



**FACTORS AFFECTING FOREIGN EMPLOYEES' ENGAGEMENT AND CAREER  
MOBILITY**

**BY**

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**A DOCUMENTARY RESEARCH**

**SUBMITTED IN THE PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE  
DEGREE OF MASTERS IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION  
INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM, GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS  
SIAM UNIVERSITY, BANGKOK, THAILAND**

**2020**



**Research Title** : Factors Affecting Foreign Employees' Engagement and Career Mobility  
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**Academic** : 2020

This independent study has been approved to be partial fulfillment of the requirement for Degree of Master in Business Administration

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## ABSTRACT

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30 / 6 / 2021

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In our modern and highly dynamic business world, dealings with employees pose a considerable challenge to managers and the decision-makers of almost every organization. Understanding how to help employees deliver their best for the betterment of the organization in a competitive environment has become the focus. Hence, most companies have placed human capital as the most critical asset. This study used documentary approach to explore the factors that affect engagement levels of foreign employees and career mobility. The study posed two fundamental questions that have often been avoided as the world is becoming quickly globalized, and job mobility is on the rise: 1) what are the possible challenges to be encountered by foreigners who choose to work in countries other than their home countries? 2) How will those challenges affect their engagement levels in their workplaces and their career mobility objectives? 3) This study used 50 peer-reviewed articles on engagement and career mobility, retrieved from the Siam University, Scientific Research online library, Wiley Online, Research Gate, and Sci-Hub academic search engines based on relevance to the topic. Eight factors that affect engagement and career mobility were identified from the literature cited, and a conceptual framework was established based on the identified factors. Recommendations were offered to managers and CEOs of corporate societies and non-profit organizations.

**Keywords:** Employee Engagement, Foreign Employee, Career Mobility



## 1.1. INTRODUCTION

Engagement in the workplace has remained a recurring decimal both in local and international work settings. While the term "engagement" has not been adequately conceptualized (Azevedo, 2015; Baruch et al., 2016), its impact has been mainly visible in an organization's productivity level. In a world where career mobility has been on a steady increase due to rapid globalization especially in emerging economies where competition tends to be high ((Anderson et al., 2014), exploring factors that affect foreign employees' engagement and career mobility has become imperative. Identifying such factors will also create a clearer perspective on the challenges faced by workers who live and work in countries other than their home countries.

It is estimated that about 232 million people live and work outside their countries of origin worldwide (OECD, 2013). On the other hand, understanding the mitigating factors against motivation is another concern. Added to the growing trend in career mobility are data backing self-initiated or personal decision to move to outweigh traditional or company-initiated moves (Doherty, 2013; Doherty et al., 2013). Understanding the motivation behind the trend is a good area for academic inquiry, hence this study. Due to the ambiguity that characterizes the concept of engagement Christenson et al. (2012), this study excuses the use of the two ideas interchangeably.

Another point of interest in career mobility is that the search for talent and its management is perceived to have gone beyond border restrictions, and it is also observed that career mobility has remained asymmetric due to the easy access enjoyed by those in advanced countries seeking investment or job opportunities in less developed economies. Taxation has remained a significant obstruction to cross-border movements ((Stegman, 2015) for instance. On the other hand, it is crucial to point out the disparity in the existing data on foreign workers which focus more on

companies sending their employees abroad than on other sectors like charity organizations (Maäkela" et al., 2015), the military (Fisher et al., 2015), non-governmental bodies such as United Nations agencies and the diplomatic institutions (Hart, 2015).

Although employee's engagement has been extensively studied in business and across many sectors, little research had probed into factors that affect the engagement level of workers who are domiciled in another country. Existing data reported a general decline in global engagement level among workers in 2017 cultural differences- where it may be found as rude to be overly excited or dull in a workplace, economic and political instability factoring as the primary reasons responsible for the trend (Dutta & Sharma 2017).

## **1.2. Research Problem**

There's been a growing concern about the general decline in global engagement level which stems from engagement level decline of employees in their different organizations, and this trend is seriously raising anxiety over career mobility sustainability (Hewitt, 2017). According to Hewitt's statistics, employee engagement level across all sectors dropped from 65% in 2015 to 63% in 2016 changing the rather slow but steady increase witnessed from 2011 up until 2015. Populist movements like those seen in the United Kingdom, the United States, and those taking hold in parts of Continental Europe have made discussions about erecting borders and walls more common. If realized, these moves will restrict the flow of labor between countries and change the economic rules of the game. Thus, anxiety is permeating the workplace.

Supporting the Hewitt, the Gallup (2013) Report on State of the Global Work Place, only 13% of employees across 142 countries worldwide were engaged in their jobs. The vast majority of employed people around the globe are not employed or actively disengaged at work-meaning

they are emotionally disconnected from their workplaces and less likely to be productive (Ngoisa, 2016). This study explored factors that may obstruct the engagement level of foreigners who lived and work in foreign countries and built a conceptual model that may be considered as useful further studies in studying how engagement affects career mobility in particular.

### **1.3. The objective of the Study**

Apart from the three external factors mentioned that affect global engagement level, this study has grouped factors that have a direct impact on foreigner's engagement level in the diaspora which are everyday work experiences that act as drivers for engagement. On the one hand are Brand, leadership, and performance which are based on pride or reputation, leadership management, and evaluation. Others are the work itself, the basics and company culture. While the work is about autonomy to take personal initiatives and share skills with other colleagues, the basics deal with benefits, job security, safe work environment, and work/life balance. The company culture involves communication, customer focus, diversity, and inclusion, enabling infrastructure talent and staffing.

Engagement level itself had been modeled in a Say, Stay and Strive (SSS) model by the Hewitt in 2017. The "say, stay and strive" model briefly captures the essence of engagement concept in a work setting, describing what makes employees say beautiful things about their employer, what makes the employees to stay and to strive to give their best to achieve the organization's goals (Hewitt, 2017).

As the aim is to examine how the identified factors affect the engagement level of foreign workers in diaspora and the overall engagement impact on career mobility, the researcher has focused on three factors that may be found in both the external and the internal work

environment. The identified factors include performance which has to do with career opportunities, learning and development, performance management, people management rewards and recognition, the basics which deal with benefits, job security, safety in workplace, balancing work with social life, and company's culture which bothers on communication, customer care, diversity and inclusion, workplace physical surrounding, talent appraisal and staffing.

#### **1.4. Significance of the Study**

This study is especially significant now when globalization is speedily permeating all the aspects of human endeavors with particular emphasis on the business world. Nowadays, technological breakthroughs have made it possible to connect with people in all places for different reasons. Globalization has also made it possible for people to travel to very distant places around the world for business purposes. However, only recently, there is a growing concern about the new border-control consciousness as policies are being set by first-world countries to restrict the free movement of persons, goods, and services. How this trend affects career mobility and the engagement level of employees who reside in countries other than their home country is an exciting research area.

This study, however, focuses on the factors that may affect foreign employees' engagement level and career mobility. The study is especially significant because it's coming at a time when such factors are hampering the core concept of globalization as border-control, perceived racism, and discrimination towards foreigners who live and work in foreign countries, perceived inequality in incentives and salary of the non-indigenes, employees' motivation, etc.

### 1.5. Scope of the Study

The study aims to explore the perceived factors affecting foreign employees' engagement and career mobility. The introduction briefly examined the backgrounds of employee engagement and career mobility and highlighted their overall impact and the possible factors affecting the two main concepts. The opening was followed by the identification of the research problems, research objectives and the significance of the study in that order. The study used documentary research approach in reviewing the literature and previous researches based on the topic. Research Gate, Siam Library, Scientific Research, and Wiley Online research engines were used to retrieve reviewed literature used in the study. Recommendations and conclusions were offered based on reviewed literature in a conceptual model established in the study. APA format reference style was used to acknowledge authors whose works were cited in the study.

### 1.6. Operational Definition of Terms

- i. **Employee Engagement-** the extent to which employees feel passionate about their jobs, are committed to the organization, and put discretionary effort into their work. In this study, employee engagement is means the same thing as employee motivation to perform well and be productive.
- ii. **Career Mobility-** the movement of employees across from one position to another or from one job to another and from one place to another. It can also mean a complete change in occupation or career. The decision for career mobility can be internal or external, personal or collective, local or global. Internal means that the movement is within the organization. External factors outside of the organization. Personal means individual decision. Collective means executive or



organization's decision. Local means within the country. External means outside of the country of origin.

- iii. **Foreign Employees-** are employees or workers who live and work in countries other than their home country, temporary or permanently, paid or voluntary.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Employee Engagement

Mansoor & Hassan, (2016) have listed imbalanced service allocation, bad accommodations, unsatisfactory pay, negligence, disregard, disputes with management as factors that may trigger feelings of discontentment in a work setting among the workers. Such discontentment could lead to low engagement or disengagement. Other factors such as communication, opportunity to learn and grow, leadership, teamwork, job description, performance management, people practice, customer- oriented, brand alignment, freedom to advance in a career, etc., have also been implicated in engagement scale in a work-setting (Hewitt, 2015).

Truss et al., (2013) argued that since leadership is at the center of all activities within the management, its role as the chief driver for engagement among the employees cannot be overstated. Agrawal (2015) has also found that matching the right person to the right job can boost engagement level. The factors reviewed here under different pieces of literature would be discussed in the results analysis section.

## **2.2. Career Mobility**

According to Baruch et al., (2016), one of the most significant factors in career mobility in recent times, from the global perspective, was the economic and financial downturn between 2008-2009. Globalization has also contributed to the current wave of labor mobility especially among younger persons who are more eager and willing to travel outside of their home countries in search of befitting jobs (The Economist, 2014). It is estimated that about 232 million people live and work outside of their home countries (OECD, 2013).

Other factors have also been associated with career mobility. Doherty et al., (2013) emphasized the relationship between self-initiated career mobility and executive or company directive career movement. For company-initiated career mobility, Baruch and his team of researchers identified company strategies, policies and practices/culture as variable factors affecting mobility while on the individual-initiated career mobility demography, personality, attitude, and family were implicated as reoccurring factors. However, the globalization boom has led to more individualized or self-initiated move which raises the need for a more globalized best talent management (Cascio & Boudreau, 2015).

## **2.3. Foreign Employees**

Two primary perceived reasons why foreigners are employed in countries other than their home country is labor shortage and labor cost. A study in Malaysia revealed that the country had been experiencing labor shortage since the 80s which explains the surge of foreign employees in their country's labor market (Mohd et al., 2012). Abdul et al., (2013) argued that the trend in Malaysia labor market, for example, will continue undisturbed as long as the border-control policies favor foreigners living in Malaysia.

Kim et al., (2015) also identified communication problems and cultural differences as obstructive to productivity when more foreigners were employed in a Korean constructive company. Kim and his team of researchers argued that for effective productivity to be possible, there is a need for efficient workforce management of foreign workers to boost motivation and increase production. Also, significantly positive relation has been found between leadership style, employee motivation, and discipline and employee performance. Hence, leadership style and employee's motivation have been implicated as influencing factors (Pawirosumarto et al., 2017). Good leadership has also been identified by Sihombing et al. (2018) as a strong influencing factor.

## FACTORS BASED ON PREVIOUS STUDIES

### **2.4. Training and Development**

Ezam et al., (2018) examined the impact of training and development on employees' engagement and findings indicated that development has a significant relationship with employee engagement whereas, an insignificant relationship found between training and development of employee engagement. Also, in Presbitero (2017), studies revealed that changes in training and development culture would correlate with workers' engagement level positively.

On career mobility and success, Cole (2015) identified organizational fit as the basis for training and development with the intention of engrafting workers who have the potential to advance in their career into the organization management board. Haines et al. (2014) also found out that development of critical qualities can also facilitate upward mobility for individual employees on the conviction that the growth in their human capital makes them more marketable both within and outside the organization.

## **2.5. Performance Appraisal**

According to Stalinski & Downey (2012), performance appraisal is closely related to employee engagement. The purpose of performance appraisal, for any organization, is to improve the individual and the organizational performance. Performance appraisal has also been linked with management performance (Seiden & Sowa 2011), with the intent to align the employee's objectives with the organizational goals.

Performance appraisal has also been linked with employee development for successful career goals attainment. According to Mathis & Jackson (2011), managers who look out for their employees engage them beyond performance management. Caring managers discuss the employees' strengths and weaknesses, career goals, and training needs. The culmination of the conversation results in the creation of individual development plans for employees. These plans, enacted throughout a year, become tangible evidence of an organization's willingness to invest in employees' professional growth, promoting both personal and organizational effectiveness (Mathis & Jackson, 2011)

## **2.6. Communication**

Manager-employee Communications has also been linked with employee engagement and career mobility. Karanges et al., (2015), using surveys and regression analysis, confirmed that internal organizational communication and internal supervisory communication support workplace relationships based on meaning and worth, and have a significant part to play in developing and maintaining optimal employee engagement. This is made possible when the managers engage with their employees, positively, by discussing the quality of employees' performance. (Pulakos & O'Leary, 2011; Stalinski & Downey, 2012). During this exchange, candid feedback is given to

an employee, performance expectations are clarified, and opportunities are identified for employees to improve their ability, empowering them to excel in their jobs.

### **2.7. Equal Opportunities and Fair Treatment**

According to Seifert et al. (2016), a decline in organizational commitment occurred when employees who started with a high level of trust in their management experienced unfair work processes combined with unfavorable outcomes. Also, their findings indicate a sharp rise in employees' engagement when workers exhibited a low level of trust towards the organization were treated fairly by the management. In another study by Chattopadhyay & Choudhury (2017) career mobility and success have been linked to how employees are being processed in a workplace. Findings revealed that managers who find themselves into a challenging context early in their careers would continue to experience faster advancement in the long term, suggesting that initial deployment to a challenging setting is associated with human capital development.

### **2.8. Pay and Benefits**

According to Ogbonnaya et al. (2017), incentives and pay are closely associated with employees' job engagement and overall wellbeing. Their studies examined the relationships between three dimensions of contingent payment – performance-related pay, profit-related pay and employee share-ownership – and positive employee attitudes (job satisfaction, employee commitment and trust in management, and findings indicate that of the three contingent pay dimensions, only performance-related pay had direct positive relationships with all three employee attitudes. Results also further revealed that performance-related salary is associated with work intensification, and this offsets some of its positive impact on employee attitudes. Wai Wong et

al. (2016) also examined the relationship between external job mobility and occupational job mobility on earnings among engineers and results obtained from regression analysis indicate that higher external job mobility will contribute to higher incomes, but the functional job-mobility will have an adverse effect on earnings.

## **2.9. Healthy Work Environment**

Jansson von Vultée (2015), explored how a healthy work environment and personal health impact organizational success. Using a multi-regression analysis to measure identified variables such as absenteeism due to illness, work satisfaction, and other regulatory factors leading to healthy or unhealthy workplaces, results tested positive. In other words, an unhealthy worker is always absent from work, and absenteeism is one of the symptoms of disengagement in the workplace. Another study also suggested that increasing sick leave is partly due to the work environment (Rydh, 2014). On career mobility, Reineholm et al. (2012) in a study to determine what work conditions predict voluntary job mobility and to examine if good health or burnout predicts voluntary job mobility, results indicated that low variety and high autonomy were associated with increased voluntary job mobility. However, the associations between fitness and voluntary job mobility did not reach significance.

## **2.10. Relationship at the Workplace**

Dorothea (2015), examines the relationship model of supervisor relations, co-worker relations, psychological conditions, and employee engagement in a work environment, as well as the influence of mental condition variable as a mediator variable on the relationship between good relations with co-workers and supervisors and employee engagement. Results showed that there is a mediating model of psychological conditions on the relationship between supervisor

relations, coworker relations, and employee engagement. Another study by Rothmann & Welsh, (2013) also showed that individuals who are appreciated by colleagues connected with them would have psychological meaningfulness in the workplace. On career mobility, Kaye et al. (2018) argued that changes in workplace environment due to the departure from the traditional business worldview to the modern understanding of business had affected the relationship in the workplace which consequently affects engagement.

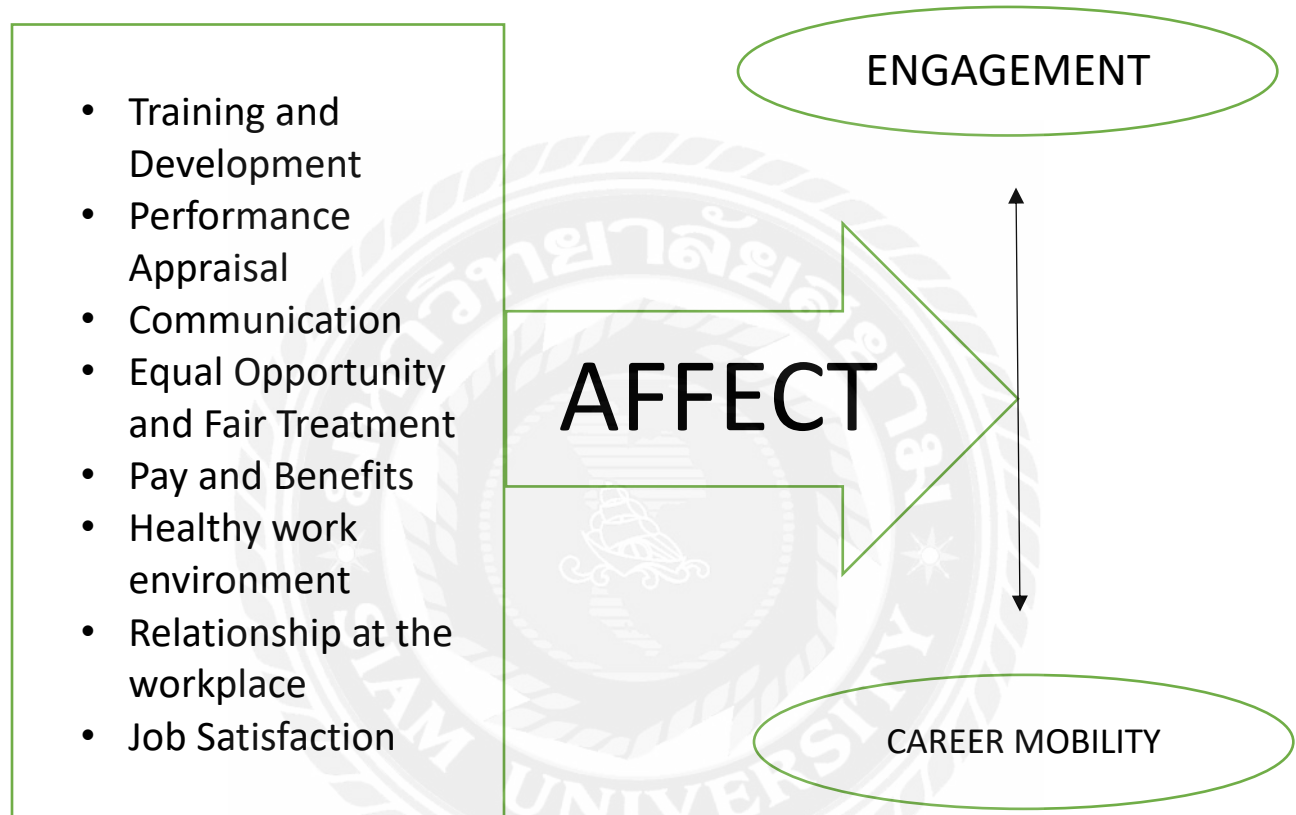
### **2.11. Job Satisfaction**

Tepayaku and Rinthaisong (2018) examined the relationship between job satisfaction and employee engagement among human resources (HR) staff of private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in Thailand. Results revealed that there is a positive direct effect of job satisfaction on employee engagement ( $0.89 = \beta$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and job satisfaction could explain 80% of the variance in employee engagement ( $R^2 = 0.80$ ). Other studies had explored the importance of staff job satisfaction in a workplace, and results indicated that staff job satisfaction is an essential determinant of growth, service, and quality within an organization (Lee, 2017). Other findings further reported that satisfied staff might perform better and contribute to the total success of an organization while on the other hand, personnel who is not happy would not perform well and may become a hindrance to success (Shmailan, 2015). On career mobility, Rosanna et al. (2017), examined the relationship between job satisfaction and alignment between the individual's current occupation and his/her talents, needs and values, namely as career anchors and findings revealed that workers who are independent are more satisfied than those who receive salary, male ones are more satisfied with the job than the female ones, and there is a positive association with years of experience and satisfaction in the position.

### 3. Findings

#### Established Framework:

**FIGURE 1.1. Factors most likely to affect Foreign Employee's Engagement and Career Mobility in the workplace.**





#### 4. Discussion

Employee engagement is influenced by a variety of factors, in which the driving factors help to increase the engagement level and hindering factors might challenge the level of commitment. From the above, numerous driving factors which influence employee engagement and career mobility were identified in the conceptual model. Typically, there are eight factors commonly identified. However, this study submits that identified factors may also affect career mobility.

- **Training and Development** imply the opportunities availed to the employees to develop, improve and advance in their personal and organizational career and objectives respectively. Companies tend to invest more on the employees who they consider possesses an organizational fit and as such train him or her to integrate them into the more meaningful corporate life. It is usually the opportunities to take part in the jobs' routine and decision-making on a higher level.
- **Performance Appraisal - Line-of-Sight** between individual performance and company performance: this shows the relationship between the employees' understanding of the company's goals and the awareness of how their contribution impacts on the company's performance.
- **Equal opportunities and Fair Treatment** this refers to the path in the employees' career development which offers the employee a sense of belonging and pride for their organization as a result of the generous reciprocal gestures shown to him or her by the company in different ways. Equal opportunities and fair treatment usually determine to a large extent how the company or the organization view and value their employees.
- **Relationship at workplace** implies the extent to which employees relate and interact with other colleagues and line managers up to the CEOs or the directors of the company.

It is perceived that when the relationship in the workplace is healthy, engagement and productivity tend to increase, leading towards the realization of the company's overall goals.

- **Job Satisfaction** has always factored on work engagement. A satisfied worker will most likely be more engaged and productive than the less happy worker. Also, people who are confident with their jobs will most likely explore other challenging tasks in a workplace in order to improve in their career. Hence job satisfaction, engagement and career mobility share correlative characteristics in different measures.
- **The healthy work environment** has often been considered as the most critical aspect of the company's concerns. A company that takes good care of its employees by ensuring that both the personal and organizational needs of their staff or employees are met will most likely enjoy substantial competitive opportunities over the companies who instead treat their workers or staff with less care. Healthiness in this sense does not imply only physical fitness, and it also includes the psychological and the emotional needs of the employees, and the hygiene, safety, cleanliness and the safety of the working environment.
- **Communication** may be referred to the way through which information is dispersed and circulated among employees in the organization, and among the executive, managerial and functional levels within the organization. It is the livewire of every company's sustenance or survivability. It may also include communication at personal or interactive levels among the workers. Good communication network and channels will lead to clarity of purpose and job descriptions within the organization and ultimately leads to high productivity, engagement and active career mobility.

- **Pay and Benefits** involve all forms of incentives, salaries, bonuses, grants, etc., enjoyed by the employees of any organization. Compensation and benefits have been linked to engagement and career mobility. Although many scholars disagree on the effect of pay and profit on the employees' performance, satisfaction, and engagement, the pay is good when it is deserved. Future research might need to focus on the definition of “pay” as the traditional understanding of the word concerning work-setting is taking a modern conception due to the rampant changes taking place in today's business world.

## 5. Conclusion

The study had focused on exploring the factors affecting foreign employees' engagement and career mobility using the documentary approach. Engagement study is not a newcomer in the academic arena. Even though the concept is not new, scholars have always debated the best applicable theory that underpins what to know about the phenomenon. Hence there is the need to update what is known about engagement continually, and to fill the widening knowledge gap that is created by the changing circumstances in the corporate world.

The study had fetched the previous peer-reviewed articles on engagement and career mobility to generate a conceptual framework that may be useful for future researchers. Eight factors were identified as the most crucial concerning engagement and career mobility. The identified factors did not follow any sequence, in other words, there is no basis for rating one as more important than the others, but it is assumed that a fraction of the factors may occur in different work settings locally or internationally.

### **5.1. Study Limitations**

One of the pitfalls with the documentary method of research is the lack of quantitative and qualitative analysis of variables. The quantitative analysis uses the statistical design to measure identified variables to arrive at a relative and measurable, significant conclusion. As such, the quantitative method reduces the problems of bias and over-generalization and provides a transparent theoretical background for the study by systematically selecting the population of research and applying suitable instruments that could measure the testable hypotheses.

### **5.2. Recommendations**

#### Corporate Society

Corporate societies involve all professional organizations, political, social and economic units where human capital is highly utilized and expended. Some organizations value their human capital over other assets while some do not. In whichever strategy an organization chooses to peg their tents, understanding what makes workers commit and engage in their duties is crucial for the survival of the organization. A highly engaged worker tends to be more productive than others. Also, an engaged worker may want to embrace higher responsibilities in the workplace by exploiting other job specifications to expand their career. This is known as career mobility.

#### Non-profits

Organizations whose primary intent is not to make money should also implement strategic policies that meet the psychological, physical and emotional needs of their workers for maximum outputs. Engagement, as it seems, is what makes modern organizations thrive and survive the highly dynamic world that we live in today. Hence there is the need for managers, line managers,

supervisors, executives and CEOs of every organization to embrace reports that explored how to manage their human capital best to achieve the organizational goals.



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