



# Exploring employee engagement

- Subjective reflection by applying the Five Themes Model

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Subjective reflection by applying the Five Themes Model

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The purpose of this study was to explore the current situation of the employee engagement in a specific organisation. This research was implemented as a case study for an anonymous company. The role of the researcher was to give the voice to the individual employees in the organisation and gather information how they define and experience the phenomenon. By interviewing the employees, the researcher would be able to share an overview of the situation and identify potential outcomes.

The data was collected by using a semi-structured interview. The Five Themes Model was designed for this purpose and applied during the interviews in order to gather the most relevant information for this specific case. The interview results were analysed through the theoretical framework based on the studies of Kahn (1990) and it is combined with the most recent research results of the topic.

A subjective reflection of the employee engagement provided a lot of valuable information for the organisation to when renewing their Human Resource Strategy. The results suggest the employees in this specific organisation are relatively engaged but the most significant challenge found in the research was related to professional development. This outcome would require a new, more detailed research to learn more about the professional development needs the employees have in this specific organisation.

The study recommends the organisation to focus on the employees as individuals and to share time with them in person. Due to the unique context, conclusions and recommendations cannot be directly transferred to other case studies or teams in similar situations. However, the Five Themes Model implies the components of employee engagement are interconnected and improving one theme of the model, has potential to have a positive impact on the whole experience of employee engagement in general. Leader's role is significant in the employee engagement process.

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Key words: employee engagement, subjective reflection, leadership

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement is a relatively new term, it is challenging to define, and yet its importance in our modern working lives should not be overlooked in any sector. In recent years, not only researchers, but also organisations, have become increasingly interested in this topic. There has been wide interest in understanding the fine line between professional and personal life as it has become increasingly blurred due to technology, flexibility and a feeling over being “constantly on.” There are also negative aspects of high employee engagement. It is generally accepted that multiloading by activities has become the new normal, but this can lead to a phenomenon called acceleration trap and to health problems (Bruch & Menges,2010).

In this study, the context is in profit-making, international business where working life can be challenging, demanding and dynamic. Not only should the focus be on the profit and goals, but also on improving employee engagement, company culture, providing self-development opportunities and improving how to work well as a team. Once a company culture is well identified, it provides a set of tools in use which help to understand the engagement of employees too (Bersin, 2019).

The role of the leadership in employee engagement is undeniable, and this shows in both direct and indirect ways. In all five themes examined in this study in relations to the experiences of employee engagement, the impact of leadership is instrumental in improving. It is not only a leader’s duty to maintain the aspects of improved employee engagement. Leader’s role is significant when creating, together with the employees, a suitable environment for engaged employees.

Knowing your employees is key and being aware of the characteristics of the different generations in working life today is beneficial. The Millennials' share of the workforce has increased dramatically and organisations that are seeking to engage these employees in their work need to understand this and tailor their employee engagement strategies to this group. Without generalising a whole generation too much, it is safe to say that Millennials are a generation for whom globalisation, technology and economic wealth has been a normal part of their lives. For them, work is not an obligation but an extension of their own identity (Mellanen & Mellanen 2020).

The definition of the term “employee engagement” remains subjective, and its focus can have overlapping elements, depending on the point of view. Based on research on the topic over the years, employee engagement could also be called “work engagement,” “organisational engagement,” or “social engagement.” In this paper, the most accurate term to be used is employee engagement. The use of this term has an inclusive aspect of the research: the individual’s voice will be heard, which is often neglected in research on engagement. Employee engagement has been extensively studied. However, less attention has been paid to an individual’s experiences about the topic. The purpose of this research was to explore within the specific organisation, how their employees’ experience and define employee engagement in their working place around five selected themes. The reason for researching this specific organisation was to implement a study within it, as this was a topic that had not yet been researched within this organisation before. The timing seemed to be suitable as the topic of employee engagement is an emerging one in both professional and personal lives. Based on the research by using the Five Themes Model, the findings will provide new insights into the organisation’s Human Resource strategy implementation and offer new tools for the management to improve productivity and engagement. The daily operations in the office could benefit from identifying the elements that have an effect on their employees’ engagement. The main findings indicate the employees strong need for more attention from the leadership, especially in person, as well as opportunities to support self-development.

My personal relationship towards the team, knowing the organisation well, enabled me to act as a dedicated messenger of the employees. This research journey has been an adventure where many aspects have been discovered along the way. Some findings were new and surprising and some of them had been acknowledged beforehand. All of the reflections around the five selected themes of employee engagement came in several surprising forms. The most relevant part of this journey has been in noticing that the interviews can be seen as small stories of an individual employee whose voice can now be heard. This aspect of a narrative in researching engagement has often not been emphasised in so much depth as was in this study.

## 2 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The structure of the thesis is as follows: in the introduction, the thesis topic and the purpose of the research both in general and for this specific organisation have been outlined. After introducing the research focus in general, the thesis will explore in detail the phenomenon of employee engagement. Then the centre of attention will be narrowed down to this specific organisation's needs based on the Five Themes Model. To share a clear idea for the reader about the structure, the final backbone of the thesis lies in the Five Themes Model. The centre of attention is in these five themes in the theoretical framework, in interview questions as well as in the recommendations to the organisation.

Chapter 2 introduces the research questions and the research methods used in the research part of the thesis. In this thesis, the chosen method was the qualitative research method and data collection was carried out by conducting semi-structured interviews. Because of the topic and the confidentiality of the interviews, some ethical questions have been introduced in the chapter too.

Chapter 3 defines the phenomenon of employee engagement. Along with this ever-evolving topic, there are also some negative aspects to be found in the aim of having high employee engagement. Acceleration trap and other side effects should not be overlooked, because they can have a serious impact on both working and private life.

Chapter 4 introduces the theoretical framework of the topic. The foundation for the phenomenon was created in the 1990s by Kahn, and Shuck has given a more modern approach to it, based on his versatile research. The two academics have created a foundation for the theoretical framework of this thesis accompanied with several other academics' supporting theories around the topic. The introduction of antecedents of employee engagement creates a logical explanation as to why the Five Themes Model has been created for this specific organisation to research the phenomenon of employee engagement. Each theme is introduced separately as it is associated with employee engagement and leadership.

Chapter 5 summarises the results based on the interview reflections of the participants. Together with the theoretical framework and the reflections of the interviews, discussion of the results will follow. A preliminary purpose of the final thesis in the Educational Leadership Programme is to carry out a development project, and therefore the thesis also includes recommendations to the organisation as a mandatory part of the thesis. Discussion of the results and the recommendations to this specific organisation are based on the reflections of the interviews and the supporting theories about employee engagement. Discussion of results and recommendations are listed in Chapter 6.

## 2.1 Research questions

The purpose of this case study is to gain the insights of employee engagement in the specific organisation and then focus on exploring their experiences of employee engagement.

### **Research question 1:**

*What is the current situation of employee engagement in the specific organisation?*

### **Research question 2:**

*How would the employees describe the employee engagement in the organisation from their own perspective? How do they experience it in their daily lives?*

This study should reveal the current situation of employee engagement in the specific organisation and provide new insight into the employees' experience, as well as define employee engagement in their working place. The purpose is to focus on an individual rather than see the topic from the organisation's or management's point of view. Based on the findings, this research could provide tools for management to improve employee engagement, and - if necessary - provide information for their future Human Resource strategies. The aim is to reveal, through these interviews how the employees value themselves at work currently, according to their experiences, what is being done well in their organisation at the moment, and what are the areas of improvement needed to enhance engagement around the five selected themes.

## 2.2 Research methods

The research was made for an anonymous company in the Netherlands in an international field. The participants are employees working in the company's head office. The majority of the participants represent the work generation Millennials and they are in the relatively early stages of their careers (entry-level or mid-career). The participants took part in the research during their workdays. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, and the interviews were conducted on



the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> of July 2019. 7 employees voluntarily participated and in addition to that, a shortened version of the interview was conducted with the manager together with the summary of results on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August 2019. This was to summarise and reflect on the interview results with the leader's own input. For each staff member, an email was sent to agree upon the interview time along with a consent document, to be signed by the individual, which stated that this data would be used in a study, but that their answers would remain confidential. This was also to protect the authenticity of the responses, as well as to guarantee that no direct or indirect harm need be anticipated by taking part in the study. The interviews were audio recorded. The dissemination meeting was scheduled for the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2019, to share the results, partake in a small workshop and have lunch.

Due to the nature of the research topic and the size of the team, the most logical way to conduct the feedback was by collecting the empirical data, using a qualitative research method. The purpose of the research was to collect individual employees' experiences about their own employee engagement. For reliable research results, this was carried out by a case study method and by conducting semi-structured interviews to collect the data. Quantitative method or in-depth interview would not have served the purpose. The selected methods will be described in the next chapter.

A qualitative research method was the chosen framework for the data collection due to its narrative character. The participant pool is often small in qualitative research, but the received data is very informative, and the narrative aspects of the responses can bring a lot of valuable information. The name qualitative research method says it all; the quality is superior to the number of responses. It is also typical for a qualitative research method to attempt to explain the situation as genuinely as possible and the researcher's role is to remain as objective and neutral as possible. In educational science, quantitative methods have had long-standing traditions in their academic research. A quantitative research method has not been taken over by qualitative methods, but qualitative methods have become a reliable research method in addition to that (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). A traditional research approach in business life is a case study; often the research focus is on an individual's point of view (employee, customer or a manager) and

the main purpose is to have a better understanding of the situation and its relation to the context. A case study makes it possible to present complex and abstract business-related topics in a practical and presentable way even though real-life case studies have been accused of lack of scientific accuracy and focus on organisational advantages (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

As Eskola and Suoranta (1998) also admit, being 100% objective is an important, but not an idealistic attempt in research. It is hardly ever fully possible. When a researcher is aware of his/her relationship with the research topic and research participants, one acknowledges one's own interpretations, and the possibility of his/her own subjectivity, then better objectivity can be reached. After acknowledging this, a researcher can be surprised and learn from the information that evolves. In qualitative research, one must not test the hypothesis but generate one. When analysing qualitative data, it is important to specify research topic that defining the research topic is accurate (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). The research focus in this study is purely narrowed down on the employee engagement in the small team in this specific office.

An appropriate option for the interview method was a semi-structured interview: this can be used to study "what" and "how" of the selected theme but still offers some room for spontaneity during the interview while the overall structure of the interview remains controlled. The tone of the interview is relatively informal, and both open and closed questions can be conducted (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The team is familiar with the interviewer and because of their relationship, another more formal way of conducting the interview could have been a liability to the research.

### **2.3 Data acquisition methods and research process**

The research data was acquired by applying semi-structured interviews from employees of the organisation. Each interview was scheduled for one hour and audio recorded after each team member had given their consent for the recordings. The team is small (N = 7) and the participation percentage was 100% on a volunteer basis. Participants are all employees of the organisation's head office.

The interview started with the interviewer explaining that the interview questions have been categorised into five themes which have been carefully selected and will provide relevant information for the organisation. The structure of the interview followed chronologically according to the five themes, and the interview included open and closed questions. The interview started and ended with the same question by asking the participants to define the concept of employee engagement in their own words. The reason why it was asked twice during the interviews was to encourage the participants to re-think the concept after doing the exercise and acknowledging all the themes which were associated with the interview.

The suggested interview schedule was carried out according to the plan, and 100% of the participants joined the interviews. The amount of the participants was relatively low (N=7) but that is the size of the current team and therefore it was positive that everyone volunteered to share their experiences.

The interviews were conducted in the summer but the timing of the interviews was scheduled to be just before the summer holiday period was about to start and the employees would have still their own work roles and not responsibilities of being a holiday cover of a colleague. Therefore, there was also enough time to conduct the interviews when the full team was available.

In reviewing the whole research process with the organisation, it could be described as straightforward and cooperative. The process was driven very independently by the researcher, but support or feedback was always available when needed. The interview process was arranged on a fast schedule: once the research questions were established, the interviews were conducted within one week. The final thesis was finished roughly on schedule even though the schedule was unrushed by the organisation or TAMK.

## **2.4 Practical and ethical issues**

There were no potential problems expected or experienced during the research process. There were also no issues of commercial confidentiality or intellectual property rights encountered during the process. Communication and cooperation

worked very well. However, the organisation has requested to keep the company name and results confidential at all times.

Unbiased research limitations could be anticipated, due to the fact that the researcher is familiar with the organization itself, the leadership and the team. However, this could be seen as an asset or a liability in this study. The knowledge of the industry and the context could be seen as an asset, as this enriches the researcher's motivation to act as a voice for the employees. Helping to find the answers to the questions, which otherwise may not have been asked, was personally the researcher's biggest driver in making the research successful.

Potential concerns could be:

- Does the team take the role of the researcher seriously?
- Can the researcher remain objective during the interviews?
- Have the interview questions been led by the researcher's own interpretations and does the researcher have some preliminary expectations about specific answers?

These ethical questions were taken into consideration when they were designed, and the researcher kept as neutral a position as possible during the interviews. Some of the participants' reflections were partly surprising, which is reassurance that the researcher's own interpretations did not interfere with the interviews.

Another ethical concern was that the interview may raise questions within the team and trigger them to think about their current situation. Some may feel positive about the current situation and some negative after there have been detailed questions about the topic. Certain topics may cause frustration, especially if there is no follow up or actual improvement done for the team. To have closure as a researcher, a dissemination was scheduled for the team in October 2019. The researcher gave a presentation and the results were discussed together as a team followed by a team lunch.

A limitation of the research could be in analysing the results. As often can be anticipated in qualitative research, comparing the results can be challenging, es-

pecially when the selected themes for the interview can include somewhat overlapping responses due to the subjective interpretation of participant responses. Another research limitation is the timing of the research. This research should reveal the current situation of employee engagement in the specific organisation. This research could give new insight into how the employees experience and define employee engagement in their working place. Based on the findings, it could provide tools for the management to improve their HR strategies. However, the research will reveal the situation at that very given moment (July 2019) and when the final thesis will be published, the level of engagement may have changed. To bridge the time between the interview moment and publishing the final thesis, an assimilation moment was scheduled with the team to share the results as soon as they were summarised. In this way the organisation was able to define their own next steps in the process on how to improve employee engagement.

### 3 INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH TOPIC

The research phenomenon, employee engagement, has been a challenging process to define to date. Shuck, Schaufeli and Bakker belong to the most cited academics researching this specific topic. Shuck has pointed out in several works of research, the universal challenges of how to compare, define and measure employee engagement. The concept of employee engagement can loosely be confused with job satisfaction, job involvement or job commitment (Shuck, Ghosh, Zigarmi & Nimon, 2013). Schaufeli and Bakker (2010) have also clarified the differences between these concepts and they also agree that the concepts appear to have similarities with employee engagement. However, they must be identified as their own concepts in the terminology due to their small, yet crucial differences. To emphasise the differences, FIGURE 1 explains the three different terms. **Job satisfaction** (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010) and employee engagement both measure aspects of work-related attitude, but as a differentiator it can be said that job satisfaction shows limited added value when it comes to organisational performance. (Shuck et al., 2013). Job satisfaction measures general mood about the job (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010) whereas employee engagement includes all the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural energies which each individual employee has directed to serve the organisation's goals (Shuck et al., 2013). **Job involvement** and employee engagement both measure cognitive dimensions of work-related thought processes, but employee engagement goes further than that again by including all the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions. Cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions of employee engagement are also the same differentiators with organisational commitment (Shuck et al., 2013). **Organisational commitment** can be seen as the connection between an individual employee and organisation (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010).

The concept of employee engagement shares overlapping aspects of all three concepts theoretically and in practice, but also has elements of its own which cannot be combined with the other terminology (Shuck et al., 2013).

Engagement should not be confused with "workaholism," even though engaged employees can feel the strong impulse to work. The difference is that the engaged employee can feel the enjoyment of working, not as compulsion (Taris, Schaufeli & Shimazu, 2010).



FIGURE 1: Comparing the terminology (Shuck et al., 2013).

Shuck et al. (2013) have compared several conceptualisations of employee engagement, and in FIGURE 1, a part of their list of definitions in their research can be seen. This was to indicate how the concept of engagement has been debatable for years even among academics and therefore it is understandable that in the workplace it is also challenging to fully understand, measure and develop the concept of employee engagement.

The purpose of sharing these two studies is to highlight the versatile nature of employee engagement. The complexity of the concept of employee engagement makes it challenging to measure the phenomenon and compare the results on an operational level.

Having analysed the concept of “employee engagement”, in FIGURE 1 it is justified to use the definition of Wollard and Shuck about employee engagement in

this study: *“an individual employee’s cognitive, emotional, and behavioural state directed toward desired organisational outcomes”* (Shuck & Wollard, 2010 p.103)

The definition supports the aspects of what this research tries to achieve: an individual employee experiences the employee engagement in this specific organisation. The aim is to have open dialogue during the interviews and specific conclusions of each employee’s engagement at that particular moment. In this research, the focus has been limited to the specific purpose of exploring the experience of an employee with the phenomenon of personal interest. This study gave attention to a perspective that is not often considered in the traditional employee engagement literature.

### **3.1 Negative aspects of high engagement**

The negative aspects of high employee engagement have not been raised often in the literature, even though there are limitations around the phenomenon. An engaged employee is generally defined as someone with a positive, fulfilling, work-focused mindset. The presumed opposite of high employee engagement is burnout (González-Romá, Schaufeli, Bakker & Lloret, 2006). Unfortunately, the research about the topic shows alarming figures that Millennials will be the first generation to have higher burnout statistics than the previous generations (Mellanen & Mellanen, 2020).

Productivity is a goal for most organisations, but there is a downside to what high employee engagement can bring: highly engaged employees can become so involved in their work that it can come at the cost of their personal life and health. This could lead to burnout as well as having other serious impacts in the organisation’s productivity. Organisations can be unaware that their pace, and the constant aim to keep improving, changing, overloading and multiloading by activities has become the new normal. This can lead to a phenomenon called acceleration trap. It is not realistic to demand the same level of accelerated effort every day, for a long period without effect. Employees, in general, can tolerate overload for a while, especially when there is an end in sight. But chronic overloading sooner or later causes harm to organisations in the areas of performance, retention, employee health and productivity. Once the organisation is aware of the issue, the acceleration problem can be re-routed in the right direction by making the cultural



changes to break from the trap now and avoid the situation in the future. It's not only the symptoms that need help, but the cause of the symptoms (Bruch & Menges, 2010).

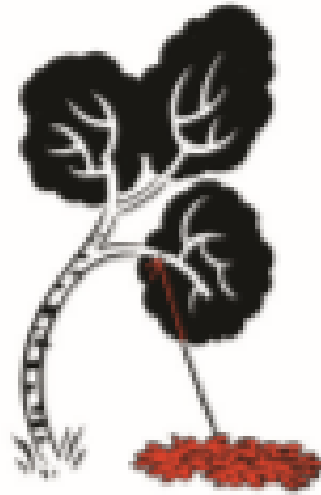


FIGURE 2: Acceleration trap (Bruch & Menges, 2010).

Just like the tree in the picture illustrated above, it is not possible to predict how long the employees can bend before they break in the acceleration trap situation. Eventually, the pressure is too high and the branch of the tree or the tree trunk itself will break unless the stretching towards the ground gets less.

Other negative aspects of high employee engagement could lead to personality-related discrimination. Certain personalities are naturally positive, and extraverted people often openly express happiness and engagement. However, this gives an unfair disadvantage to the more introverted candidates going through the hiring process and might create some favouritism to the more outgoing candidates, even though these personality traits are not indicators of the level of employee engagement (Garrad & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2016).

## 4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 4.1 Foundation of employee engagement until today

In this study, the theoretical foundation is strongly based on the research of William Kahn and Brad Shuck. The original concept of employee engagement can be found in the studies of William Kahn (1990) as he is seen as a founding father of the concept by his research of the difference between personal engagement and disengagement. Personal engagement refers to how we feel at work and how much an employee's "preferred self" or "full self" can be expressed at work. These acts have been divided into three different categories and have different aspects:

- physical
- cognitive
- emotional

These three elements of *preferred self* mean that the employee is physically involved, cognitively alert and emphatically connected in the work situation, the organisation's values and to colleagues. As a result, one brings the "full self" to work. Personal disengagement is the opposite of full self: it is shown as a withdrawal of a person's preferred self, and the employee remains passive in the work role. The employee lacks all three of the aspects in work-related situations (physical, cognitive and emotional) (Kahn, 1990).

Kahn defined three psychological conditions which shape one's experience of engagement or disengagement in their work. People's personal engagements vary according to their expectations of the returns of the benefits, safety, meaningfulness and the guarantees. The three conditions are psychological **Meaningfulness, Safety and Availability**. Psychological meaningfulness means that employees want to find meaning in their work, and it can justify their being themselves at work as well. Meaningfulness can be associated with the organisation or society. Psychological safety is the employee's feeling of being able to show one's true personality without fear of consequences to self-image or even career. Availability means the ability of the employee to bring their full self to work both mentally and physically (Kahn, 1990).

Brad Shuck further develops Kahn's concept of employee engagement by connecting the concept further in detail in leadership and well-being by giving it a broader and more modern point of view. Shuck also often has clear connections on how his research topics could have practical implications to Human Resource Development (Shuck & Reio, 2014, Shuck & Herd, 2012, Rose, Shuck, Twyford & Bergman 2015).

As mentioned, Shuck has researched employee engagement as a concept itself, but he sees employee engagement as a wider phenomenon and has translated many of his findings in practice to help human resource development in organisations. Many of his research topics derive from modern people's lives and its relation to work. The research results can have implications to improve organisational learning, workplace performance (Shuck & al., 2013), leadership (Shuck & Herd, 2012) and well-being in the working place (Shuck & Reio, 2014).

## 4.2 Impact on employee engagement – organisation and leadership

High employee engagement – or lack of it, is a phenomenon that not only affects an individual employee but the whole organisation. Shuck and Rose state that traditional organisations have been focusing on the outcomes of engagement which give competitive advantage such as increasing profit and improving organisational performance (Shuck & Rose, 2013).

The debate about employee engagement and its differences in its conceptualisation and measurement is ongoing, but all of the studies carried out about the topic prove that a higher engagement indicates higher performance outcomes at all levels. There are several drivers of employee engagement, such as leadership style, supportive organisational culture, feedback, trust, career opportunities and transparent HR practices which support this (Popli & Rizvi, 2016). Instead of focusing on the outcomes of engagement which give competitive advantage, the organisation should spread the attention in improving the conditions of the employees that nurture performance (Shuck & Rose, 2013). Several studies have shown that employee engagement flourishes in workplaces which can be described as supportive, authentic and positive in their daily operations. The organisations which are aware of the employees talents, skills and motivations and which empower them to serve the organisation's goals, have a tremendous human potential at their hands to use. The potential of fully engaged employees is unknown (Wollard, Shuck, Shuck, Reio & Wollard, 2011).

Today, organisations, and especially leaders, put more emphasis on employee engagement not only to reach the organisation metrics but also to compete in the field as “best workplaces”. Great place to work- certificate is one of the best-known benchmarks. The ranking is done annually in 60 different countries and this competition is often not left unnoticed by social media. If an organisation can provide great workspaces, flexible benefits, and create trust and great company culture, it enhances employee engagement and the organisation's image too (Great place to work, n.d). Nearly nine in ten executives (85 percent) in Deloitte's survey in 2016 shows a world map where engagement was rated as an important (38 percent) or very important (48 percent) priority for their organisations. The Netherlands has a score of 81% which is 4% lower than in Western Europe in

general based on this survey (85%) (Brown, Bersin, Gosling & Sloan, 2016). It is comforting to notice that the importance of employee engagement is starting to be acknowledged globally and in general the rates are relatively high. However, it is surprising to see that the tail end of the scores are held by the Nordic countries and other European countries.

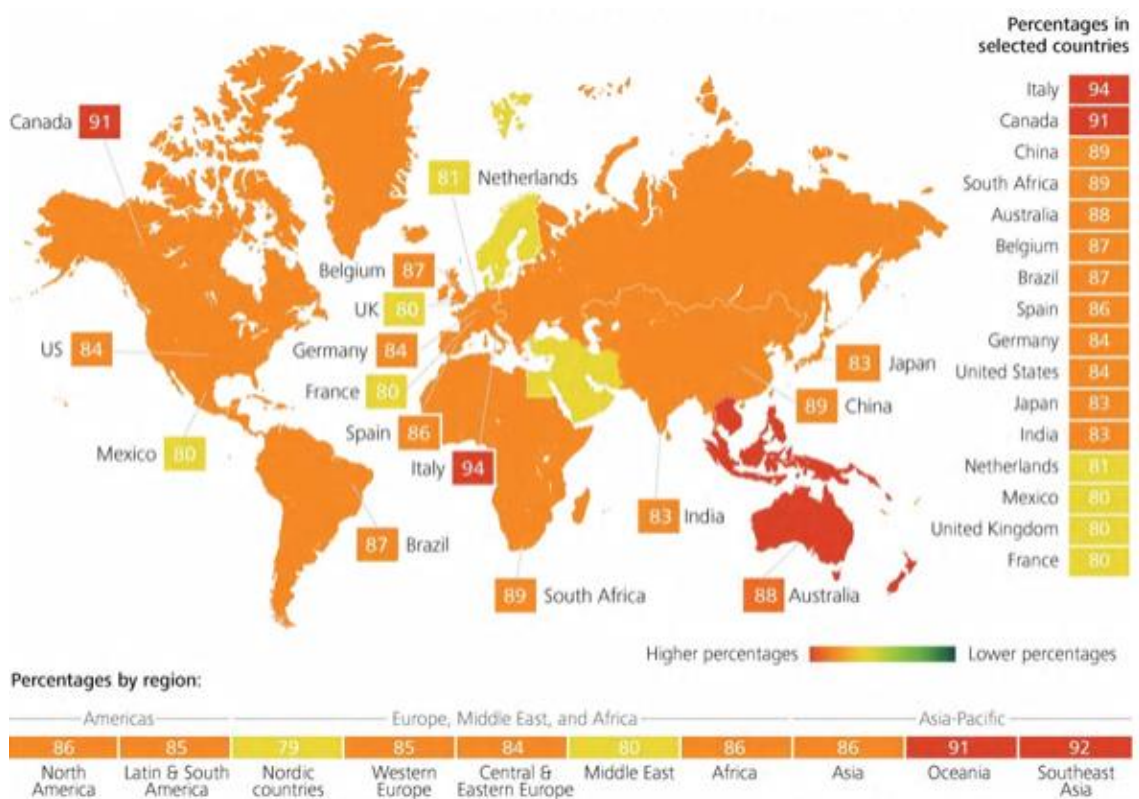


FIGURE 3: Engagement. Percentage of respondents rating this trend “important” or “very important”. (Brown et al., 2016).

It is interesting to consider whether the perceptions of employee engagement are similar between the leadership and the employees. Without knowing the organisation’s employees’ needs regarding employee engagement, conducting surveys will be wasting resources. Aon’s recent research was conducted among 1.000 companies from around the globe with more than 8 million employee responses in 2016 and 2017. Globally there are differences between different continents and even between different countries within Europe. Despite the relatively low points in employee engagement in Europe, from the 15 largest European economies, 10 countries had vast improvements in their employee engagement scores in their latest research. Interestingly, the research shows that the Netherlands has been able to improve their employee engagement scores unlike some other European countries (Aon, 2018). To compare the graphics below shown in FIGURE

4, (Aon, 2018) with the graphics above of FIGURE 3 ( Brown et al., 2016), one could notice a difference between employees' experienced engagement percentages globally and the leadership's opinion about the importance of employee engagement. The research has not all been conducted by same researchers but seeing variation in the percentages and in the point of view in research topic, raises some questions whether there could be some room for improvement to get these two research groups better aligned.

**Employee Engagement: Europe vs. The World**

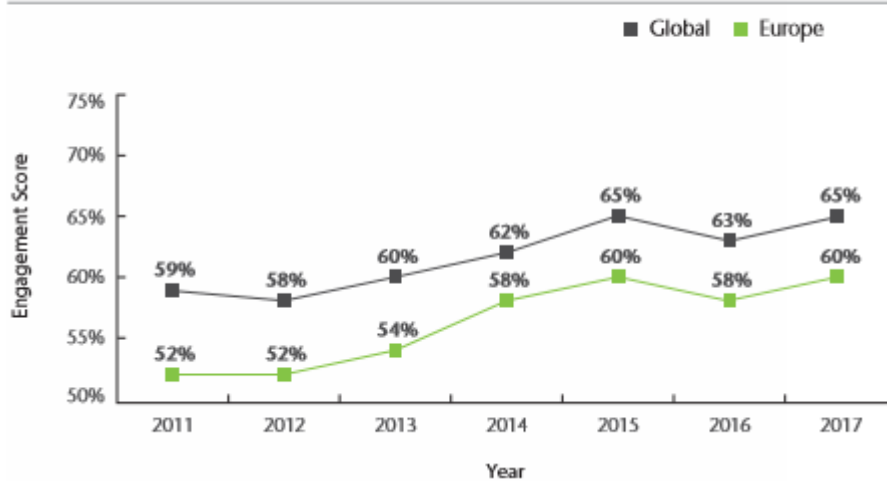


FIGURE 4: AON employee engagement survey in Europe (Aon, 2018)

Organisations are run by leaders and the leadership role today is emphasised in several studies around the topic of employee engagement. Its importance will be deeper analysed in the later chapters of this study. To share another point of view regarding the leadership topic, the impact or the lack of good leadership will be pointed out in the following chapter.

Leadership today can contribute to employee engagement in a positive or negative way. Examples of bad leadership include passive-avoidant leadership style, “not solving a problem until it gets serious” (Popli & Rizvi, 2016). Shuck and Rose have researched another leadership malfunction: dysfunctional leadership. The purpose of their study was to clarify intentional or unintentional *dysfunctional leadership* and how it can professionally *skunk* workplace. Shuck, together with his colleagues, have coined the term to raise awareness, especially towards well-being of a skunked workplace. This is simply because higher levels of engagement correspond to better workplace health and the costs saved in healthcare are millions. Dysfunction comes in many forms in the workplace and depending

on the severity, the effects of dysfunctional leadership on the workplace can have severe consequences on various levels as well as short or long-term effects. Dysfunctional leadership can have a psychological impact as well. An individual's well-being may suffer by their creating unhealthy habits to process work stress and it can directly contribute to long-term health problems. The effect can also spread further than on an individual employee. On an organisational level stress can have significant effect on retention and turnover. It can have an effect on whole teams on the work floor, not to mention the impact on the families who suffer from these consequences at home. One of the solutions for improving dysfunctional leadership is paying attention to company culture. Creating a company culture where well-being is promoted and where bad leadership behaviour will be reported, the "skunded" behaviour will not have room to grow (Shuck & Rose, 2015).

### 4.3 Antecedents of employee engagement

As mentioned in the previous chapters, in this study I focus on one definition of employee engagement which covers all the relevant aspects in this context the best: "an individual employee's cognitive, emotional, and behavioural state directed toward desired organisational outcomes." (Shuck & Wollard, 2010, p.103) Kahn (1990) has created the foundation for the concept of employee engagement but additional information about the antecedents of employee engagement has been relatively unknown until Wollard et al., researched the concept further. Only personality and other individual factors have a vast impact in people's working life and private life, but ultimately the antecedents are the factors that form the cognitive and emotional level of engagement. In their research the antecedents were divided into two different categories: **individual antecedents and organisational antecedents**. Individual antecedents are constructs, strategies and conditions which are applied directly or indirectly. Examples of that could be motivation, work-life balance, value congruence and perceived organisational support. Antecedents on an organisational level are constructs, strategies and conditions which are applied across the organisation as a foundation to employee engagement. They are also closely linked around basic human needs. Examples of organisational antecedents are leadership, opportunities for learning, mission and vision (Wollard, Shuck, Shuck, Reio & Wollard, 2011).

Individual Antecedents to Employee Engagement	Organizational Antecedents to Employee Engagement
Absorption <sup>a</sup>	Authentic corporate culture <sup>a</sup>
Available to engage	Clear expectations <sup>a</sup>
Coping style	Corporate social responsibility <sup>a</sup>
Curiosity	Encouragement
Dedication <sup>a</sup>	Feedback
Emotional fit	Hygiene factors
Employee motivation	Job characteristics <sup>a</sup>
Employee/work/family status	Job control
Feelings of choice & control	Job fit <sup>a</sup>
Higher levels of corporate citizenship <sup>a</sup>	Leadership
Involvement in meaningful work <sup>a</sup>	Level of task challenge <sup>a</sup>
Link individual and organizational goals <sup>a</sup>	Manager expectations <sup>a</sup>
Optimism	Manager self-efficacy <sup>a</sup>
Perceived organizational support <sup>a</sup>	Mission and vision
Self-esteem, self efficacy	Opportunities for learning
Vigor <sup>a</sup>	Perception of workplace safety <sup>a</sup>
Willingness to direct personal energies	Positive workplace climate <sup>a</sup>
Work/life balance <sup>a</sup>	Rewards <sup>a</sup>
Core self evaluation <sup>a</sup>	Supportive organizational culture <sup>a</sup>
Value Congruence <sup>a</sup>	Talent management
Perceived Organizational Support <sup>a</sup>	Use of strengths <sup>a</sup>

Table 1. Individual-level and organisational-level antecedents of employee engagement (Wollard et al., 2011).

Not all the antecedents of employee engagement of Wollard et al. (2011) were researched in this study. The selected five themes of employee engagement included a combination of individual and organisational antecedents which were relevant and further researched in the interviews. The antecedents were either directly embedded in the interview questions, or some antecedents were seen directly or indirectly the reflections of the participants. These questions can be reviewed in the Appendix 1 “Semi-structured interview questions”.

The list of antecedents in employee engagement is not exhaustive and one new addition to the list could be seen, that is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). CSR is an emerging trend to date and Ferreira and Real de Oliveira (2014) and Eglavas (2016) have researched the possible correlation of Corporate Social Responsibility as an antecedent for employee engagement. Eglavas suggests that when CSR is embedded in the organisation’s activities, employees can show more of their whole selves at work and it will therefore positively affect employee



engagement (Eglavas, 2016). CSR can be translated into practice as policies that organisations carry out regarding creating positive social, and environmental changes (Ferreira & Real de Oliveira, 2014). A relationship between employee engagement and corporate social responsibility at work exists (Mirvis, 2012) but to truly understand the underlying mechanisms needs further research (Eglavas, 2016). Perhaps when the topic has been researched more, the complex correlation can be further understood.

#### **4.4 Employee engagement model – The Five Themes Model**

Based on the previously described theoretical concepts and perspectives especially of Kahn and Shuck, an applied model was created for the purpose of this study. The model consists of five relevant main themes related to employee engagement. The model was then piloted with the studied case organisation: the organisation representative approved the used model. The Five Themes Model includes the themes of Company culture, Leadership & Team, Communication, Motivation and Well-being. In the following chapters, all the five themes will be described separately with the supporting theories and research around the topic. The research results from this specific organisation will be explained in the Results chapter.

In this new model created for this study, the emphasis on employee engagement is on the subjective reflection when themes, questions and experiences can be interpreted in various ways. Besides the subjective reflection, all five of the themes can have an overlapping aspect with each other. The model indicates with the arrows that themes are interdependent and connected to each other. This highlights why the concept, employee engagement, remains a challenge to define.



FIGURE 5. The Five Themes Model.

#### 4.4.1 Company culture

As with all of the five themes related to employee engagement in this study, the theme of company culture can be challenging to describe. In this section, the aim is to highlight the layers of company culture in general in a multicultural organisation as the research is conducted for.

Company culture is an intangible concept, and it can often be described as “how things are done here”. Culture can be seen as a sustainable business advantage and tool for any organisation which can offer a remarkable differentiation factor on the market (Levine, 2018). It can be even stated that company culture is the only sustainable competitive advantage which is completely under the control of the leadership. Researching how the culture looks at the moment, how it has become like that and what aspect the culture should include is the starting point for any future actions. Good leaders understand the importance of the culture and

are willing to put the effort in to shaping it when it is necessary, as its importance in the strategy should not be undermined (Mellanen & Mellanen, 2020). In the long-term, culture can be created or changed, but it requires contribution from every employee on all the levels. Identifying and understanding the dynamic term 'culture' has an undeniable impact on recruiting the right employees whose values fit in the culture, enhances the onboarding time, lowers retention rate and enhances employee engagement. Levine (2018) reveals that diverse workplaces are the most successful by having variety in different economic, geographic, or educational backgrounds. But if the employees share similar values, the engagement will show. It is also helpful if employees can share their feelings and events in their private lives instead of trying to keep work and private lives apart (Levine, 2018).

There are individual conflicts in understanding values, but also cultural differences can be significant too: international employees interpret values in different ways. Appreciating different values vary in different stages of people's lives (Freeman & Auster, 2015).

People are the foundation of the company and age structure can have a big impact on the company culture. In this research most of the participants were Millennials. In other words, it means that the majority of the participants in the interviews were individuals born between the years 1980-2000. The generation before Millennials is called Generation X, and they are individuals born in the years 1960-1979. Before Generation X, the post-war baby boomers were born, between the years 1945- 1959. Every generation is a product of their environment and culture where economy, history and politics reflect in their general behaviour and attitudes. However, when describing Millennials, or any other generation, it is important to note that is not reliable to generalise and stereotype behaviour of a whole generation only based on their year of birth. It is also logical that comparing Millennials with each other shows variation in their behaviour depending when on the Millennial-timeline one is born. In 20 years, a lot can happen: Those born in the early 1980s who have already gained working experience seem to have different traits than those born in the 2000s and are just entering the working life. Differences within one generation can cause misunderstanding, not forgetting when there are employees from different generations working together. Yet

they are all called Millennials. The Millennial generation is not necessarily different from any other generation, but the world around them has changed so rapidly which forces them to adapt in communication. In the research conducted by Mellanen and Mellanen, three important things in work remain in the answers, regardless which generation replied. They were interesting work, justice and good leadership, only the ranking in the importance was varying. Acknowledging the background of the Millennials can help as a guideline to be aware of a certain aspect of their thinking and expectations (Mellanen & Mellanen, 2020).

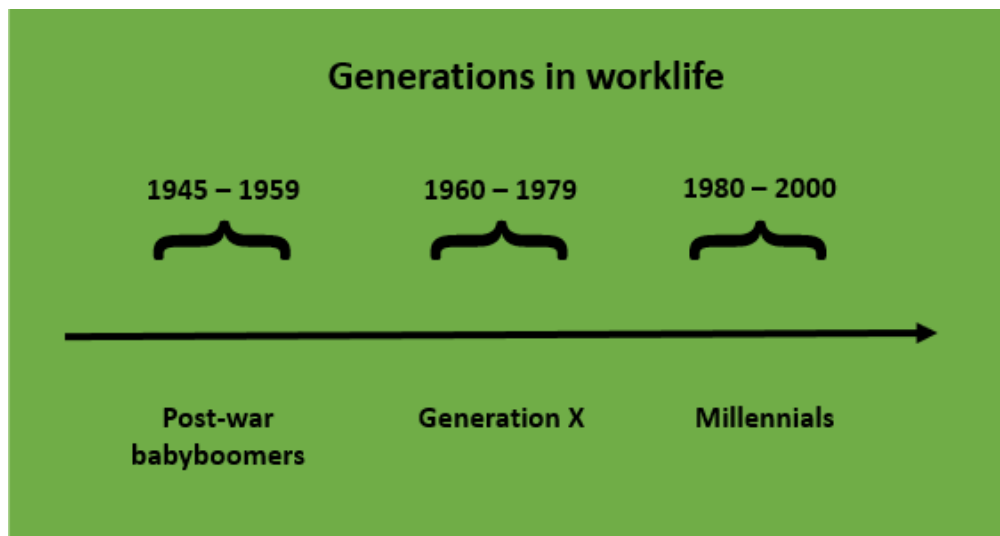


FIGURE 6: Timeline of generations in work life (Mellanen & Mellanen, 2020).

#### 4.4.2 Leadership and team

This section aims to explain the impact and the role of leadership today. Leadership can be seen as a spiderweb because it has an impact on several topics. In this section, the topic leadership is narrowed down to explore the aspects of leadership which are relevant for this specific organisation.

Leaders and organisations today are facing big changes from the top down, starting on the hierarchical change and leadership strategy level. The role of leadership is more important than ever, but the major difference is that leadership is expected to move away from a traditional leadership style towards cross-functional teams. Deloitte's Global Human Capital Trends survey from the year 2019 shows that 31% of the respondents answered that 'most' or 'almost all' of the work they do is performed in teams. The right mindset starts on the management level and then involves all other levels to operate in a team-based culture. The

process to move towards team-centric and network-based working is a complex and dynamic process, yet it is inevitable as the trend to move towards team-based organisation seems to be the most effective way to respond to complex and unpredictable demands now and in the future (Volini, Schwartz, Roy, Hauptmann, Van Durme, Denny & Bersin, 2019).

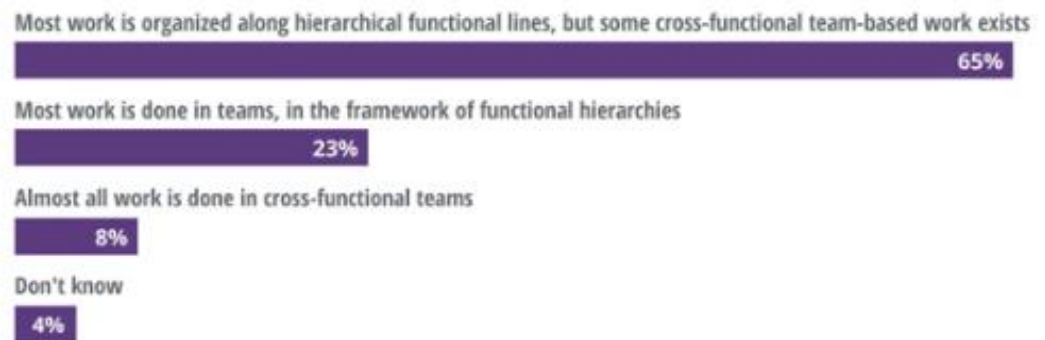


FIGURE 7: Deloitte Survey of work done in teams (N.a, 2019).

Bersin implicates in his article too that today's digital world has impacted the foundation of organisational structure so heavily that the traditional functional hierarchy in the organisations has re-formed to become a "network of teams". This new model of work forces the leaders to re-shape and change the job roles and job descriptions and know how to emphasise the right skills and support learning as keys to engage and perform in the role (Bersin, 2017).

Today's leaders should not see emotions as a factor which interferes with daily operations but rather use them as a team's emotional guide. Leader's emotional intelligence and own competencies are crucial here because the leaders resonate the emotions in the workplace: when they drive emotions positively, they bring out everyone's best and enable people to flourish in their workplace. When the emotions are driven negatively, it creates toxic emotions in the workplace (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2009).

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is a feature that distinguishes good leaders from dysfunctional ones and can be also associated with a strong performance of the employees (HBR, 2011, Shuck & Herd, 2012). The debate about whether leaders are born or made won't be fully solved with EI but self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills are the emotional intelligence skills that

leaders need today. These cannot be learnt overnight, but the leaders can train and develop the EI skills further over the course of time (HBR's 10 must reads. On leadership,2011).

Both concepts, employee engagement and leadership, are dynamic and complex. Shuck and Herd have researched the conceptual relationship between them. Different leadership styles vary in different contexts, but leadership is fundamental in creating the environment where employee engagement can grow. Emotional intelligence and especially self-awareness create a foundation for the leaders who understand the importance in developing employee engagement as a collaborative process and the level of employee engagement can be used as a company strategy (Shuck & Herd, 2012).

#### **4.4.3 Communication**

Communication is the third essential component of the Five Themes Model of Employee engagement. Organisations in general recognise the importance and value of external communication between customers and shareholders for the business. Often however, external communication gets more focus in the strategy and internal communication is not as integrated as it could be to achieve the best potential (Cowan, 2017, Mishra & Boynton, 2014).

Communication is linked to an organisation's financial benefits, achieving goals and attracting, engaging and retaining employees. Traditionally, internal communication has been seen as "cascading" information from the leadership which implies hierarchical and passive communication sharing. The traditional way of communication does not apply anymore in the 21st century's communication environment. Understanding behaviour, speed and interconnectedness are a few of the important factors in the modern communication environment. Instead of using the term "cascading", it has been suggested to use the term "infusing" to introduce more dynamic communication ways at all levels and directions, like tea infuses in all directions in a teacup. When employees feel involved and well-informed in the communication process, it will assist in employees feeling they are an important part of the organisation and therefore become more engaged (Cowan, 2017).

Internal communication is important for building a culture of transparency among the organisation. Mishra and Boynton (2014) were researching the correlation

between internal organisational communication and enhanced employee engagement. Transparent communication creates trust between the organisation and employees and trust enhances employee engagement.

A lack of internal communication strategy creates confusion and leadership behaviour can be measured in the ways the internal communication is being done. Being secretive in communication is generally experienced as bad leadership behaviour and causes blocks in communication, creativity and knowledge transfer, whereas good behaviour of the leadership would have a positive effect on those elements. Good behaviour can be cultivated by showing commitment to the employees and being respectful. By acknowledging the importance of adequate attention as being worth the effort because the human mind behaves well when one feels supported, connected and engaged (Cowan, 2017).

Communicating internally about the organisation's values can be challenging, especially if the values are difficult to adapt by the employees. The formal values of an organisation are often relatively universal and there could be more room for creativity. Therefore, many values are difficult to translate into practice and they are not representing the reality of the organisation. Knowing if one's values are experienced as aspirational or realistic depends how the HR leadership can communicate and implement the values in the daily operations (Cowan, 2017).

How people interpret and respond to the communication is done through their own cultural lens, and it is not only dependant on the linguistics. The message formatting, underlying meanings, conversational formalities, showing of emotions and non-verbal communication play a part in it, just to name a few. Managers who understand the process of attention-interpretation-message in a cross-cultural environment can benefit from more effective communication and productive exchanges (Nardon, Steers & Sanchez-Runde, 2011).

For a leader in a multicultural team, it is crucial to have a global mindset, and they are expected to possess a set of competencies to recognise perceptions of leadership roles, communication skills, ways of organising work, etc. (Zander, Mockaitis & Butler, 2012).

#### 4.4.4 Motivation

Motivation can be understood as something that energises and gives direction to behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Just like energy, motivation or lack thereof is not only limited to working life but it also has an impact on all areas in life and is closely connected with personal values. When we are full of energy, we feel motivated: we feel good, and that creates a buffer to deal with possible problems and topics life has to offer (Sale, 2016).

Employers are often interested in raising performance and productivity from the organisational perspective, and the focus often remains on hard metrics as profit, turnover and other relevant numbers. However, the interest should be started on an individual level: identifying first what motivates employees the most leads to self-development and more energised employees. If an organisation ensures the employees are heard and arranges the environment accordingly, it will motivate the employees to perform better and contribute more to the organisation's needs. The leadership has an important role in enhancing motivation by embracing the enigma of motivation: motivation is all around us but yet also difficult to measure partly because of its variable and subjective nature (Sale, 2016).

There is much research about the benefits in engagement if employees are well aware of the company values. Values through conversation is a powerful way to motivate and engage the employees, but this will be only beneficial when the companies practice what they preach (Freeman & Auster, 2015).

One framework for exploring motivation is the Self-Determination Theory of Deci and Ryan. The Self-determination theory (SDT) is a well-known framework for understanding the factors that promote motivation and healthy psychological functioning in the workplace. The theory is based e.g. on their 1970s research, but the results of the research is still valid to date. The differentiator is that they divide the motivation theory in intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, often the motivations can even affect simultaneously. Intrinsically motivated behaviours are the ones which are performed out of interest and for the "reward" and extrinsic motivation is instrumental for some outcome such as social approval or a valued outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2017).



Bakker and Oerlemans state that there seems to be a positive cumulative effect in motivation if the job and employee are equivalent. Engaged employees ensure their skills, preferences and the work environment are aligned. The more time engaged employees spend on tasks in their favourable work environment, the happier they will be in their roles because they experience autonomy and competence in their daily work. These factors create a strong congruence between engaged employees enduring well-being and their work activities (Bakker & Oerlemans 2016).

Modern organisations who understand the importance of promoting intrinsic versus extrinsic values in the workplace are able to enhance employee engagement. (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Organisations who are aware of what motivates certain generations can be surprised that the Millennials in working life are not necessarily motivated by salary. The work itself is appreciated when it is meaningful and when the employee is able to experience personal development. Work is not often seen as an obligation for Millennials in working life but more than an extension of personal life and as a way to develop oneself and being able to do it in a flexible way (Mellanen & Mellanen, 2020).

#### **4.4.5 Well-being**

In this study the term well-being is chosen instead of work-life balance. To the researcher's opinion the term well-being captures better both work and private life balance.

According to Businessolver (2018), one of the main well-being factors at work is empathy and when it is undervalued or lacking recognition, it will not go unnoticed in workplaces. "Traditional" benefits such as maternity leave and health insurance have been experienced as empathetic, but it is useful for leadership to understand that different people view empathy in different ways and valuing empathy goes further than that. Businessolver has listed that implementing flexibility at the workplace, communication face-to-face and embracing diversity are the ways of harnessing empathy in action. Empathy continues to be the key in increasing employee engagement. Respecting the need for time off due to private reasons,

flexible working hours and celebrating milestones in career contributes to an empathetic workplace. Age and gender are differentiators in how employees experience their perception of empathy in working places: Boomers and females rate their employers higher in empathy than Millennials and males. According to Businessolver's research 80% of the employees would be willing to work longer hours for an empathetic employer and it is a factor that attracts and retains employees. Empathy increases productivity and 87% of the CEOs believe that a company's financial profit is tied with empathy (Businessolver, 2018). This shows that empathy increases employee engagement and, in that way, contributes to the business outcomes (Businessolver, 2018). Despite all the improvements in working life and with all the modern healthcare which is available, it has become evident in the research done by Health Foundation that Millennials may be the first generation whose well-being in their middle age will be worse than its previous generations (Mellanen & Mellanen, 2020).

Disengaged employees can be destructive to organisations because it has an impact on lack of productivity and decreasing the employee well-being. Psychological workplace climate is the way employees experience their work environment in relation to preserving their own well-being. This includes both social and physical resources. Shuck and Reio's research prove the impact of varying levels of engagement (high and low engagement) not limited only to productivity and turnover but to overall well-being in the workplace and in private. (Shuck & Reio, 2014).

The importance of flexibility in well-being in working life also reflects in the findings of the research of the World Economic Forum. Dutch people were ranked as having the highest work-life balance in Europe. The reasons for this could be that Dutch people devote more time than other countries to eating, spending time with friends and family, sleeping and working less. Many male and female employees work part-time in the Netherlands, (Charlton,2019) and this opportunity is used especially if employees have young children who balance with work life and family.

## 5 ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH RESULTS

In this chapter the data collection, analysis method and the process of data analysis are described. The preliminary results are introduced. The results will be further discussed in the following main chapter under the title “Discussion of results”. Based on the created Five Themes Model, the needs of the studied organisation were listed. The interview questions were framed and categorised based on the five themes to explore the current situation on employee engagement on the optimal level. The formed questionnaire is provided in the appendices at the end of the thesis. In this chapter, the answers are reflected to the research questions through summarising and analysing the interview responses. The researcher has created a summary of the participants’ reflections which were interpreted to be most crucial for the research. The transcripts of the interviews will not be provided in the study and the quotes from the interviews have not been named or numbered. This is to guarantee the anonymity of the small participant pool. The confidentiality is the key factor in the success of this research.

In the beginning of the interview the researcher shared with every participant what the five different themes are in this study. After that the participants were asked about their own understanding of the employee engagement and what it meant to them in practice. This was for the participants to be aware about the concept of employee engagement and that these five themes around the concept were selected for this study. Some of the participants found it challenging to describe how the term can be translated into practice. The concept of employee engagement turned out to be difficult to define by the participants at first, however finally every participant was able to create an answer. Some of the participants reflected the company goals in their responses. To them employee engagement was being dedicated to meet the goals, showing interest in the goals and objectives of the company and doing their best on a daily basis. Also being able and willing to go the “extra mile” when needed was mentioned as well as the need to be happy in order to be fully engaged.

The analysis method used in the study was content analysis. This was selected as a method as it was the most applicable method to process transcripts of human communications. The research group was small, and the research topic had

a narrative nature during the interviews due to the subjective reflection. Content-analysis also supports the fact that text can be categorised into fewer content themes (Weber, 1990). In this study the themes were based on the Five Themes Method.

## 5.1 Company culture

In the questionnaire section about *Company culture* the focus was to find answers to how the company culture has been experienced by the employees; what is experienced as positive and what is experienced as negative in the culture. The company values were also a part of this theme. Based on the reflections, the values were only partly or fully known among the participants. Many participants were able to name a few of the four values, but they were hardly visible in their daily work. The values of the organisation (Accountable, Entrepreneurial, Trusted and Motivated) were not very clear for most of the participants. However, when asking the interviewees about the company values, the answers actually reflected some of the values, just translated in different expressions. For example, most of the participants described the company culture as hardworking and that response could derive from values “entrepreneurial” and “motivated”. This quote about company culture could include both “entrepreneurial” and “motivational” aspect of the company culture:

*“It’s more than being employed, it’s more personal than that”*

The participants were asked to give a grade for their own employee engagement. The given scale was from 1 to 10, 10 being the highest grade. The average grade the participant gave in their replies was 7,3. This grade resonates that the team was relatively engaged at that particular moment. In the interview the participants were also asked to describe the work culture in 3 - 4 words. The work culture was mostly experienced positively, and the most common adjectives used were *collaborative, hardworking, international, friendly and intelligent*. On the negative side, it was mentioned that there was *“pressure to get results”* and there was *“a gossip atmosphere”*.

There were two questions in this theme which produced similar kinds of answers. The participants were asked what they valued the most in the work culture. The most common replies were *flexibility, healthy work-life balance, independence and supportive colleagues*. When the participants were asked what was the reason why they accepted the job in this specific organization, the same above-mentioned reasons were again mentioned. It was interesting to notice in the reflections that the factors in the work culture which seemed important for the participants when they were accepting the job in this organisation were still valued and shown in the work culture today.

The importance of flexibility was mentioned repeatedly in several different categories during the interview. Flexibility was mentioned in many different forms; having flexibility in working times and having the opportunity to work part-time. This could be a reason why the majority of the participants felt that their work-life balance is good.

## **5.2 Leadership and team**

*The theme Leadership and team* included questions to explore the participants' relationship with the peers and the leadership. The participants were asked if they felt valued at work and if they felt it was easy for them to give feedback to their peers and to the leader. The results showed that the participants did not feel valued all the time in their work, but mostly the answers were positive. Giving peer-to-peer feedback was experienced as comfortable in 100% of the responses. Giving feedback to the leader gave some variation in the replies. It was experienced as slightly more challenging, but the majority of the responses were positive.

It was explored if it is easy for the participants to receive support from the peers and the leader when it was needed. The participants were also asked if they experienced having access to all the resources in order to do their work well. Both these questions had positive responses. Some surprising additions came in the answers to this theme:

*“More attention from the leadership, greeting, showing interest in work and to an individual (employee) In a small team, I shouldn’t be feeling like a number”*

*“I wish we would be celebrating small milestones when a job is done”*

*“I wish the potential in the staff would be seen and freedom was given to solve the task”*

The studied team is small, and they work closely with each other. The participants were asked if they have a “best buddy” at work. Most of the participants did not describe having a best buddy at work. In all the reflections during the interview, it can be seen how collaborative the team is and that there was an atmosphere of taking time for each colleague when needed. The team spends their lunchbreak together and during the lunchbreak private and social topics are often discussed among the team. Despite the supportive culture and social aspect during the lunchbreak among the team, it is surprising to read that having a dedicated work buddy was still missing from the majority of the participants.

### **5.3 Communication**

In the theme communication, the focus was mainly on internal communication. Mostly it explored how internal communication was experienced in general and what could be improved upon. Surprisingly, in this theme the interview questions did not provide a lot of information with the participants’ reflections, but the responses repeated the same trends which were mentioned already during the other themes of the interview. Communication could be more transparent and personal. The team is small and due to the lack of transparency in communication, gossip can take over as an unofficial way of communication. Here again the overlapping element of the five themes was evident. A few examples of some surprising quotes:

*“More attention, transparent communication in present, not in past tense”*

*“Better structured communication and a more personal touch”*

*“Less gossip”*

## 5.4 Motivation

Employee motivation is one of the Five Theme Model aspects. In this study, the purpose was to find out how the participants felt about their own motivation in their current role.

The interviews also included questions to further explore which conditions were positively and negatively affecting their motivation. In addition to current motivation, future wishes and concerns were also inquired of in order to have more information for future HR strategies of the organisation. The participants were asked to give a grade for their own motivation on a scale 1-10, 10 being the highest. The average grade was 7,3 which can be seen as a relatively high score.

In this theme, the future was studied by asking questions about future trends, plans, wishes and concerns. The questions on this topic were open-ended and the participants could fill in the questions related to their private or professional lives. This quote summarises the emerging aspect of how the participants' motivation could be improved by offering professional development possibilities. The reflections stated that any self-development would be welcome. There was clearly a strong desire to enhance professional competencies but specifying it more in details seemed challenging for the participants. Perhaps the question was unexpected and answering it thoroughly would need more time and consideration. This quote stated it very promptly:

*“Specialisation in my work would be necessary”*

The participants' professional future scenarios also included concerns in many forms: individual worries about the work role itself, the survival of the industry in general, the impact of technology and artificial intelligence (AI) on the work itself. Growth was mentioned in the future wishes on many levels: growth in one's own role and but also growth in teamwork and making the employer's brand stronger in the sector. In FIGURE 8 below, the positive reflections are indicated in green colour, negative scenarios are marked in red.

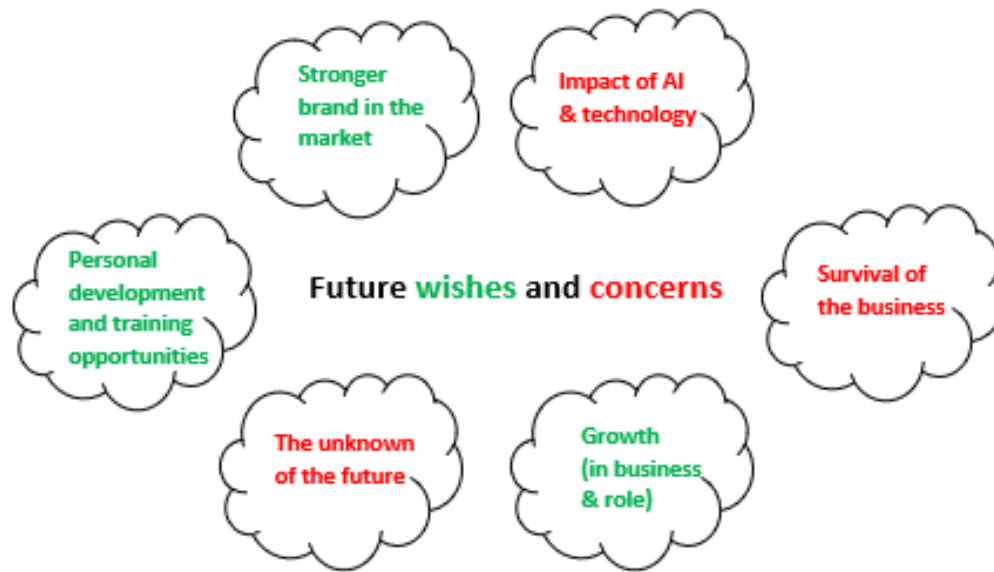


FIGURE 8: Future wishes and concerns.



## 5.5 Well-being

Work and private life are less divided nowadays and therefore we can more accurately call this theme well-being. In this theme the research purpose was to learn what the current situation is regarding employee well-being in terms of workload, what the participants value regarding their own well-being in their work and how the participants spend their free time in order to relax.

On a scale of 1-10 (10 being the highest), the participants gave an average grade 8,3 for their work-life balance. There are several ways that they reported relaxing in their free time. The majority of the participants do sports, spend time with friends and family, watch movies, go out for dinner and sleep. One supporting factor in the participant's well-being was the flexibility that the employer offers in the workplace. This was by far the most relevant factor among the participants' reflections and it was mentioned under several themes during the interview.

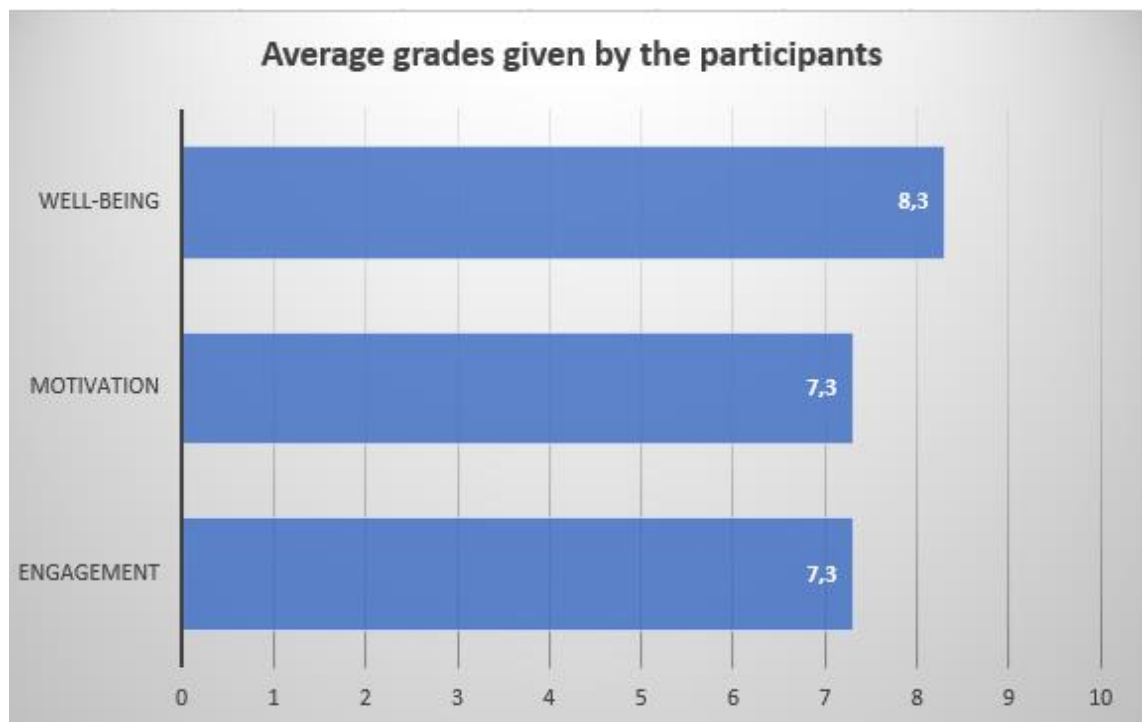


FIGURE 9: Average grades on well-being, motivation and engagement.

At the end of the interview, the participants were asked again what their own understanding of employee engagement is and what it meant to them in practice. The reason to renew the questions was to have them an opportunity to refine

their definition. Most of them wanted to do so but there were no major additions to the reflections they had shared at the beginning of the interview. It was merely just adding depth or details in the earlier reply. This would reflect my perception about the processing of the topic and how overlapping and complex the term employee engagement can be. One beautiful subjective reflection below shows a deeper perception in defining employee engagement:

*“You have to show you are worth the investment the company makes in you. But also, the importance of being a pleasant colleague that other people enjoy you are there”*

## 6 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The purpose of this case study was to gain insight into employee engagement in general within the specific organisation and then to explore their experiences of employee engagement.

In the five themes of employee engagement in this research the overlapping element in the reflections was noticeable. Not only in the participants' reflections but also in the theories related to the five themes where it can be seen how all these five themes connect to each other.

The semi-structured interview focused around five selected themes for the team. The themes were Company culture, Leadership and team, Motivation, Communication and Well-being. A good example of overlapping aspects is communication. Communication as a theme did not provide a lot of information when it was addressed during the interview, but when addressing the other themes, many communication related answers were received. Most importantly, the role of the leadership is connected to all the five themes.

The answer to the research questions became clear during the process.

### **Research question 1:**

*What is the current situation of employee engagement in the specific organisation?*

Based on the reflections of the participants, the average grade for their level of engagement was relatively high (7,3). They were all able to mention several areas which were doing well in the company as well as what they were satisfied with. So, the current situation of employee engagement was studied carefully in its positive and negative contexts. Evidence of this includes the stating of the same topic multiple times and in multiple themes. Areas of improvement were also mentioned in the participants' reflections. Therefore, it is evident to the researcher that these emerging topics should urgently be solved by the organisation. Those recommendations will be found under the Chapter 6.3 Recommendation.

**Research question 2:** *How would the employees describe the employee engagement in the organisation from their own perspective? How do they experience it in their daily lives?*

It became more evident after the interviews that employee engagement is indeed a difficult, intangible concept which has subjective connotations. It was not entirely clear for the participants what areas can be related to employee engagement and how to describe this in their own situation. The reflections had a narrative nature where certain aspects of positive experience were mentioned and also the aspects which would need improvement.

The most emerging reflections of the interview were flexibility at work, more attention to the employees, empathy, communication and eagerness to learn more.

### **6.1 Validity of the research**

Validity is an aspect which needs to be considered at the beginning of the study to guarantee the selected research method measures the phenomenon in a correct way and can give answers to the research questions. There are also several point of views where validity of a research can be observed. One way of observing validity is called *face validity* which critically and intuitively observes the validity of the research as a whole. Using the correct participant pool, choosing the right interview questions, understanding context and timing when the interview is carried out, are aspects that have an impact on the level of validity. If previous theories and research results about the same topic indicate similar results or specifies it, this can be translated into validity of the research (Hiltunen, 2009).

The above-mentioned argumentations support the fact that the research made for this specific organisation indicated high validity. The research results are reflecting existing theoretical framework about the phenomenon of employee engagement. However, the complexity of the topic leaves potential to research employee engagement further and narrow down to receive more detailed information about one specific theme of the Five Theme Model.

## 6.2 Reliability of the research

In addition to validity, reliability is also an indicator of the success of the research. It measures how reliable, stable and consistent the research results are.

Reliability could be parted further to measure stability and consistency, but stability does not guarantee consistence of the results and vice-versa. In this study, stability would be a more important factor to consider. It demonstrates how stable the research results are and whether similar results would occur when repeated. However, it is often not the instability of the research that changes the research results, but the changes happen between the data collection (Hiltunen, 2009).

Recording of the interviews have decreased mistakes in reliability. The researcher is familiar with the context and the research results do not seem irrational and coincidental. It would not be expected that the research results would differ a lot if the interviews would be repeated. Participants' own interpretations may have an impact to the answers so that the answer is not fully aligned to the interview question.

The Five Themes Model creates a foundation to ensure that the research is valid and reliable. The five selected themes of employee engagement and the interview questions were designed and accepted by the organisation representative to meet this specific organisation's needs. Therefore, the themes and research questions were explored and received the correct attention to provide sufficient information to answer the research questions.

## 6.3 Recommendations

As this final thesis is a development project, practical conclusions and advice are expected to be offered to the organisation. The recommendations can be only valid if the context is well known. The majority of the participants were Millennials and therefore many of the recommendations in this study rely on the newer research of Mellanen and Mellanen (2020) about the needs of Millennials in working life today. These recommendations together would potentially contribute to improved employee engagement and create an opportunity for the employees to

bring their “preferred self” to work according to Kahn’s (1990) earlier introduced theory in this study.

Based on the analysis of the research data around the five selected themes, a few emerging themes became apparent. Each of the five themes did reveal findings where improvements would be appreciated, some topics being more urgent than the others. This research has proven that the five topics are interdependent, and the model indicates also that they are connected to each other. Even though the recommendations are categorised under all five themes in the FIGURE 10, the indirect effect can be experienced in multiple themes simultaneously. In the themes *Company culture* and *Leadership and team* the level of reflections was scarce and had only few reflections which could lead to recommendations in practice.

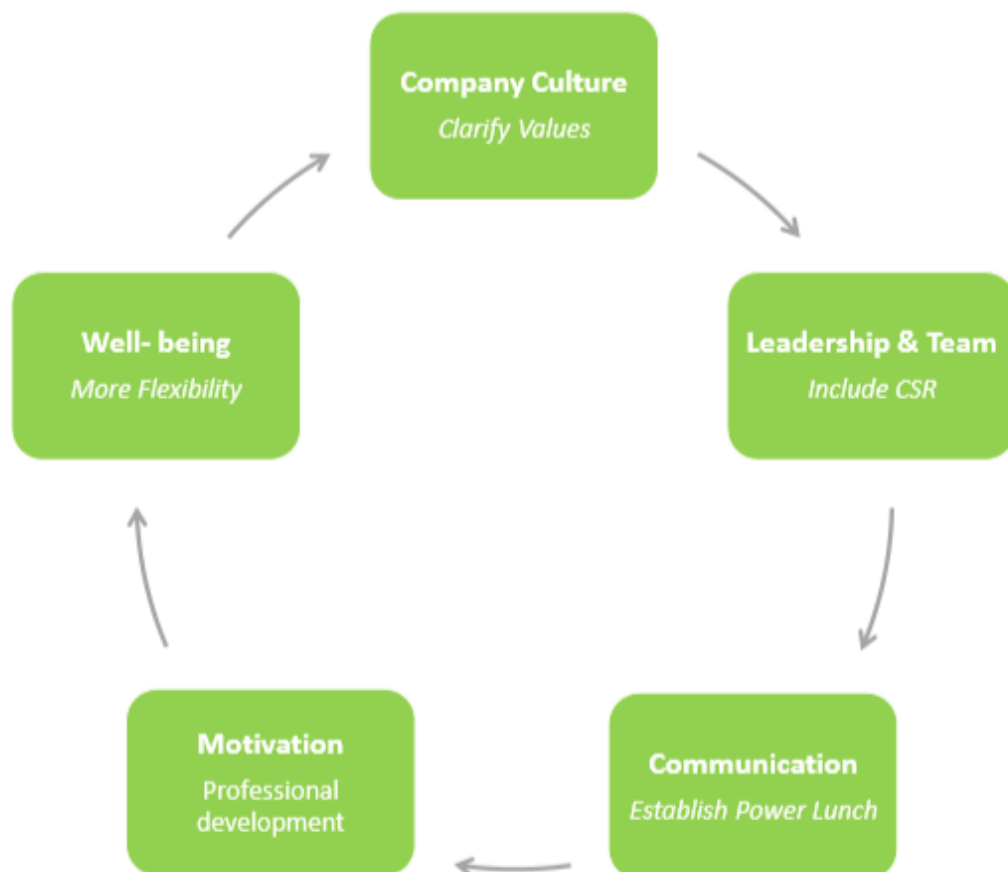


FIGURE 10: Recommendations to the company.

- Company culture

In the theme *Company culture* the company values were included in the interview questions. The results showed that the values were not fully clear for the employees and therefore, “walk the walk” as a guideline would be recommended here. This recommendation would not demand a lot of effort, yet its small attempts could make improvements. Talking about the values in the team, what they mean to the team and how it shows in daily lives is a good starting point. Fostering the values and making the values repeatedly visible on the organisation’s webpage, internal meetings and documents would ensure that repetition would make them more memorable and concrete.

- Leadership and Team

Leadership and Team are strongly connected with each other. Much communication from the leadership or within the team can be done electronically but connecting face-to-face has a positive impact on the team spirit. It is encouraged for the leader to create situations where the team can be together outside the regular meetings and gives the team an opportunity to show stronger relationships and flourish as a team and in work-related situations (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

In addition to the five themes, one overarching recommendation in employee engagement is paying attention to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The topic of CSR was previously introduced as an antecedent of an employee engagement. In the participants’ interviews, making the employer brand stronger was reflected. The keyword in the reflections was “growth” and here the growth was specified seeing growth both in the amount of team members and business. By using social media and CSR, the employer brand could develop stronger for the outside world. Mirvis (2012) has divided CSR in three categories:

- Transactional approach to meet the needs of the employees who want to take part in socially responsible activities.
- Relational approach where the company makes a commitment together with the employees to take part in socially responsible activities.
- Developmental approach where the company activates the employees and the company to produce greater value for business or society.

As a transactional or relational approach, a practical recommendation would be for the company to plant trees together, collect trash or have a “garage sale” in

the form of swapping products or selling with a low price. A developmental project could be offering help nearby the office or in their own area of expertise. The team could offer help to international schools or offer support to young expats entering the Dutch labour market by reviewing resumes etc. The opportunities are endless but in this way of using CSR, the company is shown as being a responsible employer both inside and outside. A good employer image could create a positive impact on the outside world, for future candidates and customers, and it would engage the current employees further.

Deal and Levenson (2016) state that Millennials share a controversial trait in working life: they are demanding and independent at the same time. Millennials represent a generation who are used to having fast responses due to technology and social media. Therefore, they are also expecting instant feedback, having support and mentoring both in private and in working life. Millennials also expect to have independence at work. They want to have control but are not willing to have full control over their work as flexibility is key.

A concept of *Friend Leadership* is an applicable model when the organisation is thinking about next steps in enhancing employee engagement. This would be a recommendation to read as a useful and different approach in leadership. According to *Friend Leadership* the members of the organisation are friends with each other, more than acquaintances, but less than a close friend. From the leader is expected always to be an attentive and available listener where actions matter and the title "friend leader" will be earned every day (Toivanen, 2018). This could be applicable in the studied organisation as the team is small and relatively informal with each other. The team would offer a lot of potential for closer collaboration.

- Communication

In this theme, the results reflected a demand for better communication and more attention from the manager. To ensure a feeling of having independence and control in their work, sufficient amount of information about immediate objectives helps Millennials to understand where their careers are going (Deal & Levenson, 2016). Many things in our society can be customised. A need for information to-



gether with customised services create an important aspect for Millennials. According to the research by Mellanen and Mellanen, Millennials appreciate human approach in leadership and personalised leadership (Mellanen & Mellanen, 2020). In this specific organisation with quite high number of employees belonging to the cohort of Millennials, one practical recommendation for the organisation would be to introduce *power lunch* for the team. Power lunch is also known as “business lunch”. The lunchbreak is essential for everyone and combining lunch, enhancing attention to the employees and communication in person could be an effective and useful addition to the team. This should be organised in a way which suits the company culture and managing director’s agenda. The managing director could share available dates with the team where the team members would be free to choose from a power lunch. The purpose of the lunch would be that the manager and employee would have the lunch outside the office, at the organisation’s expense. Alternatively, a coffee break could be an option too, if it feels more natural. The content of the conversations could be decided in advance to be work related or casual, depending on the employee. The main purpose of these moments would be that each individual could have a break during the day, a chance to step outside the office, and have some face-to-face time with the manager. This would enhance the feeling of being an individual whose voice is heard and support the purpose of the research.

- Motivation

In the theme motivation the participants’ eagerness to develop themselves was obvious: 100% of the participants mentioned this in their reflections. Therefore, the organisation’s investment in learning and development would be in the researcher’s opinion the most urgent topic. The next steps of carrying out the research results in practice could be implementing another, in-depth research about the elements of employees’ professional self-development and training needs. Finding out what kind of specific training the employees would need, will help the organisation to improve the engagement, productivity and retention (Mellanen & Mellanen, 2020).

- Well-being

*Well-being* is one of the five themes in employee engagement and in this study the participants emphasized significantly the feeling of flexibility in the workplace

in several themes during the interview. Overlapping of themes becomes apparent in this theme as for everyone's well-being is interpreted in different ways. Flexibility could be a reason for some participants to remain motivated, for some it could be an important aspect of well-being. In this research it was chosen to fall under the theme well-being and therefore, the recommendations will follow accordingly. Recognising flexibility as a factor in employee engagement, the aim is to maintain the level of flexibility in the studied organisation at least as it has been until now. For example, improving the flexibility by promoting the possibility to work from home regularly, would be recommended. This wish did not appear directly in the reflections of the interviews and it is difficult to tell beforehand if this opportunity would be widely used. It is understandable that there must be days when the whole team will be working in the office. However, offering the possibility to the employees to work more from home, would be highly recommended. This recommendation is based also on the company culture and the demographics of the employees: Millennials and employees having family could benefit from this option from working home (Mellanen & Mellanen, 2020).

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

Employee engagement seems to be a challenging term and phenomenon equally for academic researchers and for individual employees to define. One of the explanations for the complexity of the term is the subjective reflection of the phenomenon. However, understanding the elements of employee engagement and how it impacts in each specific organisation, is worthwhile to explore. Especially, the impact of a leader should not be neglected. The purpose of this case study was to gain insight into employee engagement in general in the specific organisation and explore the employee's own experiences of employee engagement.

It should be noted that there are some limitations to the research. Interpretations of this study were shaped by pre-existing knowledge by the researcher that should not be ignored in the process. The findings were also measuring the situation at that very moment in the summer of 2019 and they are not revealing the actual situation anymore when the final thesis will be published in the spring of 2020. The participant pool was small, yet it covered the whole team in the office. However, the small number of participants enabled a narrative aspect in the reflections which added valuable information to the research.

After exploring the topic of employee engagement by applying the Five Themes Model, this study has created a window of opportunity to research the phenomenon further in this specific organisation. The most outstanding outcome of the interviews was regarding professional self-development opportunities (100% of the participants reflected that in their answers). The next research focus areas could be exploring in depth the professional development opportunities which the participants would need and in what form. What are the emerging topics which the participants want to develop? Would it be following lectures, courses, studying online or something else? The findings would benefit the organisation greatly in developing employee engagement and retaining the employees. As a researcher, I envision this organisation would offer an interesting environment to continue the research as the suitable occasion arises.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1. Semi-structured interview questions

#### **Semi-structured interview questions - Employee engagement**

Five themes in this interview:

- Culture and work
- Leadership and team
- Motivation
- Communication
- Well-being

#### **Company culture**

1. How would you define employee engagement in your own words?
2. How does it show in your daily work?
3. On a scale from 1 to 10, (10 being the highest), how engaged do you feel you are? Why?
4. Are you aware what the company values are? (*They are Trusted, Entrepreneurial, Accountable, Motivated*)
5. If you aware of them, can you see them in your daily work?
6. Can you name several competitors of your employer in Europe or worldwide? How is your employer ranked among the competitors in Europe?
7. How would you describe the work culture in 3-4 words?
8. What do you value most about the work culture?
9. What was the number one reason you accepted this job? Is the reason still the same today?
10. Would you recommend your employer to your friends and family? If yes/ no, why?
11. How does diversity show in your company's culture? *By diversity is not meant only gender diversity here, but also religions, age, LGTB, nationality, etc.*
12. If your employer had a theme song, what would it be?



### **Leadership and team**

1. Do you feel valued at work? What would improve this feeling?
2. Do you feel comfortable giving feedback to your manager? Why?
3. Do you feel comfortable giving feedback to your colleagues? Why?
4. In your opinion, do you receive the appropriate recognition when you do good work?
5. In your opinion, do you receive the appropriate recognition & support from your manager and colleagues when you need it?
6. Do you have a “best buddy” at work?
7. Do you have access to the resources you need in order to do your work well?
8. Do you agree with this sentence: “Most of the systems and processes here support us in getting our work done effectively.”? Yes / no, some explanations.
9. Do you agree with this sentence:” I know what I need to do in order to be successful in my work?”

### **Motivation**

1. How motivated are you at work on a scale from 1-10? (10 being the highest)
2. What would motivate you more?
3. Could you highlight something done well in the workplace to motivate you, and what would you like to have otherwise?
4. What would you wish to come from your work in the coming years?
5. Are you aware of any trends, opportunities or vulnerabilities in your role which may create big changes in your work in the coming years? You can think about global topics or topics in your private life.

*Options to share if some trends need to be mentioned:*

- *Digitalization*
  - *Political climate in the world*
  - *Business related changes such as mergers and acquisitions*
  - *Changes in your own private life (relocation, family situation etc)*
6. What kind of training you would wish to have for enhancing your professional competencies?

**Communication**

1. Do you think the company keeps people informed about what is happening in the organisation (at global and/or regional level)?
2. Where do you get the information you need in order to move forward in your work?
3. What would you wish to go differently when it comes to the internal communication?
4. Do you think being more active in social media (LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter etc.) would be beneficial for the team?

**Well-being**

1. How do you relax outside of your work?
  2. Do you feel the amount of work allotted to you is reasonable?
  3. How do you rate your work-life balance?
  4. What do you value at work?
  5. Could you describe in a few words how you feel the company takes care of the well-being of the employees? How could it be improved?
- 
- After doing this interview, I ask the first question again: how would you define employee engagement in your own words now?
  - Would you add anything in your answer you gave in the beginning? If yes what?

Is there something I should have asked in this survey and you would like to share with me? Thank you.