

## **EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES AND EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE OF PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN NAIROBI CITY COUNTY, KENYA**

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this study was to assess the relationship between employee engagement strategies and employee performance in public universities in Kenya. To achieve this goal, the study drew on the social exchange theory. The study utilized an explanatory research design and a methodology that involved collecting primary data from a target population of 144 respondents, consisting of 144 heads of academic divisions from 4 main campuses of the public universities. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed to select a sample for the study, including stratified random sampling and simple random sampling. The data collected from the 91 respondents were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple linear regression. The results led to the conclusion that there is a significant positive statistically significant relationship between employee engagement strategies and employee performance. It was thus recommended that; organizations should improve telecommuting and wellness options, prioritize a safe work environment, and diversify recognition and rewards systems, which can enhance employee engagement and overall employee performance.*

**Keywords:** *Employee engagement strategies, employee performance, social exchange theory, public universities*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Employees possess the capacity to either propel or hinder an organization's success. Therefore, organizations such as the public universities should focus on employee feedback so as to achieve substantial academic achievements driven by increased levels of employee engagement (Githinji & Muli, 2018). In the global context, as public universities consistently evolve beyond the conventional boundaries of knowledge dissemination to become pivotal drivers of economic and societal progress, there has been a growing realization that the engagement of employees within public universities plays a crucial role in shaping their overall performance. The performance of these institutions directly correlates with the quality of education, research, and innovation. Employee engagement strategies have garnered increased attention as a means to optimize the potential of the academic workforce, enhance the quality of education, and bolster research output worldwide (O'riordan, 2017). Palle (2022) opined that public universities that actively engage their employees not only avoid wasting effort and talent but also gain increased commitment from their workforce. They experience reduced absenteeism, a stronger customer orientation and heightened productivity.

Public universities play an indispensable role across the African continent, addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by nations. They function as hubs for knowledge creation, nurturing the next generation of

leaders, and making significant contributions to national development. The performance of employees in African public universities relies heavily on the level of engagement among academic and administrative staff (Wairimu & Ndeto, 2019). African universities contend with a range of issues, including insufficient resources, infrastructure limitations, and the necessity to accommodate expanding student populations. Consequently, there is an urgent requirement to explore and implement effective employee engagement strategies tailored to the African context (Sixpence, Braine, Bussin, & Mthombeni, 2021). This need arises due to various challenges, including a shortage of skilled personnel, low motivation, and poor working conditions (Gile, Buljac-Samardzic, & De Klundert, 2018). In line with this Aziez (2022) has proposed that public universities adopt an employee-centric approach. Engaged employees exhibit strong passion for their work, a clear sense of purpose, and deep fulfillment. They are driven to surpass expectations and actively contribute to the organization's success. Such individuals are profoundly committed to the organization's objectives and principles, taking ownership and pride in their roles within the institution (Wairimu & Ndeto, 2019).

In Kenya, public universities have been integral in advancing the country's educational, research, and development agenda. The Kenyan government has consistently invested in expanding access to higher education and research, leading to a burgeoning need for effective employee engagement strategies (Kanake & Nyakego, 2016). This need stems from the recognition that engaged employees are more likely to contribute to the realization of the university's mission and objectives. Kenyan public universities are increasingly focusing on adopting and tailoring employee engagement strategies to address issues such as faculty motivation, research productivity, and overall institutional performance (Cheruiyot, Influence of Training Strategies on Employee Performance in Public University Campuses in Kericho County, Kenya, 2020). The Kenyan government, recognizing the importance of higher education, is keen to support initiatives such as employee engagement strategies that enhance the performance of these institutions. However, public universities in Kenya face specific challenges such as funding constraints, increasing enrollment, and the need to uphold international standards in education and research (Nderitu, 2022). Understanding the impact of employee engagement strategies on employee performance is crucial in addressing these challenges and further elevating the country's higher education system.

### **Problem Statement**

Over the past two decades, the concept of employee engagement has gained widespread recognition with organizations increasingly considering their employees as strategic partners rather than strategic tools. As a result, many organizations are increasingly striving to assess the engagement levels of their employees and seeking ways to keep them engaged (Githinji & Muli, 2018). However, within the context of Kenyan public universities, a pressing social need arises due to the persistent labor disputes, which have led to deteriorating performance characterized by high absenteeism, diminished trust, reduced productivity, and consequently, a decline in service quality. These challenges result in a dissatisfied customer base, adversely affecting the universities' ability to fulfill their societal and educational missions (Nderitu, 2022).

While research has acknowledged the link between employee engagement and performance, a significant conceptual and contextual knowledge gap exists concerning the relationship between employee engagement strategies and academic staff performance in public universities in Kenya. Prior studies, such as those conducted by Githinji and Muli (2018) centered on the airline sector and employed measures such as employee compensation, work environment, training and career development, and employee involvement and participation as indicators of employee engagement strategies. On the other hand, Nderitu's (2022) research focused on public universities but primarily examined the performance of non-academic staff, utilizing factors

like working environment, leadership, training and career development, and remunerations to assess employee engagement strategies. Additionally, Gikonyo's 2019 study was conducted in the banking sector of Kenya. This study intended to address the aforementioned knowledge gap by investigating the relationship between employee engagement strategies and the performance of academic staff in Kenyan public universities. It sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of how engagement strategies tailored to academic staff affect their performance, with a specific focus on aspects such as recognition and rewards, work life balance initiatives and work environment.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The social exchange theory was first introduced by Homans (1958). The theory proposes that social interactions between individuals involve an exchange of resources, such as time, energy, and emotions. The theory suggests that individuals are motivated to engage in social relationships if they believe they will receive a positive return on their investment. In the context of employee engagement strategies and employee performance in public universities in Kenya, the social exchange theory suggests that employees who feel engaged and supported by their organization are more likely to perform better. When an organization provides resources such as training, career development, and opportunities for recognition, employees feel valued and motivated to reciprocate by performing at a higher level. This can lead to increased job satisfaction, commitment, and productivity (Githinji & Muli, 2018).

The theory assumes that employees are motivated to engage in positive social relationships with their organization if they perceive that the organization values them and their contributions. It also assumes that employees are willing to contribute to the organization's goals and objectives if they believe they will receive a fair return on their investment (Aziez, 2022). Several studies have indicated the positive contribution of the social exchange theory to organizational success. Researchers have found that employee engagement strategies such as recognition programs, career development opportunities, and supportive leadership positively impact employee performance, motivation, and job satisfaction. In the context of public universities in Kenya, studies have shown that employee engagement strategies can improve employee performance, retention, and commitment to the organization. However, the theory has also faced criticism. One critique is that the theory focuses on the exchange of tangible resources and neglects the importance of intangible resources, such as emotional support and trust. Another critique is that the theory assumes that individuals are rational decision-makers who always seek to maximize their benefits, but in reality, employees may have conflicting motivations and goals that are not always rational (Ahmad, Nawaz, Ishaq, Khan, & Ashraf, 2023).

In promoting employee engagement in public universities, the social exchange theory can be utilized by organizations that need to create a work environment that fosters fairness and equity. This includes providing employees with opportunities for development and growth, recognizing and rewarding their contributions, and involving them in decision-making processes. By doing so, employees are more likely to perceive that they are receiving fair treatment and are more likely to reciprocate by engaging in positive behaviors that enhance organizational performance. Thus, employee engagement strategies should focus on creating a sense of fairness and reciprocity in the workplace to improve employee performance and well-being.

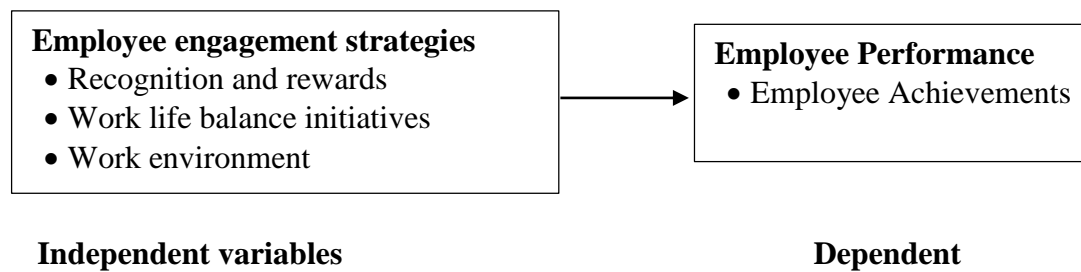
Empirical review relating to the variables was carried out. The study conducted by Palle (2022) aimed at examining the relationship between employee engagement strategies and employee performance. The study employed both causal and descriptive research methodologies, collecting data from a planned sample of 100 employees using a standardized questionnaire. The study's findings indicated a link between employee engagement and performance, indicating that motivated workers are more productive and devoted to their jobs. The study also found a number of elements, such as pay and benefits, environmental health and safety conditions, leadership development, and internal communication, that have an impact on employee engagement. Organizations are advised to concentrate on enhancing employee engagement in order to improve employee performance and boost productivity. Organizations should focus on variables like remuneration and benefits, leadership development, and internal communication that have an impact on employee engagement in order to achieve this. Offering training programs, opportunities for professional advancement, and rewarding employee achievements, according to the findings, could be effective methods for raising employee engagement. Nevertheless, the study lacked a theoretical foundation. The target population was not mentioned; hence it was also unclear how the sample size was determined.

A study carried out by Aziez (2022) used the job demands-resources theory to guide the review of the relationship between employee engagement and performance, with job satisfaction and compensation as the study's mediating variables. In this study, a qualitative approach—more precisely, a literature review—was used as the research methodology. To determine the link between employee engagement and performance, the researchers carried out a systematic evaluation of 13 sources, using job satisfaction and pay as mediators. The annotated bibliography method of analysis was employed in this study. According to the literature study, employee engagement increases work satisfaction, pay, and productivity. Employee engagement tends to increase job satisfaction, which enhances performance. Those who are more engaged at work are also more likely to perform better. Employees who feel fairly compensated are more likely to be engaged and perform well, hence compensation was also discovered to be a mediating factor. Nevertheless, the study only looks at how job satisfaction and pay mediate the relationship; other factors like leadership, corporate culture, and work-life balance may also be important. Furthermore, the study solely used a qualitative methodology, which can restrict the applicability of the findings. The relationship between employee engagement and performance should be studied in future studies using a quantitative methodology, with a larger sample size and a more diverse population.

The study by Githinji and Muli (2018) focused on examining the impact of employee engagement strategies on the performance of Air Kenya Limited. The study used employee compensation, work environment, training and career development, and employee involvement and participation as measures of employee engagement strategies, and drew on theoretical foundations such as social exchange theory, dual factor theory of motivation, three component theory of engagement, and resource-based view theory. The study employed a descriptive census survey design and collected primary data through structured questionnaires from a sample of 48 respondents out of the 191 management employees at the Air Kenya Limited headquarters. The findings indicated that employee salary, work environment, employee involvement and participation, training, and career development significantly influenced the performance of Air Kenya Limited. The company had various strategies in place to encourage employee engagement, including providing incentives and bonuses, offering internal and external training programs, supporting mentorship initiatives, and allowing employees to voice their grievances through a union. The study discovered that staff engagement strategies had a significant effect on Air Kenya Limited's performance. The research suggests that the business concentrate on fostering a supportive work environment, offering training to staff members at all levels, and assessing its effects on

employee output. The report recommends that workers form a union so they may voice complaints and take part in initiatives to raise service quality. Allowing staff members to create and implement new ideas is a key component of effective employee management. The company needs a dependable mobile e-commerce platform, more extra sales for commissions, and a standard method of paying all staff. However, the sample size was relatively small. A larger sample size would provide more robust results and increase the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study only focused on one organization in a specific context, which limits the external validity of the results. Future research should investigate the relationship between employee engagement strategies and performance in a broader range of organizations and contexts.

**Conceptual Framework**



**3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research employed an explanatory research design, which is well-suited for investigating causal relationships between variables, making it suitable for exploring the effect of employee engagement strategies on employee performance in Kenyan public universities. The study was conducted in the 4 main campus public universities located in Nairobi City County, Kenya. A total of 144 heads of academic departments and divisions from these universities were targeted as respondents in the study. The study utilized a multi-stage sampling technique, beginning with stratified random sampling, which divided the population into strata i.e., universities. From each stratum, respondents were selected using simple random sampling. The sample size for the study was determined using the following Yamane formula of sample size computation:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2} \dots\dots\dots(\text{Eqn. 1})$$

Where;  
 n is the sample size,  
 N is the population size,  
 e is the level of precision.

This aided in collecting and analyzing data which was used to generalize findings for entire population.

$$n = \frac{144}{1 + 144(0.05)^2} = 106$$

The sample size for the study was therefore 106 heads of academic departments from the 4 main campus public universities in Nairobi City County. The respondents were identified purposively since they were conversant with the employee engagement strategies and employee performance.

Table 1: Sample Size

University	Head department	of	Sample calculation	size	Sample size
Multimedia University of Kenya	16		$16 \times 106$		12
Technical University of Kenya	51		$51 \times 106$		37
The Co-operative University of Kenya	9		$9 \times 106$		7
University of Nairobi	68		$68 \times 106$		50
<b>Total</b>	<b>144</b>		144		<b>106</b>

The primary data was collected by use self-administered questionnaire which had 5-point Likert scale questions. An 86 percent response rate was recorded. The computed Cronbach Alpha coefficient was above 0.7 indicating that the questionnaire was reliable. Multiple linear regression was used in testing the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable. The adjusted R square tested the strength of the relationship of the variables while the p-values were used in deducing the results.

#### 4. RESULTS

This section presents the results and discussion of response rate, the descriptive statistics and the hypothesis test.

##### Employee Engagement Strategies Descriptive Statistics

The study assessed the effect of employee engagement strategies on employee performance. The study examined three critical factors within employee engagement strategies: recognition and rewards, work life balance initiatives and work environment. The study's results demonstrated several key findings. Firstly, 100 percent of the respondents acknowledged that employees receive non-financial rewards and recognition, such as public acknowledgment and appreciation. Additionally, it was observed that high-performing employees are rewarded with financial incentives like bonuses or salary increases, with 15.4 percent strongly agreeing, and 84.6 percent in agreement with this strategy. Furthermore, a unanimous 100 percent of the respondents indicated that employees are provided with equal opportunities for recognition and rewards, as well as flexible work schedules to help balance their work and personal life. On the other hand, when it comes to telecommuting or remote work options, 19.8 percent of the respondents strongly agreed, 67.0 percent agreed, and 13.2 percent maintained a neutral stance. However, regarding the availability of wellness programs, such as gym facilities, only 17.6 percent agreed, while 62.6 percent remained neutral, and 19.8 percent disagreed.

Conversely, it was unanimously agreed by 100 percent of the respondents that a safe and healthy work environment is provided at the workplace. Moreover, employees are afforded opportunities for engagement and involvement in decision-making processes, with 18.7 percent strongly agreeing, 46.7 percent in agreement, and 35.2 percent maintaining a neutral position on this matter. Additionally, 36.7 percent strongly agreed, while 63.7 percent agreed that a positive work culture and teamwork are fostered among employees. The results are indicated in table 2.

*Table 2: Employee Engagement Strategies Descriptive Statistics Results*

<b>Questions</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
Employees are provided with non-financial rewards and recognition, such as public acknowledgment and appreciation	0.0	100	0.0	0.0	0.0
High performing employees are provided with financial rewards, such as bonuses or salary increases.	15.4	84.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
Employees are provided with equal opportunities for recognition and rewards	0.0	100	0.0	0.0	0.0
There are flexible work schedules to help employees balance their work and personal life	0.0	100	0.0	0.0	0.0
The department provides telecommuting or remote work options.	19.8	67.0	13.2	0.0	0.0
Employees have opportunities of wellness programs, such as gym memberships or stress management workshops.	0.0	17.6	62.6	19.8	0.0
Safe and healthy work environment is provided at the work place	0.0	100	0.0	0.0	0.0
Employees are given opportunity for engagement and involvement in decision-making processes	18.7	46.2	35.2	0.0	0.0
Positive work culture and teamwork is fostered among employees	36.3	63.7	0.0	0.0	0.0

### **Employee Performance Descriptive Statistics**

The dependent variable of the study was employee performance. The study examined the critical factor within employee performance: employee achievements. The study's results highlighted several key observations. Firstly, it was found that employees consistently complete their assigned work on time and effectively manage their tasks, with 100 percent of the respondents in agreement with this statement. On another note, it was observed that employees exhibit proactivity in identifying and resolving issues, with 18.7 percent of the respondents strongly agreeing, and 81.3 percent in agreement with this aspect. Additionally, a significant proportion, consisting of 36.3 percent strongly agreeing and 63.7 percent in agreement, noted that employees consistently meet or exceed their productivity targets. The results are indicated in table 3 next page.

Table 3: Employee Performance Descriptive Statistics Results

Question	SA %	A %	N %	A %	SD %
Employees complete their work assignments in a timely manner.	0.0	100	0.0	0.0	0.0
Employees effectively manage their workload.	100	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Employees are proactive in identifying and resolving issues.	18.7	81.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
Employees consistently meet or exceed their productivity targets.	36.3	63.7	0.0	0.0	0.0

### Simple Linear Regression Analysis

A regression is carried out to assess whether the independent variable explain the response variable (Zikmund, Babin, Carr, & Griffin, 2013). The study used simple linear regression to examine the link between employee engagement strategies and employee performance, subject to several assumptions. These assumptions include a linear relationship between predictor variables and the response variable, normally distributed residuals, and the absence of multicollinearity and autocorrelation. To confirm these assumptions, diagnostic measures were initially conducted.

First, the Durbin-Watson test was performed to assess autocorrelation. A Durbin-Watson value of 2.0 indicated no autocorrelation in the sample, with the Durbin-Watson statistic ranging from 0 to 4. A value of 2.0 signifies an absence of autocorrelation, values from 0 to less than 2 suggest positive autocorrelation, and values from 2 to 4 indicate negative autocorrelation (Griffith, 2013).

Secondly, the Shapiro-Wilk test was used to test the normality of the variables. The normality hypothesis is typically rejected when the significance level is below or equal to 5 percent, indicating non-normality (Jobson, 2012). However, the results revealed normally distributed residuals, with p-values (p-value = 0.075) exceeding 5 percent, indicating that the variables in the study follow a normal distribution.

Lastly, the study checked for the absence of multicollinearity, which occurs when predictor variables are highly correlated. Tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) criteria were used for this test. The tolerance values exceeded 0.1, and the VIF values were less than 5, indicating no multicollinearity in the data. According to Fox (2019), tolerance and VIF values for all variables should be greater than 0.1 and less than 5, respectively. Thus, the findings suggest an absence of multicollinearity.

### Employee Engagement Strategies and Employee Performance

Simple linear regression was conducted to assess the relationship between employee engagement strategies and employee performance of public universities in Nairobi City County. The analysis revealed a strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.792$ ), indicating a strong relationship between these variables. The R-squared ( $R^2$ ) value of 0.627 suggests that approximately 62.7 percent of the variability in employee performance can be explained by the predictor variables. The adjusted R-squared (Adjusted  $R^2$ ) value of 0.623 reinforces this, indicating that 62.3 percent of the variations can be attributed to the studied variables.



To test the overall model's significance, an ANOVA test was conducted, and the results showed a significance value of 0.000, which is below the significance level of 0.05. This indicates that the model is statistically significant in predicting how employee engagement strategies influence employee performance, making the general model significant. Additionally, the study variables were examined so as to compute the coefficient of the predictor variables. The results are as indicated in table 4.

Table 4: Regression Coefficients

Model	$\beta$	Std. Error	t	P
Intercept	8.101	0.7735	10.5	< .001
Employee engagement strategies	0.252	0.0205	12.2	< .001

The multiple linear regression test established a prediction equation as highlighted below;

$$\text{Employee performance} = 8.101 + 0.252 \text{ Employee Engagement Strategies}$$

This equation indicates that for every unit increase in employee engagement strategies, there is a corresponding increase of 0.252 units in employee performance, while the intercept is 8.101, representing the expected performance when employee engagement strategies are zero.

The regression results indicate that employee engagement strategies and its constant have a P value less than 5 percent and a coefficient ( $\beta$ ) of 0.252 and 8.101. This indicates that for every unit increase in employee engagement strategies, there is a corresponding increase of 0.252 units in employee performance, while the intercept is 8.101, representing the expected performance when employee engagement strategies are zero. These findings are in agreement with the results of a study conducted by Githinji and Muli (2018), Nderitu's (2022) and Palle (2022), which indicated that there exists a positive statistically significant link between employee engagement strategies and employee performance.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study revealed that employee engagement strategies, including recognition and rewards, work-life balance initiatives, and fostering a positive work environment, demonstrated mixed effectiveness in the surveyed organizations. While non-financial recognition and equal opportunities for recognition were widely practiced, the statistical analysis established a significant relationship between these strategies and employee performance.

Based on the study findings the study suggests several recommendations for organizations to optimize their employee engagement strategies. First, organizations should enhance the accessibility of telecommuting options and wellness programs to better balance employees' work and personal lives. Additionally, prioritizing the creation of a safe and positive work environment is crucial for employee well-being and engagement. Diversifying recognition and rewards systems, beyond non-financial recognition, can motivate and reward high-performing employees effectively. Implementing these recommendations can lead to improved employee engagement and, consequently, enhanced performance within organizations.

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