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Low Employee Engagement in the UAE: Causes and Solutions to Overcome the Issue

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According to Prathiba (2016), employee turnover and low engagement at the workplace are universal challenges faced by many industries. It has become the top business priority for senior management. Organizations require employees with high performance and who are work engaged to grow and survive in the current challenging globalized economy. Highly engaged employees can increase productivity, be innovative and be committed to the organization. These capabilities will allow the management to depend on such employees to lead and respond quickly to organizational changes. Therefore, *Gulf News* has been publishing the results of ongoing studies and researches that have been exploring the underlying reasons for low employee engagement. As employee engagement impacts on organizations' productivity, it is crucial to find solutions for this issue (Maceda, 2014; Maceda, 2017a, 2017b; Nair, 2017).

This chapter contains the following sections: literature review about causes and solution for low employee engagement, research

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methodology, collected and analyzed secondary data, discussion on the findings of this study, conclusion and the limitation of this study.

The purpose of this chapter is to:

- Investigate the concepts of employee engagement, job satisfaction, turnover and the relationship between them.
- Explore the common patterns and reasons for low employee engagement.
- Explore the solutions to minimize the issue of low employee engagement.

The concept of employee engagement has been defined and linked with the emotions of employees. These emotions are directed towards the organization in terms of passion and desire to perform better at workplace (Al Shehhi, 2017; Jindal, Shaikh, & Shashank, 2017) or optimistic and positive attitude to finish the job (Byrne, Weston, & Peters, 2016). This study explicitly focuses on the above mentioned emotions, which has resulted into the development of a conceptual framework that can be investigated further in forthcoming researches. As this study depends on secondary data, future research should validate the findings of this framework with primary data and take it forward. In addition, the findings provided in this chapter can be used by human resources (HR) of any organization, as the findings are based on information gathered from studies conducted in different countries and sectors worldwide. Hence, this framework can be used to resolve the low employee engagement issue within the UAE as well.

Research Questions

The objective of this chapter is to find the relationship between employee engagement, job satisfaction and employee turnover. In addition it aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the common causes for low employee engagement?
- What are the solutions to enhance and overcome the issue of low employee engagement?

Employee Turnover and Employee/ Work Engagement

One of the HR concerns is how to engage the employees at work to ensure increased productivity (Dsc.gov.ae, 2018). This section reviews the relevant research and studies on employee turnover, work engagement, job satisfaction and leadership and discusses the relationship between these concepts, which aid in exploring the reasons for low employee engagement and identifying the solutions. In addition, it critically analyzes the findings of previous studies (the literature review) to understand the limitations and common patterns. This will help in meeting the objectives of this chapter and to fill the gaps.

Employee turnover is one of the challenges which human resource (HR) managers and fast growing economies are facing. It costs the company money and disturbs operations (Iqbal, 2010). The concepts of employee turnover, job satisfaction and work engagement are all related (Schubert-Irastorza & Fabry, 2014). The study by Tosum and Ulusoy (2017) support the positive relationship between job satisfaction and employee performance. Motivated employees show higher levels of performance and their intention to leave the company is low as they exhibit high positive attitude, dedication and enthusiasm toward their job. Employee work engagement is driven by the interaction of resources and job demands. Resources are divided into job resources and personal resources. Examples of job resources are support from supervisors and colleagues, performance feedback, professional growth and opportunities for growth. Examples of personal resources are self-esteem and optimism. A positive interaction between job demand and resources results in better employee engagement and job satisfaction. For instance, an employee who performs well at a given job (job demand) and receives positive feedback (job resources) will feel more competent and have more self-esteem (personal resources). On the other hand, if the employee experiences negative interaction between the job demand and (personal and job) resources, this will lead to disengagement and higher employee turnover.

In a study conducted by Smith and Macko (2014), food retailers in the UK faced heavy employee turnover. As per the results of the research, these employees had low levels of engagement; 60% of the employees did

not feel engaged. The findings of this study demonstrated that low employee engagement was not considered relevant to employee turnover by the firms. This indicates that organizations should opt for additional awareness in regards to the relationship among the concepts of employee engagement, job satisfaction and turnover. This inadequacy of understanding from organization could possibly be due to unavailability of a standard holistic framework or could also be due to insufficient researches, demonstrating and emphasizing the relationship of these concepts.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is: an assessment of the favor-ability of a job; multidimensional; and typically arrayed along a positive to negative continuum (Judge et al. 2017).

Job satisfaction it is the reflection by the employee's feelings, evaluation and opinion about the work or the workplace environment. There are various factors for job satisfaction such as job security, career opportunities, pay and working hours. There is a positive relationship between job satisfaction and turnover. Employers can retain their employees by providing opportunities for increased job satisfaction, because research shows that some of the important reasons employees leave their jobs are lack of recognition, lack of interesting work (routine), lack of career opportunities and lack of training for development (Alam, 2012). This is supported by another study conducted by Ahmad, Kashmoola and Kheng (2017), which also emphasized the relationship between job satisfaction and employee turnover. The study also inferred that companies should adopt strategies to increase the level of job satisfaction to retain employees.

Ibrahim (2015) aimed to determine the causes for retention of employees in three UAE banks and to examine the effectiveness of their retention strategies and therefore conducted interviews with their human resource stakeholders. The results supported previous studies by Alam (2012) and Ahmad, Kashmoola and Kheng (2017) and concluded the reasons for employee retention as job satisfaction, performance appraisal, feedback, pay, training and work–life balance. Further analysis highlighted that low salary and limited professional development opportunities were the major reasons for turnover (Ibrahim, 2015).

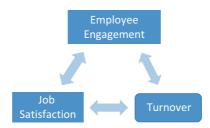


Fig. 3.1 Conceptual framework for the relationship between job satisfaction, employee engagement and turnover. Source: Author

As per the literature review, the first finding and the contribution of this chapter is the relationship between job satisfaction, employee engagement and turnover. This relationship is demonstrated in Fig. 3.1.

Factors Related to Job Satisfaction

According to Alam (2012), the pharmaceutical sector uses Medical Promotion Officers (MPOs) to distribute and market their medicines. Formal interviews were conducted with 40 MPOs to find out factors for job satisfaction and turnover. The answers were analyzed using the Likert scale, which involves five points ranging between strongly agree and strongly disagree. As per the results presented, the reasons for being satisfied were safe working conditions, recognition for job achievement and flexible working hours. On the other hand, the reasons for not being satisfied and being less motivated are workload, stress, low work–life balance and unbelievable sales targets/KPIs by the pharmaceutical sector.

My perspective on the findings is that previous studies looked mainly at the causes and reasons of low job satisfaction. However, there was limited emphasis on the symptoms of low job satisfaction and the relation with employees' commitment and engagement to work. In addition, there was not enough focus on the solutions which are as important as the causes to resolve this issue. This is why this chapter aims to focus on emphasizing the relationship between job satisfaction, employee engagement and turnover, following the causes and solutions. As the causes have been explored in depth in earlier studies, this chapter will look into the common causes which have been mentioned and accordingly the solutions which can minimize these causes. The following sections explore some of the factors related to job satisfaction discussed in detail in previous studies.

Boredom

Cleary, Sayers, Lopex and Hungerford (2016) conducted a research to investigate the reasons for boredom at work for mental health nurses and the possible ways to address this issue by both the employee and the employer. As boredom at work can make the employee feel stressed, distracted and overloaded, it will lower the engagement and satisfaction toward the job, which in turn will impact the level of support and service provided. Several factors contribute to boredom at work, such as micromanaging the employees, routine work, limited opportunities for career advancement, overloading the employee and lack of support and direction. Therefore, different strategies have been suggested by Cleary, Sayers, Lopex and Hungerford (2016) to minimize boredom at work. First of all, boredom can be eliminated through empowering the employees, as this will allow them to have a sense of responsibility and challenges them accordingly. Moreover, employees will get motivated to manage the work in the best possible way to achieve certain performance levels, which will increase their work engagement. The second approach to reduce boredom is through providing breaks, allowing them to take leaves and spend time on mindless activities. The third approach is through creating meaningful environment, as employees feel more engaged and satisfied if their work becomes important and meaningful for them. It is the responsibility of not only the employers but also the employees to make it so. Some of the approaches are through engaging with customers, colleagues and service providers.

Lack of Recognition and Career Advancement

According to Iqbal (2010), the strategic solution to retaining employees is to increase their job satisfaction level. Exit interviews allow obtaining the reasons for the turnover. Some fast growing economies like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) were not aware of the reasons for employee turnover and retention. Therefore, the aim of the study was to investigate the reasons and devise some strategies to minimize employee turnover and improve work engagement. A survey conducted using bayt. com received 13,376 responses. Seventy percent of the responded participants were planning to leave their current job, with the major reason for this decision being lack of job satisfaction. The following were identified as reasons for the lack of job satisfaction in Saudi organizations. The first one was that employees were not happy with the performance system; 52% claimed that they did not receive honest feedback from their managers to avoid conflicts. The second was lack of recognition, which resulted in impacting their performance and engagement levels. The third highlighted reason was lack of personal and career advancement, in addition to unfair policies for promotion. The final reason was ineffective communication with the management. All these factors contributed to low employee engagement and turnover in KSA organizations. Hence, the organizations need to address these issues.

Leadership

A study was conducted by Xu and Thomas (2011) to investigate the relationship between leaders' behavior and employee engagement. An online survey was conducted in a large insurance company in New Zealand. The results clearly showed the positive relation between leadership behavior and employee engagement. Leaders can motivate and inspire employees to perform better and develop positive attitude. Employees feel valued when their leaders display team-oriented behavior. This results in higher employee performance and employee engagement. Some of the teamoriented behaviors are showing interest in the personal development of the team members and celebrating the success of the team. Leaders can also contribute to employee engagement through task-oriented behaviors. Some of the task-oriented behaviors are practical and good decision making, managing the task allocation to the team members more effectively, showing integrity and providing high ethical standards by being transparent in feedbacks and communications. Thus, leadership style has a positive influence on employee behavior and engagement. For instance, transformational leadership involves several elements that influence employees, such as building trust with employees, inspiring them and providing them challenging tasks; moreover, leaders should communicate to the employees about the importance and contribution of their work. In addition, transformational leadership supports the creation of a blame-free environment. These factors contribute to job satisfaction as well.

According to Zhang, Avery, Harald and More (2014), transactional leadership style also contributes in increasing employee engagement. Employees accept the requirements of leaders but they do it for financial rewards, to avoid disciplinary actions or for recognition. Hence, this leadership style does not support in engaging the employees from the management the organizational vision. This is the opposite of transformational and organic leadership styles, which add future value due to the emotional involvement of the employees with the organizational vision. Thus, leaders can change the relationship between the employees and the organization.

A survey was conducted by Suliman and Al Junaibi (2010) in the UAE oil industry to explore the relationship between leaders and employee turnover. More than 2300 employees participated in the survey. The study confirmed that there is a significant relationship between leaders and job satisfaction. Therefore, by creating an ethical working environment leaders can minimize employee turnover.

Research by Smith and Macko (2014) showed that one of the reasons for turnover in retail stores in the UK was poor communication from the management. Employees felt that their management did not care about them. Several studies have emphasized the importance of role of leadership and have explored it's impact on the employee's job satisfaction. However, there are limited studies that have prescribed a solution to this compelling issue. Therefore, this chapter not only discusses the acute issue, but also guides to the corrective actions.

Strategies for Employee Engagement, Job Satisfaction and Turnover

Prathiba (2016) conducted a study to explore the relationship between employee engagement, empowerment and commitment to the workplace. The participants of the study were 250 employees from the banking sector in Chennai, which is a city in India. The employees were from both public and private banks. The results of the study determine employee empowerment to be one of the retention strategies. As employee empowerment is one of the HR's most effective and powerful approaches to increase employee engagement, satisfaction and commitment, it will result in employee retention. In addition, empowering employees will motivate them to contribute in the creation of competitive advantage. It can also lead to higher performance as the level of their participation increases. In addition, according to Iqbal (2010), organizations need to look for retention strategies such as creating new compensation plans, redesigning the job and strengthening social ties.

Singh and Sharma (2015) conducted a research using 225 participants in private sector organization of the UAE. The findings helped in classifying the retention strategies into two categories: long term and short term. The short-term strategy is to provide financial benefits according to the employee's performance. Long-term strategies are career opportunities which will make the employee more involved, training, succession planning and developing leadership skills.

Singh and Sharma (2015) provided the following suggestions after conducting a study in three UAE Islamic banks. Conduct regular job satisfaction and organizational commitment surveys across the organization. Then analyze and address the issues which require solutions. Use the performance appraisal system more effectively and provide regular feedback for improvement. Also, assign coaches and mentors for support and to improve performance. Benchmark the pay and benefits in both government and private sectors to design an attractive pay plan. Moreover, reward employees based on their performance level. In addition, training should be linked with the performance management system to improve the areas and skills which require training and development. It should focus on both leadership and technical skills in order to make the employees capable of taking up responsible positions. Moreover, organizations should regularly communicate to the employees key information with regard to vision, missions and strategic objectives. Also the organization's achievements should be shared with the employees to keep them involved. Retention is the responsibility of the managers as well, and not just the HR, as it is the responsibility of the employees.

Research Methodology

This study uses thematic analysis approach to build a conceptual framework based on the findings. To achieve the objectives of the study, secondary data was collected from various sources such as news articles, HR sites, YouTube channels, published sources and official websites. The mentioned responses without percentages were subjected to qualitative analysis. The mentioned responses with percentage were subjected to quantitative analysis. The analysis was carried out by calculating the frequency of the repeated key factors to identify the most common factors. Following this, the findings were grouped and categorized. The final inputs were used to produce the conceptual/thematic framework, which is the contribution of this research. The framework can be used in the UAE and the findings to be further validated.

The data obtained was analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Following methods were used for analyzing the secondary data:

- Graphical analysis
- Chi-square test for association
- Exploratory factor analysis

These approaches were used by Prathiba (2016) while discussing employee engagement as a tool for talent retention. Since my study is discussing a similar topic, these approaches are chosen to be aligned with the methodology of previous researchers for analyzing the secondary data.

The following are some of the key factors identified from literature review, which were considered while collecting and analyzing the secondary data:

- Employee engagement
- Job satisfaction
- Employee turnover
- Employee retention
- Employee motivation

All the collected secondary data are mentioned under the "Data Collection" section in this chapter. In addition, collected quantitative data are displayed in the tables.

Data Collection

Reasons for Low Employee Engagement

It is interesting to note that highly motivated employees who do not set appropriate goals can face burn-out and as a result become negative, disinterested and later struggle to engage. According to Seppala and Moeller (2018) and Menges (2018), high employee engagement can become a reason for turnover as well. An employee who is highly engaged and spends too much time and energy on work can become stressed. In addition, such employees can get exhausted to the extent where it impacts their continuity at work. Some employees have very ambitious goals, which leads to high performance but ends up in demotivation quickly. Hence, setting realistic goals is pivotal for sustainable employee engagement. In addition, employers focus on providing tangible resources and provide less importance to intangible resources such as empathy and friendship/social gathering. This results in low motivation for the employees in the long run. According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) (2017), when a job satisfaction survey was done in the US, almost 51% of the employees were not very much satisfied about their job. Five main factors were identified by the survey as major contributors for low job satisfaction: respectful treatment of all employees at all levels, salary/compensation, trust between the employee and the management, job security and opportunities for using the skills at work. The top reasons for being less satisfied about the job are salary and trust.

Morris (2017) studied the reasons which make employees feel unhappy. The data for the research was collected from various sources and the results indicate that salary and work–life balance are the top factors for being unhappy. Similarly, a survey conducted in the UAE using Bayt. com showed the salary to be one of the main reasons for turnover (Kapur, 2013). Salary as the major concern was also emphasized by Duncan (2016) from the professional services company Towers Watson, based on a survey of 25,834 employees from 24 companies during 2015–2016.

According to Al Bawaba (2018), a survey was conducted through Bayt. com from December 6 to December 22 in 2017 to investigate the most important factors which matter to professionals. There were 4,418 participants for the survey from different nationalities such as the UAE, Bahrain, Lebanon, Syria, Morocco, Oman, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar and KSA. Results demonstrate that breaking the routine and using advance technology are the most important factors for the employees.

According to Eggleston (2014) and Khalife (2016), the factors which make the employee unhappy and unsatisfied at work are lack of recognition, low salary, lack of work–life balance, limited job security and limited career advancement. Also employees like to be recognized when they perform well, as a sort of appreciation. In addition, working to the extent that daylight becomes a dream results in stress and loss of work engagement. Finally, progressing in the career to reach higher positions is a basic need of an ambitious employee.

Deloitte is one of the HR consultants and its analysis aimed at exploring the top HR challenges. It had surveyed more than 3000 HR and business leaders in the Middle East and around the world in 2015. According to the survey results, the top four challenges identified are learning and development, leadership, reinventing HR and culture and engagement, which are the responsibility of the organizations and the HR. In addition, 78% of the survey participants believed that their organizations were not fully prepared to develop their leaders. In addition, there were issues in leadership capabilities, which were affecting the engagement of the employees at work. Thus, employees leave the organizations also because of poor leadership (Arabian Gazette, 2015).

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) is the world's largest human resource membership organization dedicated to human resource management. It had surveyed 600 employees in the US during November and December 2015. According to this study, the top reasons for employees to leave or stay in the organization are salary, benefits and career advancement (Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 2017).

Solutions to Improve/Enhance Employee Engagement

Various studies have stated solutions and best practices to motivate employees and increase their job satisfaction level and engagement level and accordingly minimize the turnover. According to Nair (2017), increasing salary is one of the approaches to retaining employees, because employees usually plan to change their employment after one year seeking better benefits. However, according to Maceda (2017a, 2017b) increasing the salary is a short-term solution. Hence, HR should focus on other motivational factors such as training and development programs. Moreover, as mentioned by DeMers (2017), employers should allow employees to contribute their ideas, provide limited supervision and support them in taking responsibility and making decisions within their boundaries.

According to Argyll and Bute Council (2015), training and development programs can motivate employees, despite the risk that they might build the skills and leave the employer for a competitor. Also helpful are retention programs which aim to listen to and seek employees' input and feedback for improvement. Deloitte Insights, which looks into significant business issues to improve business practices, suggested making the work meaningful and choosing the right skills while hiring. Jobs should have expected output and challenges which can keep the employees motivated (Bersin, 2016).

According to Bersin (2016), leaders and HR need to raise employee engagement from an HR program to a core business strategy. The following are the suggested strategies:

- Have a management team with good leadership skills. Leaders play an essential role in employees' lives. Therefore, they should be capable of inspiring and influencing employees through alternative ways such as coaching and providing real-time feedback. It is also important to have a proper performance appraisal system, as several participants felt this process to be a painful exercise which did not add the expected value.
- Provide a flexible working environment, which includes facilities for employee entertainment such as wellness programs, working remotely and flexible hours. The survey participants preferred free time over money.
- Ensure ongoing recognition and appreciation on the delivered work, which encourages the employees to give their best. This practice can motivate other employees as well to aim for similar experience and appreciation.
- Create opportunities for growth, as ambitious employees seek to reach higher positions. However, promotions on yearly basis are not possible due to the organizational structure and budget restrictions. Management can still allow employees to take new assignments and transfer to new projects to keep employees motivated.
- Establish transparency and clearly communicate the vision and the missions to the employees. Employees are an important asset of the company and their involvement is required for the company's success.

Maceda (2017a, 2017b) suggested the following:

• Create performance management systems which match with the culture of high development.

- Create positive strategies and involve younger employees and make them more excited.
- Hire managers who can play the role of coach rather just managers and encourage transparency and promote trust so the employees feel secured and good toward the relationships at work. Managers contribute around 70% in making the employees happy and engaged at work.

Discussion and Findings

The first aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between employee engagement, job satisfaction and turnover. The findings mentioned in the literature review emphasized the relationship between these concepts. This is shown in Fig. 3.1 and this is the first finding of this study. It was of utmost importance to explore the relationship among the following concepts., as these are inter-linked. Both turnover and low employee engagement are the outcomes and consequences of low job satisfaction.

The second purpose of this study was to explore the common causes of low employee engagement. The literature review mentioned several reasons, as shown in Fig. 3.2. This was helpful in exploring the reasons from different industries and countries. Following this, secondary data was collected to investigate further on the causes. The results are shown in Fig. 3.2. The factors are highlighted in yellow boxes in Fig. 3.2.

Based on the findings of this study, the following are the commonly repeated reasons for low employee engagement:

- Low salary
- Lack of career opportunities
- Low work–life balance
- · Lack of recognition and lack of training and development

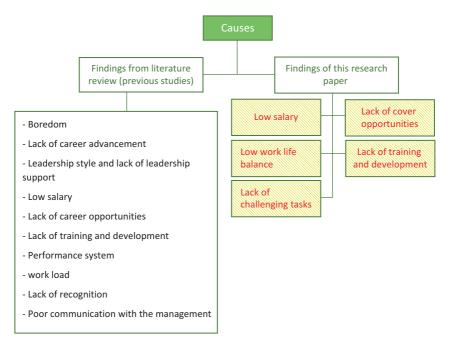


Fig. 3.2 Common causes of low employee engagement. Source: Author

These factors have also been mentioned in the literature review (Alam, 2012; Cleary et al., 2016; Ibrahim, 2015; Iqbal, 2010; Kashmoola et al., 2017). Hence, these factors can be considered as the common factors for low employee engagement. In addition, these factors have been mentioned for different countries and industries. Hence, they are generic factors which are applicable to and can be used by any industry and country. These findings might vary if the data was collected from a specific industry or age group. For instance, work–life balance might matter more to married employees than to non-married employees.

Another possibility is that salary might be less important for lawyers as the nature of their work depends on building trust with the clients to earn money. Therefore, their engagement might depend on other factors. In contrast, a mechanical engineer might care more for high-salary jobs looking at the nature of the work and the high pressure the job requires. Therefore, these common reasons can be applicable in general and



Fig. 3.3 Conceptual framework of solutions for low employee engagement. Source: Author

further investigation is required to be fair with other related factors such as gender, age and industry type.

Figure 3.3 shows the third contribution and the finding of this study, highlighted in yellow boxes. The following solutions can minimize the issue of low employee engagement.

- Companies need to look into the compensation plan and redesign it to meet the benchmark. This was also mentioned by Iqbal (2010) in the literature review.
- Training and development is required for the employees to learn and break the routine at work. In addition, training increases their knowledge and networking. This point was emphasized by Singh and Sharma (2015) in the literature review.
- Providing flexible working environment where the employees are not restricted on the check in and out times will increase the level of employee engagement. This point was not mentioned in the literature review and it is a contribution of this study for this topic.
- Performance system and honest feedback can enhance employees' capabilities and skills. This point was not mentioned in the literature review and it is a contribution of this study for this topic.

- Employees appreciate recognition and supportive leaders who can increase the level of employee motivation. This results in higher engagement and productivity as they do their best at work. This point was not mentioned in the literature review and it is a contribution of this subject for this topic.
- According to Conant (2011, 2012), when he took over Campbell's Soup Company as CEO he faced the problem of very low engaged employees within the organization. It took him almost eight years to reach world-class employee engagement. One of the key factors for employee engagement is leaders. It is important for leaders to be transparent with employees about organizational changes. In addition, they need to have continuous interactions with the employees and listen to their issues. The suggested approach by the management for the leaders to follow was the 'Listen, frame, advance' approach, where the leaders listen to the employees and then frame the next step and be clear about who should do what. Moreover, allowing employees to take breaks during long working hours can enhance their level of engagement. In addition, developing strong corporate social responsibility (CSR) can also increase employee engagement. These points were not mentioned in the literature review and are a contribution of this study for this topic.

The solutions can vary depending on the nature of the industry and the interest of the employees. However, for a company to satisfy all the employees would be not practical. Therefore, these solutions can support in resolving the common pain points and would still bring positive results.

Conclusion

This study was able to make three contributions and findings related to employee engagement. The first finding is the relationship between the three concepts, job satisfaction, employee engagement and turnover. These concepts need to be looked together and not separately. The second finding is the common reasons for low employee engagement, which are low salary, lack of career opportunities, low work-life balance, lack of recognition and lack of training and development. The third finding is the solutions or the factors that need to be focused on to minimize low engagement: compensation plan, recognition, training and development, performance system, having supportive leaders and flexible working environment.

It is recommended that the companies and human resource departments use these findings as a framework to understand the issue of low engagement and ways to minimize it. The UAE is one of the countries reported to have 85% low employee engagement (Maceda, 2017a, 2017b) and where 83% of employees are thinking of leaving their workplace (Maceda, 2016; Times, 2016). Therefore, different sectors in the UAE can use the findings and the framework from this study to look into their low employee engagement issue.

One of the limitations of this study is the use of secondary data. This indicates a pressing need to use these findings and validate them through primary data. Organizations and human resource firms need to resolve this issue. The findings here can help, despite the fact that the secondary data collected for this study had limited information about the survey participants, location and type of questions used. Therefore, my next recommendation is that future studies for this topic should collect data from a more focused group of participants, industries, age range and other such elements.

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