. (Karanges et al. 2015, 130.) Furthermore, employee engagement was notified as one of the most current issues in internal communication in a Delphi analysis conducted in 2012 (Vercic, Vercic & Sriramesh 2012, 228). More precisely, the respondents gave employee engagement, loyalty and motivation an average score of 4,38 out of 5 when they were asked about the current issues in internal communication, 5 meaning "agree". In the analysis, only new internal digital media and change communication scored higher. (ibid. 228.) As the respondents in the Delphi analysis were employees of national associations from various countries, it can be concluded that employees, too, understand the concept of engagement and prioritize it as an important construct in working life.

According to the studies, the meaning of internal communication in improving the level of engagement employees have for their organization was evident, but the subjects and issues that should be communicated in order to influence engagement still remain to be described more precisely. Mishra, Boynton and Mishra (2014) conducted a study to further examine some of the topics that work as drivers of employee engagement and what role internal communication plays in executing these drivers. Firstly, the respondents of the study (being executives responsible for communications and/or PR in their organizations) agreed that employees have to feel like their input affects the firm's goals and what their part is in achieving the goals in order to feel engaged (Mishra et al. 2014, 190). According to the study, understanding the goals requires managers to openly communicate and share reliable and current information of the company's operations. This led to the second finding that the front-line supervisor of an employee is in a key role in improving his subordinates'

engagement. When the employee receives true support from and creates an authentic relationship through open discussions with his supervisor, he is more likely to become engaged in the company he works for. (ibid. 188.)

An engaged employee also benefits a company in the sense that he will presumably develop positive relationships with other stakeholders and thus becomes an advocate for the organization. This provides evidence that well executed internal communication can be the source of what is being communicated externally outside of the company and what sort of reputation the organization has in the eyes of the consumers, for instance. However, putting such a great meaning for internal communication and the role of front-line managers in it, the issue might call for PR and communications specialists to coach the managers in doing it. The interviewees of the study stated that managers might hesitate to have face-to-face communication with their subordinates because of not having the skills to handle such personal interactions and thinking sending out a memo is more efficient than participating in time-taking conversations. (Mishra et al. 2014, 196.) Therefore, the co-operation of PR professionals and managers in an organization rises high in importance to spread effective internal communication throughout the company staff.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Research design

To meet the purpose of the thesis, an exploratory study was conducted, which according to Saunders, Thornhill and Lewis (2009, 139) is useful when the researcher wants to evaluate a phenomenon in a new light and to look for new perceptions. Moreover, an exploratory study is valuable when the researcher wants to formulate and make her understanding of an issue clearer, albeit that it might lead to a conclusion of the research not being worth pursuing further. For conducting this sort of exploratory research, there are some principal ways for collecting information and data about the phenomenon being studied (Saunders et al. 2009, 140). In this thesis, two of these principal sources were used: search for literature written on the specific subject at hand and interviewing experts. The exploratory study was combined with an inductive approach, i.e. formulating some theories and outcomes based on the collected data (ibid. 126). Here, this included qualitative expert interviews and studying existing academic literature.

It could have been challenging to measure employee engagement by means of different ratings or numerical scales as they would not have possibly provided any meaningful information due to their subjective nature. Each individual experiences the feeling of being engaged differently based on their personal viewpoint. This is why a qualitative approach was applied for the research so that the different factors related to engagement could be elaborated on and explained better with words. The qualitative approach was useful exactly for understanding feelings, values and perceptions that underlie and influence behavior, as Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault (2016, 18) identified, and moreover, to capture the language and imagery used to describe and relate to the topic.

Considering the nature of qualitative research, it is often linked to an inductive research approach, meaning that the researcher creates perceptions and insights from patterns in the data rather than collecting data to evaluate prepossessed hypotheses (Taylor et al. 2016, 18). This should well fit the exploratory purpose of this thesis which seeks to address the topic from a somewhat unusual or fresher perspective

that does not have too many pre-set theories around it to begin with (Saunders et al. 2009, 139). This is supported by one of the goals of qualitative research that is to study and consider how things look from different point of views (ibid. 19). This said, no perspective is more important than the other, and all of them are worth reviewing. Moreover, for a qualitative researcher, there is something to be learned from all groups of people and from any perspective.

The author was guided by some research ethics driven by social norms throughout the research process. This meant acting appropriately in relation to the rights of the people being interviewed and those who might be affected by it (Saunders et al. 2009, 184). Here, the research ethics related to how the author designed the research, accessed, collected and processed the data along with how she presented the findings in a moral and responsible way (ibid. 184).

The author assured the interviewees of their anonymity in how their responses to the interview questions would be presented and that their personal details would not be shared publicly. Hence, the author was bound to these agreements. It was also guaranteed to the interviewees at the very first stages of the interview process that no names of the persons who took part in the research would be revealed nor the names of the organizations that they represented.

In terms of accessing data, the researcher did not need access to any confidential data or information systems since the study was not assigned by any specific organization nor did the research topic deal with a certain organization's ways of doing business. The interviewees took part in the research voluntarily as private persons and the research topic focused on the interviewees' experiences on a very general level.

The reliability of the research, referring to the extent to which the author's "data collection techniques or analysis procedures will yield consistent findings" (Saunders et al. 2009, 156) could be said to have been mostly threatened by observer error and bias. Observer error, being the way how the interviewer presents the questions to generate answers (ibid. 157) was reduced by conducting the interviews by e-mail and typing the same question similarly for each interviewee. Observer bias, referring to how the researcher interprets the answers (ibid. 157), was perhaps of larger concern

than the participant bias – where respondents generally say what they think their managers want them to say – because in this specific study, the respondents did not represent their employers in the research and were granted anonymity.

The attempts to assure the validity of the research, on the other hand, i.e. the concern of whether the findings were actually about what they seemed to be about (Saunders et al. 157) were made by minimizing some common threats such as mortality and testing. Fortunately, none of the respondents dropped out of the research in between the interview rounds and thus mortality did not exist. This was likely to be due to the relatively fast pace with which the interview rounds were carried out after one another. As the interviews were presented anonymously, the respondents did not likely need to suspect that the findings would disadvantage them in any way, thus testing was successfully eliminated (ibid. 157). The study did not seek to have external validity, i.e. generalizability due to the small group of respondents, meaning that the author simply aimed to account for what the specific group of experts thought of the interview topics but did not intend to claim that the findings were equally applicable to other research settings (ibid. 158).

### 3.2 Data collection

The data collection process for this thesis started from studying previously written material on the topic with the goal of forming the theoretical framework. At this point, the researcher focused mainly on printed publications of academic literature such as journals, articles and books. The material was located using online search tools as help which also enabled the researcher to look for as current sources as possible to make sure the information utilized was still valid today. After conducting the theoretical framework, primary data was generated and later analyzed in the researcher's empirical research part of the thesis process when interviews were carried out through e-mails between the researcher and the interviewees.

As stated previously, for this type of a research using a qualitative approach, one appropriate way of achieving the research objectives was to make qualitative expert interviews. As Bogner, Littig and Menz (2009, 2) point out, experts as interviewees can

be seen to act as “crystallization points for practical insider knowledge” and to present some commonly experienced phenomena or feelings among a wider population. Even though an “expert” as a construct can have several meanings to it and it can be problematic to define and recognize what an expert is or should be, in this thesis, the expert interviewees are referred to as professionals in human resources who have several years of experience of working in the field, preferably in managerial positions. Thus, they could be assumed to have shared, special knowledge in the research topic. (Gläser & Laudel 2009, 117.) Furthermore, the researcher could expect the respondents to acknowledge the information that was needed for the research and to provide the researcher with thorough and detailed responses of high quality (ibid. 117). At the same time, interviewing line workers or so called blue collar workers could have been more challenging due to these aforementioned reasons – moreover, they were excluded from this specific research simply due to time and resource constraints of the research process.

In practice, there were four people interviewed who were professionals in human resources and met the wanted requirements of multiple years of experience in human resource management but also in supervisory occupations. These HRM professionals represented the employer’s side due to their roles as managers and superiors in the work place, but at the same time, they were (or had been) employees to their employers. In this sense, they should have understood both employees and employers’ viewpoints and seen “both sides of the coin” as well as they should have had deep insights and a wide spectrum of viewpoints regarding engagement. Yet most importantly, they had had tens or even hundreds of subordinates throughout their years in business and hence had the previously mentioned credibility and wide understanding to represent the wanted employee perspective in this study regarding employee engagement. Moreover, expert interviews were seen beneficial in terms of gathering the data efficiently and gaining the wanted results quickly as the researcher and the respondents shared a similar understanding and interest in the topic at hand, reducing the need for further explanation or reasoning (Bogner et al. 2009, 2).

The interviews for the thesis were conducted using e-mail as the instrument. E-mail interviews were used in order to guarantee that the interviewees could choose the

space and time for answering the questions, so that it was as convenient as possible for the supposedly busy professionals. According to Murray and Saxsmith (1998, 105), as e-mail interviews are not limited by geographical and time constraints, they can therefore lead to “expanding the possible diversity of the research sample”. As the use of time for responding to the interview was not limited, the participants could take as much time as they needed and thus perhaps focused on giving more detailed and broader answers. Moreover, in e-mail interviews the respondents should be less aware of their audience so that interviewer bias should not affect the answers as much as in face-to-face interviews which can even lead to giving more personal information that can be thought as too sensitive to talk about face-to-face (Murray & Saxsmith 1998, 106). The actual data collection process in practice was rather simple in the sense that the interviewees typed in the data themselves and thus, transcribing the interviews from scratch was eliminated to a great extent.

### 3.3 Implementation of the data collection process

When conducting the interviews, a structured model was used. A structured interview is based on a fixed and consistent set of questions decided in advance and often referred to as interviewer-administered questionnaires (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009, 312). Using the model, there was a set of ready-made questions with no variation sent to all of the interviewees which formed the first round of interviews. After that, there was another round of interviewing done which included ready-made open ended questions again, but which differed a little between the interviewees based on what they had answered in the first round. Structured model was chosen in order to ensure an efficient data collection process due to time constraints from both the researcher’s and the interviewees sides. In addition, as all participants answered mostly to the same questions, the structured interview enabled the researcher to easily compare the data between the responses. Even though it could be argued that a structured interview doesn’t give as much room for the respondents to share their in-depth personal experiences due to the lack free discussion (ibid. 106), the unlimited time and possibility for privacy in answering the e-mail interview hopefully reduced this challenge to some extent. In addition, the inclusion of a second

round containing follow-up questions based on the previous responses made it possible to deepen the level of discussion and ask for elaborative justifications for the interviewees' viewpoints.

In the first round, the respondents were asked five demographic questions and nine open-ended questions regarding the thesis topic. This first round of the interview was completely identical to all of the interviewees. Even though the responses were to be presented as completely anonymous in the research, the demographic questions were there to identify details like in what position the respondent worked at that moment and how many years he/she had experience in HRM related tasks to make sure the interviewees met the requirements of an expert as defined earlier. The researcher read through the first set of responses and based on what the respondents stated, there were three or four follow-up questions created in order to better define some of the previously given responses, but also to expand the discussion to some new angles related to the topic that had not been asked before. These follow-up questions differed a little between the interviewees due to the rather obvious variation between their responses in the first round. However, if a similar question was proposed to more than one person, it was always asked in the same way.

The collection of data took place in the beginning of the year 2018. The first round of interviews was implemented in the very first days of January 2018 and the second round in late January and early February 2018. The two rounds were implemented close to each other with the purpose of maintaining the topic and previous responses fresh in mind as well as to hold on to the interactive relationship between the interviewer and the interviewees.

### 3.4 Data analysis

Doing qualitative research, it is said that data collection and analysis often go hand in hand (Taylor et al. 2016, 160). This means that analyzing the data gained during the research process is an ongoing activity so that the researcher constantly tries to theorize and outline the data he/she has gotten. This goes on to continuously seeking to refine the perceptions and conclusions of the topic at hand (ibid. 160). As in this specific research process the data was typed in using e-mail as the instrument for it,

there was no need to transcribe it to text from scratch. However, the researcher collected all the responses to one large table so that she could better compare the responses to one another. This also helped in analyzing the first interview round's results and to see the big picture in terms of what still needed to be asked in the second round. In other words, this interactive nature between collecting the data and analyzing it at the same time helped to identify certain themes and patterns that came up regularly (Saunders et al. 2009, 488).

After all the needed data had been collected through the interviews, the researcher began to summarize the data (see Appendix 1). This condensation process was done in order to make sense of the large amounts of written material and to look for some of the key factors that recurred in several responses. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009, 491), summarizing the data into fewer words enables the researcher to find the most important themes but also to draw relationships between them and thus organize their validity.

Summarizing the interviews started by looking at what the written data as a whole included and deciding on three main categories for the summary. The categories were chosen right in the beginning so that organizing the data would be a smoother process and the researcher could sort out the responses under suitable 'boxes' all at once. Two of the categories were based on the two research questions of the thesis and the third one was more of a starting point for the findings, including some general issues on the concept of engagement and factors that affect it. After conducting a condensed summary, the researcher was able to start reporting the findings of the research, focusing on explaining the core issues from the data.

## 4 Research findings

The number of people who took part in the interview in the role of expert interviewees was four. These experts represented different business fields of IT and software development, education export as well as consultancy and coaching. Despite the different industries, they had all had extensive careers in supervisory roles in human resources management related tasks, varying from 10 to almost 20 years. At the time of participating in the interviews, the interviewees had occupational titles of Director in Human Resources, Partner and Coach, Human Resources Consultant and Entrepreneur, and Director of Human Resources and Culture. As one can see from these titles, the interviewees represented the employer side in the role of shareholders and/or entrepreneurs as well as managerial roles, which, hopefully, brought many angles to their perspectives on working life as a whole.

As stated previously, the data gained from the interviews was divided under three categories in order to be presented clearly and to meet the research questions of the thesis. The first one (subheading 4.1) introduced the interviewees' ideas of employee engagement as a concept. This also included what they thought that influence and drive engagement and how they defined an engaged employee. The second and third subheadings (4.2 and 4.3) were related to the two research questions on employee engagement from the employee perspective, and they sought to find solutions to these questions based on the interviewees' experiences and thoughts that they shared in the interviews. The four experts are referred to as interviewees A, B, C and D.

### 4.1 Perceptions on employee engagement as a concept

The first round of interviews started by asking the interviewees how they would define an engaged employee. The terms that were mentioned the most and by all the respondents were that an engaged employee is trustworthy, enthusiastic, loyal, motivated and interested in developing his own job as well as the organization. In addition, an entrepreneurial state of mind was mentioned as one common feature of an engaged person. Moving on to the factors that drive engagement, the interviewees

mentioned trust, openness and appreciation between employees and their employers as the most important factors, but also the workplace atmosphere and culture where success is recognized and people value each other's work. Interviewee A also mentioned the importance of feeling meaningfulness and significance of one's job and the possibilities for developing one's skills as drivers of engagement.

Every one of the interviewees agreed that salary and employee benefits are not on the top list of engagement drivers, if they are such at all. On the other hand, all of them thought that salary has to be on a fair and suitable level or it could cause dissatisfaction and lead to disengagement. Interviewee B recalled that according to studies, raises in salary influenced the level of engagement positively only for a short period of time. Interviewee C said that she had never heard employees say when leaving a company for a new one that the employee benefits would have affected them to change employer.

When asking about the positive effects that an engaged employee has for the organization, all the interviewees stated that an engaged employee is more productive and more efficient compared to a disengaged one. An engaged person was seen more willing to give a better work contribution than what the target level would be and work a little extra for the good of the organization. In other words, the interviewees said them to be the strength that supports the organization and drives it forward:

*The input of engaged employees is much greater than of the ones who only "go to work". The difference from the organization's perspective is in that they have something to give for taking the company forward and developing the internal operations (Interviewee C).*

The role of the employer in creating and increasing engagement among employees had a little more varying definitions between the interviewees but still included similar themes. Interviewee D stated that an employer encourages, advises and guides employees whereas interviewee C wrote that the employer's role in increasing engagement is to describe the boundaries inside which employees can fulfil themselves and to tell what they should do and why. Interviewee C continued that all sorts of micromanaging and stalking only brings out the worst sides of people, when again it would be essential to create an atmosphere where matters could be discussed

openly. Interviewee B highlighted the importance of communication through open interaction and appreciation of the employee and continued that the employer should focus on building mutual trust as a way to increase engagement. Interviewee A, on the other hand, stated that the role of an employer is to eliminate barriers from the way of working; to coach, thank and encourage so that the employee would feel that he is genuinely being cared for.

#### 4.2 Employees' possibilities to influence the level of their engagement

Moving forward to seeking responses to if the employee can affect the level of his own engagement and in what ways, all of the interviewees agreed that people do have different levels of wants and abilities to engage to their employers in the first place. Some employees are looking for routines and a sense of security from a long-term employer – interviewee D added that there can also be variations between generations in how long they want to engage in one employer for. Then again, some others put more weight on the level of how much they can benefit from their employer in terms of being able to develop themselves and building a career path suitable for their own needs and dreams. In addition, the respondents wrote that there are also differences in how strongly a person wants to identify himself to the organization he works for or if he wants to keep his job as a separate element from other elements in life; take work simply as only work. Interviewees C and D mentioned that, it might be that in many occasions people don't even have the intention to engage to a new employer if they need to accept a job due to some other circumstance or reason and cannot choose which employer to work for:

*Yes, not everybody wants nor can engage in the same way. For example, a family where the other has to move after a job to another city, the spouse needs to move with no matter how engaged he/she might be to his/her employer. --- Many people create career paths or travel plans and there, salary/learning is what they are looking for from the job (Interviewee D).*

Asking about how much the employee's own attitude towards his employer influences how engaged he feels, interviewee A pointed out that everyone can always affect and change their own attitude and it is something everyone is personally in

charge of themselves. The respondents said that an engaged person usually looks kindly on the employer and reacts to things with a more positive and loyal attitude. An engaged employee often contemplates how things should be done and how the circumstances and procedures could be developed at the work place, when again a disengaged person might tackle his duties blamelessly but not be interested in thinking how to take things to the next level, in particular from the organizational point of view.

What truly puts the level of engagement to test are the bad times, the low tides, according to the interviewees. Usually, the genuinely engaged ones want to show loyalty and respect for their employers also during the worse times in business. This, however, requires that the employees have been treated well before and the employees want to give something back to their employers. Therefore, it would be truly essential to focus on building and strengthening the team during the good times. Interviewee A compared this to the situation where only a few people leave their favorite sports team when they have had a bad season because the sense of community is so strong. Then again some of the less engaged employees might start to prepare leaving the company as soon as they hear about the cooperation negotiations if they can't bear the insecurity over their destiny in the company.

The interviewees did not have as strong a consensus when it came to in what ways the employees can influence how engaged they feel or, at least, any certain terms did not pop up as frequently as to many other questions. However, they all seemed to agree on that there are ways for an employee to affect his own engagement. Interviewee B emphasized self-leadership and a proactive grasp to one's own work and developing in it, whereas interviewee A mentioned that a positive and constructive attitude of an employee is the key in influencing his own engagement levels. Having an affirmative attitude also spreads the positive energy in the workplace community which helps to make people to enjoy the climate they work in:

*One can always change the attitude, that's something everyone is in charge of. With a positive and constructive attitude, you impact both your own and the others' vibes and the atmosphere has an effect on the common every-day life. With a positive, active and constructive attitude you can also affect what sorts of challenges you are given at the workplace and thus impact the level of your engagement, too (Interviewee A).*

Interviewee D again proposed being given and taking responsibility of one's own work and the team spirit as tools of feeling more engaged. Interviewee C wrote about understanding one's own role as part of the entirety, the organization. C continued that it is important to acknowledge what the organization wants to achieve in the big picture and especially why, as well as to know the story of the company and its clients so that an employee can relate to the organization he works for more easily:

*Many times, understanding your own role as part of the entirety helps. If you can't catch what's being done in the big picture and what the expectations towards the employee are, it can be hard to engage when you don't really know what you're engaging to. It's important to know the company well, understand what's being done and for which clients. It often helps if you also know the story of the company and thus know at which point you have stepped in the game yourself (Interviewee B).*

Altogether, despite the varying words used to describe affecting one's own engagement, one could say the connective theme for all of them is that an employee must have some sort of willingness to develop his own engagement but also be active and take part in measures to strengthen the engagement at the work place. It could be concluded that unless an employee has motivation to influence his level of engagement – or to be engaged in the first place – it might be difficult for an employer to make it happen on his own either.

#### 4.3 Utilization of employee perspective in developing engagement

Considering organizations making use of their employees' perspectives on what they think would drive their engagement the best, interviewee A stated that it is one of the most important things there are. Interviewee A continued that when creating something new, whatever it is, one should always ask his employees how it should be done, because they are the true experts of their own jobs and every-day life at the office. Even knowing that you, as an employee, have the possibility to have an effect on issues, creates engagement. Interviewee B agreed that organizations could utilize the employee perspective by building an interactive communication culture where

employee can bring out their thoughts to begin with and that they know they are being listened and reacted to. Interviewee D gave an example of having workshops or special themed days dedicated to developing the engagement drivers all together as a solution to get the employees' thoughts heard. Interviewee C added that the employee perspective and how the employees are going to see an organizational change, for example, should be carefully considered already at the management level. Again, communication is in key role, as C pointed out that it is also about how you, as a manager, present and 'internally market' something new to your audience of employees.

Talking about internal communication, all the interviewees agreed that it is one of the key factors in promoting engagement – that leadership as a whole is, to a great extent, communication. Interviewee B stated that if communication is not full or it is somehow vague, trust and hence engagement won't be born. Interviewee C highlighted internal communication as a tool for people to truly understand what they are doing, what they are expected to do and especially why. Interviewee A was of one mind about it, and stated that a feeling that nothing is being hidden and issues are being told the way they are, creates a sense of belonging to a greater whole where everyone works with a common goal in their minds. Interviewee A continued that shared stories of success and failures also create a sense of solidarity.

According to the interviewees, it varies a lot how well the employee perspectives are being utilized in organizations. Some make great use of them while some do not at all. Interviewees A and C mentioned hurry and tight schedules as one big reason to why employee perspective might not be taken into consideration as well as it should be. Interviewee B added that it is many times easier to rely on the easy solutions, like money, as a way to try and add engagement levels whereas interviewee D wrote that especially in small companies it is all down to how personally interested in developing engagement or other HRM related conditions the manager of the company is.

Interviewee C stated that executing things with a too strict schedule usually leads to a situation where there is no time for a common understanding of the idea to be born and thus, the idea is left a little vague and people cannot internalize it enough. Interviewee A continued that it might often seem more simple to come up with a

quick solution and then put it into practice with the staff. Interviewee A also highlighted that employees engage more easily when they can be part of influencing things especially when it comes to changes and transformations:

*People always engage better to all sorts of changes if they have been part of thinking about it or if they had a possibility to take part in it. For some, it is enough that they can choose whether or not participate as long as the progress of the case is being informed enough and in a diverse way (Interviewee A).*

When asking about how managers can affect to their employees' internal motivation towards their jobs, interviewee A stated that it is important to build the procedures and practices in a way that working is fluent and that they serve the employees and the work community in the best possible way. In addition, employees should be included in decision making, but also, learning should be facilitated, because true wisdom is found among the people who work with the tasks every day, interviewee A added. Also, meaningfulness and shared goals to which one can identify are essential. Interviewee D added that internal motivation is created from a functioning employer-employee relationship which leads to an employee feeling appreciated and valued at his workplace.

Interviewee B said that one way to influence internal motivation is to take care of the employee, in other words, taking care that the employee receives feedback of his work and that he can give feedback in return. She continued that in order to be internally motivated, an employee needs to be listened to, he needs to know the targets and goals of his job, he has to have an opportunity to affect the content of his job and he has to have opportunities to develop himself (and these opportunities should also be fulfilled). In addition, an employee's wishes, skills and know-how should be in line with the content and requirements of his tasks and job in a way that the employee fits his role.

## 5 Discussion

The expert interview findings seemed to implicate that it is easier for HRM professionals to list various ways to how employers can influence their employees' level of engagement than to what the employee himself can do about it. This was well in line with what the existing literature on employee engagement dealt with and surely, much of the interviewed experts' practices and ways related to engaging employees welled from previously published professional literature and research as well. This gives support for deciding to conduct this study with the purpose of being an exploratory study with an inductive approach as the employees' possibilities to influence their own engagement do not seem to be as widely studied, understood or applied in business.

In addition, the very consistent definitions that the interviewees gave for employee engagement as a concept and what features engaged employees have, indicated that the interviewees knew their business and the common theories and research of the field. However, when they were asked about what the ways and practices are for driving engagement, especially what the employees can do about it, the responses were multifold and differed more from each other. This implicated that there are no standardized models or processes for getting to the goal of having engaged employees. Surely, there is not only one correct or ultimately best way of doing things: the routes to the same goal can vary a lot and they are somewhat incomparable with each other. The people working in each organization have individual needs and wants and might require different ways to 'get engaged' to the companies. On the other hand, as employee engagement as a concept and its drivers seemed to be relatively customary and generally accepted theories overall, one could think that the ways to implement them would be more consistent or similar, too.

Considering the theoretical framework of the thesis and comparing it to what the interviewees stated in their responses at a more precise level, there were numerous similarities. Firstly, what came up in the interviews was that for an employee to be able to engage to the organization and to develop the level of engagement further, the employee needs to understand what he is 'getting engaged' to and how his actions are linked to a bigger idea and purpose. This was referred to in the theoretical

framework in terms of clearly communicating the reasons behind why something is being done and how those tasks can help the company to reach its goals in the long run, while, at the same time, making the employee feel like his input truly is meaningful and effective.

The importance of communication came up in various stages of the research process – as many of the interviewees put it, leadership is communication to a great extent. According to the existing literature referred to in this thesis, both organizational and supervisor communication significantly affect employee engagement and the overall meaning of communication is to enhance the sense of community as well as to ensure a continuous delivery of relevant information. The interviewees developed this purpose further and pointed out that one way for organizations to make use of their employees' opinions and viewpoints on engagement is to have the sort of communication culture where ideas can be openly discussed.

In this context, it was highlighted in the interviews and the theoretical foundations that feedback should be exchanged between employers and employees in a way that the two parties can both give feedback to one another, not only the manager assessing his subordinates. Here, the meaning of a genuine relationship based on trust was named as an enabler. Moreover, the interviewees described an engaged employee as someone who doesn't need constant babysitting on what he is doing but that he can be trusted on making his best and getting things done, even beyond expectations, independently. In the theoretical framework, this was linked to employees having control over their own jobs as an engagement driver by having a choice on how they want to work and what fits them best – not giving a detailed framework from above.

However, for engagement to take place in the beginning, some level of intrinsic motivation is required. Being engaged cannot be compelled by anyone: no matter how ready-made solutions for making an employee engaged the employer could have, they do not work as long as the employee does not have internal desire for accepting the offered prerequisites. Motivation can be seen as the basis for anything to take place and to make sense, but, on the other hand, the interviewees pointed out that not all employees even want to be or become that engaged to the organization. Many times, a job is accepted due to other external factors in life even though the

person would not even be that interested in it or does not have an intention to stay in the company for long. In these cases, it truly is a challenge (if not impossible) to change the employee's mind and make him into an engaged employee or to get him perform well due to the lack of internal motivation. From the organization's point of view, these actively disengaged employees clearly are not a very good investment in terms of their low productivity and low levels of performance. The interviewees did, however, think that intrinsic motivation can be developed by including the employees in decision-making, creating meaningfulness, as well as having mutual trust, all of which are essential building blocks for the intrinsic rewards of internal motivation cited before in the theoretical foundations. These intangible rewards were said to include sense of meaningfulness, sense of choice, sense of competence and sense of progress.

## 5.1 Conclusions

As the ways for an employee to influence his own engagement did not seem to have as strong a consensus among the interviewees, it could be asked if it truly is so, then, that an employee's level of engagement is dependent only on how the employer drives it and what the prerequisites at the workplace are for engagement to take place and to increase; if the level of engagement is dependent on external factors created by the employer only. How significant is the employee's own input, then? The very first thing for an employee is to bring out his opinions on targets for development since one cannot expect others to be mind-readers. However, the ultimate effectiveness of an employee's input to the topic is dependent on how extensively the people who make the final decisions decide to utilize them – if the employees are given the chance to influence on things or not. Thus, **communication** is key in taking the first steps towards better engagement. Being able to communicate thoughts out loud requires **trust** between the employee and his manager and an **open culture** where the employee feels like he can share his thoughts, be it negative or positive feedback, and that his thoughts are being valued.

Moreover, **activity** of some level is required from the employee, too, to take part in the conversations and efforts to develop engagement. The idea of employees simply either settling for 'the cards that are given' by their employer or instantly switching

workplace because the conditions don't please them seems unlikely far-reaching. Engagement is not something that is given to a person ready-made, making the employee instantly feel fully engaged, but often requires patient development work. Taking actively part in this sort of development efforts asks for personal interest in and **motivation** for the theme, here driving engagement for the good of eventually everyone in the organization (see Figure 3). When the employee is motivated to engage in the first place, he is willing to accept the employer's suggested ways to drive engagement and to provide the employer with constructive feedback about them.

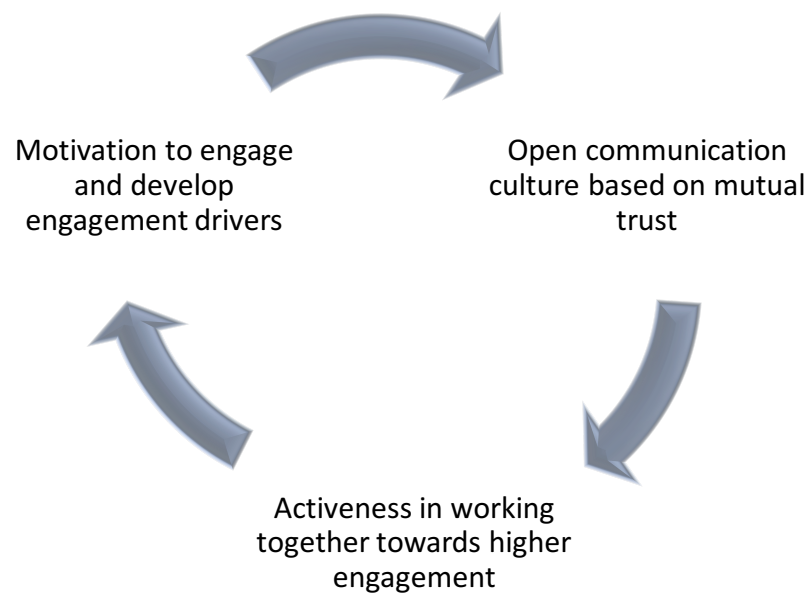


Figure 3. The foundation pillars for an employee to influence his engagement

In conclusion, employee engagement is a two-way phenomenon requiring both employee and employer. All of these key factors mentioned above; communication, trust, open culture, activity and motivation, require, not only each other, but also the two parties of employees and employers to either originate and exist in the first place or, to be effective and to make a real difference. Therefore, engagement should be thought of as a common project: Ultimately, it all comes down to a mutual, two-sided proactivity and a collective will to work and co-operate for a shared goal.

## 5.2 Limitations and further considerations

Considering the limitations to this thesis, it must be pointed out that as the number of people who took part in the expert interviews was rather small and the method of the research was qualitative, the findings were more of hypothetical drawings and speculative conclusions based on the data gained from the interviewees and existing literature, rather than generalizable deductions on the subject. However, this research could possibly inspire to shift thinking away from that employers and managers have all the responsibility in making their employees engaged, because the employees should also have some sort of readiness and motivation to accept the ways they are trying to be engaged by their employers.

Hence, the findings could work as an opening for discussion on how to include the employees in topics such as engagement that do concern them very strongly in working life. Moreover, before seeking to drive engagement, it could be useful to address the employee's internal motivation and attitudes for getting engaged in the first place. Thus, human resource professionals and anyone concerned with the subject could apply the findings of the study in terms of taking care that their employees' viewpoints are taken into consideration when developing engagement and moreover, how it could be done effectively. In addition, this thesis could work as a basis and inspiration for future researchers to take the overall perspective and purpose of this study forward in their theses or any other studies.

For further research, it could be examined if, and how, the employees themselves see their opportunity to influence the level of their own engagement and to what extent their employers take the employees' perspectives into consideration when developing the drivers for engagement. This might need some sort of familiarization to the concept and drivers of engagement first, though, to make the research and data collection effective and fruitful, as not all employees can be expected to have thought of the construct actively before. There could also be some organizations that might benefit from researching the level of the employee perspective utilization in enhancing their specific conditions for engagement as a case study targeted to their staff only. On a more personal level, the author's intention is to make use of this research in her future studies at a master's level by either researching the construct of

employee engagement at a whole another perspective or by expanding (why not contracting) the research of employee perspective in engagement. Another possibility, for example, could be to conduct a similar research than in this thesis but expand the scope so that there would be a significantly larger number of experts being interviewed. Of course, if the scope grew into larger measures, it would respectively require much greater resources in terms of time and effort by more researchers as well.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Summary of the expert interviews

#### 1. General issues of engagement as a concept

- An engaged employee is: trustworthy, excited, motivated, interested in developing himself and the organization, loyalty, entrepreneurial attitude
- What drives engagement: trust, openness, appreciation between employer and employee, workplace environment where success is being noticed and the work of co-workers is appreciated
  - o “A” mentioned meaningfulness and possibilities to develop skills, too
- Salary and employee benefits need to be at a fair and suitable level but they do not drive engagement; but if they are at an unfair or really bad level, they won’t help engagement forward either
  - o “C” had never heard that people leaving a company would’ve been due to bad employee benefits; “D” thought that versatile employee benefits could drive engagement
- Positive effects of an engaged employee: everyone agreed that an engaged employee is more productive and efficient, he is willing to give a bigger contribution than what the target level might be and maybe do a little extra for the good of the company and the work community; they are the power that holds up and takes the company forward
- An employer’s role in creating and increasing engagement: “D” stated that an employer supports and guides the employees; “C” said that an employer should define the lines within which an employee can fulfill himself and to tell what is being done and why. “C” continued that micromanaging and stalking only brings out the bad sides, hence, it’s important to create an environment where things can be openly discussed. “B” stated that an employer needs to engage the employees in the organization and to build reciprocal trust and highlighted open interaction through appreciating the employee. “A” thought that an employer must eliminate barriers from the way of working, coach,

thank and support, so that the employee feels he is being genuinely appreciated.

## 2. To what extent can employees influence their own engagement overall?

- Everyone agreed that people have abilities and wants of different levels to engage to the employee: some look for routines and sense of security from a long-term employer while some appreciate the level of benefit through self-development and career path. There are differences in how strongly people want to identify themselves with the company or to maintain job as a separate element
  - “C” and “D” mentioned that some might not have the meaning to engage to the company in the first place but might have to accept a job due to other circumstances (e.g. in the beginning of working life/ if your spouse gets a job from another city etc.)
  - There might be differences among generations in terms of for how long one wants to engage to an organization
- To what extent does an employee’s attitude towards the employer affect how engaged he is: respondents stated that an engaged person usually thinks more positively and loyally about his employer and thinks about how things should be done and developed, whereas disengaged ones might perform blamelessly from his work but aren’t interested in developing the processes
  - The bad times test the levels of engagement, but being loyal and engaged during the bad times requires that the employees have been treated well before and thus might want to show their respect towards the employer
  - Example by “A”: only a few switch their favorite sports team after a bad season, because the sense of community and fan culture is so strong – that’s why during the good times, employers should focus on making the team strong and powerful to face the possible bad times
  - “C”: during bad times, some might not deal with the insecurity over their own destiny or aren’t so engaged, so they start to prepare leaving as soon as they hear about the co-operation negotiations

- Employee's possibilities and ways to affect his own engagement: not so strong a consensus among the respondents or specific terms that would've recurred, but clearly the experts seemed to agree that some ways for it do exist
  - o "A" stated that an employee can affect his engagement with a constructive and positive attitude with which he also builds a good environment in the work community; "B" mentioned self-leadership and a proactive touch to his own job and developing at it
  - o "C" mentioned understanding your own role as part of the entirety; what is wanted to be accomplished in the big picture and why, what is the story of the company, who are the clients and what the employer is expecting from the employee; "D" added taking responsibility of your own work and the team spirit

### **3. In what ways can organizations utilize the employee perspective when developing drivers for engagement?**

- "B" stated that organizations can utilize the employee perspective when developing drivers for engagement by building interactive communication where employees are given the possibility to bring forth their opinions which are being listened and reacted to. "D" gave an example that workshops or theme days meant especially for developing engagement together could work as one way of making employees heard. "C" said that the employee perspective should be considered already at the management team when some change is being planned; often it's a lot about how the transformation is internally marketed how people react to it. "A" underlined that utilizing employee perspective is "one of the most essential things there can be"; when creating anything new, you should always ask your staff how it should be done, because the employees are the experts of their own job and everyday life. "A" continued that even knowing that you have the chance to influence to things increases engagement.
- Internal communication was one of the key things according to all respondents in driving engagement – that leadership as a whole is mainly communication. "B" stated that vague and incomplete communication results lack of

trust and thus disengagement. “C” emphasized internal communication as a tool for people understanding what they are doing and why; “A” said shared stories of successes and failures make people feel social cohesion and being able to trust that everything is told and nothing is hidden makes people feel like they are part of a bigger entirety with a common goal

- Respondents agreed that it varies a lot how well the employee perspective is being utilized. As reasons for it “A” and “C” mentioned hurry and tight schedules and “B” added that companies often resort to easy solutions, i.e. money; “D” said that especially in small firms the level of utilization is up to the entrepreneur’s personal interest in the topic.
  - “A” underlined that people engage better when they can be part of influencing to things, especially when related to change, but many times it’s faster to come up with something quick in the corner room and then put it into practice among the staff; “C” agreed that implementing things with a too tight schedule often leads to not having a shared understanding of the thing and hence it is left a little superficial
- Intrinsic motivation towards one’s job can be developed by building all processes in a way that working is fluent and that they serve the employee and the community; also by incorporating employees in decision-making and facilitating learning, because wisdom is found among the people who work with the tasks daily, according to “A”. Meaningfulness and shared goals you can identify with are important. “B” said the following: by taking care of the employee, i.e. taking care that the employee is given feedback and he can give it too, that he is listened to, he knows the targets of his work, he has possibility to affect the content of his job and that he has chances to develop his skills and his career. By making sure that the employee’s wishes, skills and requirements are in line with the content and prerequisites of his duties; the right person in the right position. “D” added that intrinsic motivation is born from a good employer-employee relationship when the employee feels appreciated at his workplace.