

## A STUDY ON FACTORS IMPACTING THE ENGAGEMENT OF EMPLOYEES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN INDIA.

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### Abstract

During the uncertain times of covid-19 pandemic, most of the organisations witnessed a major transformation in their age-old practise of shifting from a physical work setup to a remote working environment termed as the “new normal”. The traditional human resource processes including inductions, on-boarding, trainings were replicated in an online work environment. However, what remained as the biggest challenge was engaging the employees remotely and keeping them motivated especially during the uncertain times of pandemic. The present research study focuses on different factors in the form of work-life balance practices, human resource initiatives, and leadership which impact the engagement of employees. The study specifically focuses on the various employee engagement initiatives taken by the employers to better engage the employees, the challenges involved in engaging the employees in a remote setup, and the overall effectiveness of these initiatives during the pandemic times.

### Keywords

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### Introduction:

The beginning of the covid-19 pandemic brought some of the most unprecedented challenges in the workplace setting leading to a widespread anxiety and uncertainty about the current as well as future job roles. In most parts of the world, the pandemic began in the early 2020 which caused a severe impact on the human life, society, and the overall economy. In India, the first case of the covid-19 virus was reported in January 2020 from where the daily count of cases kept increasing claiming several lives and disrupting the health system as well as the economy (Andrews et al., 2020).

As per the Ministry of Health and Family welfare, the number of coronavirus cases in India was reported to be 70,53,806 of which 1,08,334 died due to the deadly virus (WHO report, 2020). To control the spread of the virus, the Indian government imposed several restrictions in the form of strict lockdowns, social distancing norms, closure of state as

well as international borders. The stringent lockdown restrictions resulted into a sudden shift to remote working setup causing disruption in the existing work norms.

Organisations adopted several innovative measures to engage their employees in a remote setup including online lunch sessions, virtual events and competitions, online counselling, and mentoring sessions, virtual team building activities, e-learning sessions etc (Chanana, 2021). The virtual sessions were challenging initially for both the employers as well as employees and there were concerns regarding the overall effectiveness of these sessions. However, keeping the employees engaged during the tough times of pandemic was extremely crucial to encourage them to stay longer in the hierarchy.

Hence, companies invested a huge amount of time, energy, and resources to ensure a smoother transition into a remote work environment and make the employees feel connected to the organisation. A report presented by Microsoft titled “The New Future of Work” (2021) suggested that organisations invested a lot to replicate the process of recruitments, joining, on-boarding, trainings as well as appraisals online. However, covid-19 pandemic itself lead to a lot of uncertainties including deaths, serious illness, loosing family members or relatives. Several employees experienced job loss, companies were shut, promotions and hikes were halted leading to a havoc in the job market.

Hence, keeping the employees engaged, motivated in such uncertainties became a difficult task. Even today, when the situation is rapidly moving back to normal, still a huge number of employees are working from home or are a part of the hybrid model. Hence, it is important to understand the challenges that are involved to engage the employees in the current scenario.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Employee Engagement**

Employee engagement is defined as the overall involvement and satisfaction of employees towards their work (Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes, 2002). It also imposes an overall positive attitude of employees towards the organisation and its goals. Moreover, employee engagement is a continuous activity than a one-time initiative as employees needs to be engaged and motivated throughout for better performance. Employees who are engaged to their organisation show better performance, enthusiasm, and commitment in doing their work (Sendawula et al., 2018). This in turn leads to better customer satisfaction and productivity of the firm. A study by Gupta and Sharma (2016), shows that companies where employees were engaged showed better sales, profits, and overall revenue of the firm. While most of the organisations invest hugely in recruitment, inductions, trainings etc. engaging the employees in an effective manner always remains a challenge. A true employee engagement is when employees are committed to the

overall objectives and strategy of the organisations and are enthusiastically working towards its goals. It also has a direct influence in lowering the turnover intentions, better performance, and attendance of employees (Sandhya and Sulphay, 2020, Shuck et al., 2014). It is the degree of commitment of the employees with their employer, company its vision and objectives. It also defines the level of satisfaction an employee has with the organisation.

There are numerous studies done on employee engagement both in India and abroad. However, most of them are done in the context of the physical work setting which does not completely define the workplace ecosystem in the current times. The pandemic situation has changed the dynamics of work environment, leading to either a complete remote work environment or a hybrid setup. The online work system has introduced virtual relationships and networking which have never existed before. Employee engagement is highly dependent on personal interaction, connect with the employers, face-to-face discussions etc. With a complete shift to remote work environment, all the initiatives were redesigned with a virtual lens or new practices were adopted to sustain in the new work environment. Hence, it becomes imperative to re-examine the impact of different factors on the employee engagement in the remote work environment or in the hybrid work model which is considered as the future way of work.

### **The Local Context: Covid-19 in India**

The novel coronavirus was first reported in India in January 2020. After that in the month of March, within a period of 15 days, the number of confirmed cases increased by 10 times (Kaushik et al., 2020). On March 15, the number of cases were 107 which had increased to 1071 by March 30, 2020 (Ghosh, Nundy, and Mallick, 2020). The symptoms of the virus included mild symptoms such as cold, cough, and fever to serious issues of pneumonia, breathing difficulty or even death (World Health Organisation Report, 2020). In India, the covid outbreak resulted into lockdown restrictions implied by the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MoHFW) which created a significant impact on health, education, job market, economy etc. The GDP of the country experienced a steep decline and India reported 6.3% GDP due to the disturbance caused to the covid-19 lockdowns (Reuters, 2022).

India with a population of 1.3 billion and wide demographic dividend experienced some unique challenges due to social, cultural, or economic differences. The challenges faced by the Indian government involved contact tracing, isolating patients, and providing necessary medical care (Lancet, 2020). To curb the spread of virus, the first phase of lockdown was imposed on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020 for a period of 21 days followed by an extended second and consecutive lockdowns to keep the number of cases under control and to prevail the health system from collapsing (Soni, 2021). The declaration of lockdown jolted the economy in few days and uncertainties loomed in the job market. Employees were disengaged and there were concerns about job loss, compensation, and

growth. Hence, it was important for the employers and HR practitioners to ensure that employees stay engaged and committed to the organisation.

## Methodology

The present research study was conducted to understand the different factors that impacted the engagement of employees in India. The data was collected using qualitative methodology by conducting semi-structured interviews to gain insights about the challenges experienced by the working professionals in India during the pandemic time and the extent to which they felt engaged to the organisation. The respondents included working professionals from Executive level to Senior Manager or higher positions. Sectors such as Information Technology, Banking and Financial Services, Audit and Consulting Firms were included in the study. The sectors included in the study especially IT were well adapted with the technology. They were already familiar with options of work from home, flexible working hours, work timings etc even before the beginning of the pandemic. Similarly, banks, audit firms were also well versed with the technology with some employees availing work from home option even before the pandemic. However, even then when the pandemic started, setting up a remote working environment on an organisation level was challenging. Additionally, keeping all the employees engaged and motivated in such situation was extremely difficult. In this context, the present study aimed to understand the factors which impacted the engagement of the employees and if they felt engaged to the organisation.

The interviews for the study were conducted in the month of January 2023. Convenience sampling technique was used to collect the data for the study. A total of 40 participants were included in the study who are working in the city of Bengaluru which is considered as the software hub of the county and where there is a dominant presence of banks, financial services firms, audit, and consulting firms.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format where questions about the various factors which impact the employee engagement were included such as leadership, work life balance, and human resource practices. Questions related to each factor and the way it impacts the engagement of employees was analysed. The interviews were recorded only when the respondents gave their consent. When some of the participants were hesitant for recording, only small notes were prepared regarding their responses. The interviews were conducted virtually either on phone or through virtual meetings on skype, Microsoft teams. Once the interviews were conducted, they were subsequently transcribed verbatim preserving the anonymity of the participants. To analyse the data for the study, the NVivo 12 plus software was used. It helped to organise, classify, and sort the information more systematically.

## Participants

A total of 40 participants were included in the study. Of the total 40 participants, the number of female participants were 28 whereas there were 12 male participants. Also, most of the respondents were married i.e., 26 and 14 were single. A majority i.e., 22 participants had children whereas 18 participants didn't had children. Respondents belonged to three major industries i.e., 16 from IT, 13 from banking and financial sector, and 11 from Audit and Consulting firms. The designation of participants ranged from Executive level to senior manager positions. Most participants belonged to executive level i.e., 14 and a minimum number of participants belonged to the senior manager and higher positions i.e., 4 and 1 respectively.

The demographic factors play a very significant role in impacting the employee engagement of people in the organisation. Past studies have mentioned that women face more difficulties in terms of work-life issues, managing multiple responsibilities, stereotypical attitude and thus they are less engaged to workplace (Shukla, Adhikari, and Singh, 2015, Sawang and Newton, 2014). Similarly, as per the age and career stage, the engagement of employees in an organisation varies. Hence, including respondents of different demographic backgrounds would help in understanding the issue from a broader perspective.

**Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants**

	Number of Participants
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	28
Male	12
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Married	26
Single	14
<b>Children</b>	
Yes	22

No	18
<b>Industry</b>	
Information Technology	16
Banking and Financial Services	13
Audit and Consulting Firms	11
<b>Designation</b>	
Executive	14
Sr. Executive	13
Manager	8
Sr. Manager	4
Any higher position	1

## Results

### Factors impacting employee engagement

Literature studies till now have mentioned numerous factors which impact the engagement of employees in the organisation including compensation, empowerment, appraisals, overall job satisfaction, health, and safety of employees and many more (Lappalainen et al.,2019, Bedarkar and Pandita, 2014). Based on an extensive review of literature, the present study has highlighted on some of the factors that may have a significant impact on employee engagement.

### Work-Life Balance

Past studies have repeatedly addressed about the need of employees to have a greater work-life balance which leads to a better engagement (Jaharuddin and Zainol, 2019, Cahill et al., 2015). A study done by Wasay (2013) states that greater the employees are satisfied with their work life balance, the better they are engaged and committed to the organisation and have higher intention to stay. Traditionally, work-life balance was seen as an organisation issue with employers taking all the efforts to ensure a balanced lifestyle for its employees by providing facilities such as childcare, flexible work hours, counselling sessions etc. During the covid-19 pandemic, employees were restricted to operate from home which gave them the comfort to be at home and finish their work. However, in this scenario, the traditional work setup was completely transformed into remote work environment which also created a significant impact on work and life dynamics. Employees along with their office work had to look after domestic responsibilities, child-care, elder care etc. With the closure of schools, day care facilities, absence of domestic help and nanny, employees in India faced a severe time crisis to manage both the personal and professional duties together. While the challenges were faced by employees throughout the hierarchy, it was the working mothers, women who were significantly impacted as they had the primary household responsibilities other than work (Irawanto, Novianti, & Roz, 2021).

During the interaction with the respondents both the male and female employees shared about the challenges they faced in terms of sharing domestic work, child, or elder care responsibilities, and focusing on work. A female executive having 2 children and working with an IT company shared.

*"It was extremely difficult to juggle between work and personal responsibilities as we had to do everything on our own including domestic chores, cooking, sitting with children for their online classes along with office work."*

A male senior executive working in a bank said

*"While it was good to work from home without any stress of travelling or getting ready for work early in the morning, the overall work-pressure impacted my work-life balance, wellbeing. It is extremely difficult to continue your work with so many other responsibilities."*

Another male respondent working as an executive in an IT company said

*"Both me and my wife are working and so we have divided our duties of cooking, looking after children. It is very difficult for women alone to look after everything considering everyone is at home whole day."*

A senior female manager working with a consulting firm shared her experienced and said,

*“The overall work has increased so much. Due to the remote working setup, I have to login early, help kids with online classes, do cooking, utensils, laundry, and other work. I feel it would be better once I start going back to office at least once a week. I would be able to concentrate better.”*

While both men as well women faced severe challenges in terms of work-life issues, it is the women who faced a significant crisis during the pandemic times. In India, where the division of domestic work is clearly tilted towards women, it became difficult for them to continue work without any domestic help and support. Hence, a significantly higher number of women felt disengaged from work. Also, many of the women shared that since everyone was operating from home, they had to be available all the time at work. Women expected better workplace flexibility in terms of working hours, work timings during the pandemic. One of the respondents also shared that flexibility is when one gets to choose the way he or she wants to work which is still missing in the Indian workplace setting.

## **Leadership**

Employees feel a lot more motivated when they are appreciated by their leaders, immediate supervisors, or managers (Chandani et al, 2016). When the mentors or leaders give a proper guidance and show the vision of the organisation along with the involvement of employees to fulfil that vision it leads to an increased employee engagement. Past studies have mentioned that authentic leadership leads to better commitment, engagement, increased productivity, creativity, and overall positive attitude of employees (Li et al., 2021, Nasomboon, 2014). The social exchange theory also highlights on the supervisor-employee relationship which suggests that employees reciprocate well when they are treated fairly by their leaders (Cook et al., 2013). Thus, encouragement from the supervisor keeps the employees engaged and increases their participation in the overall work or in various activities, events. When employees believe that they are valued, trusted, and treated fairly in the organisation it increases their engagement at work (Cook et al., 2015). Open and continuous communication, transparency from the leaders of the organisation are the key factors for better employee engagement. The human resource practitioners invest a huge amount of time and energy to ensure a smooth process of recruitment, development, retention, and for engaging employees. However, to make the processes effective the involvement of leaders, senior members play a vital role (Carasco-Saul et al., 2015).

In today's era of uncertainty with pandemic hitting the global market the role of a leader, mentor has become increasingly important. Transparency, continuous communication, trust etc are some of the important components to ensure an effective leadership that would in turn keep the employees engaged to the organisation. A study by Hunt and Aldrich (1998) highlights that it is the impact of immediate supervisor more than the leaders or CEO of the company to keep the employees engaged. The present research study also highlights the role of leader as the supervisor, mentor who directly guides or monitors the employee. Respondents shared their experience about how well they were



connected with their managers during the pandemic times and if they felt engaged to the organisation during the uncertain times.

A senior manager (female) working in an IT company mentioned

*“Your leader, mentor makes a lot of difference. During peak covid times, I was reporting directly to the Chief Technology Officer of my company. I was hesitant to connect over a video call or ask him for queries, clarifications. If it was in person it would have been easy to connect directly. The online meetings used to get cancelled multiple times and I had no one to ask about my doubts or discuss any issues.”*

A male executive working for an audit firm shared his experience that during the pandemic times it was very challenging to stay connected to the team, colleagues and especially managers.

*“During the initial days of pandemic there was lot of uncertainty, lack of trust. I was not getting time even to interact with my supervisor on a regular basis as even they were facing challenges in terms of setting up the whole system online. So, there was lot of gap in terms of communication, clarification from the supervisor which made the employees disengaged or lesser committed to work.”*

A new male executive who had joined the organisation just few months before the pandemic experienced a significant challenge in terms of connecting with the supervisor.

*“I remember so many times calls, meetings with my boss would just get cancelled. Especially if you have a supervisor who is very senior it becomes very difficult to connect with them virtually, setup a meeting or do a video call. In office, you can just ask informally or walk up to their cabins to talk to them or ask for any query. In remote setup you cannot call them repeatedly or request for a meeting all the time.”*

A female senior executive working in a bank had returned from her maternity break and faced numerous challenges in terms of feeling connected to work or with the organisation. With the pandemic situation around the employees lost personal connect and interaction made the situation even more difficult.

*“As a woman, I was feeling very depressed as there were too many things to do including domestic chores, looking after a small child. I had no family support as my parents, in laws were stuck in the hometown due to lockdown restrictions. I needed someone to talk to but at that time it was almost impossible to connect with anyone especially your mentor. I missed that personal connect and honestly felt disengaged from work.”*

## **Human Resource Practices**

The human resource practices and policies play a key role in engaging the employees with the organisation. A report by Deloitte (n.d.) states that while employee engagement is seen as an HR issue, it is in fact a business issue where employees if disengaged have higher chances of leaving the workplace which can have a direct impact on business. Hence, employee engagement should be treated as a business strategy than an HR strategy.

During the pandemic, few companies took extra efforts to keep their employees engaged and made them feel connected with the firm all the time. Programs such as covid care, doctor on call, health awareness sessions were conducted on a regular basis to stay connected with the employees (NASSCOM report, 2020). Employers tried to support their employees in the best possible way who were already going through a tough time due to financial instability, family issues, health issues etc. For example, Deloitte India hosted programs to give tips to working parents about how to engage their children while they are on work, Capgemini conducted Big Boss Challenge for where series of activities and tasks were conducted both for the employees as well as their family, friends, and relatives (Kovid and Kumar, 2022). Similarly, video interactions with team members, virtual lunch meetings, recreational events, counselling sessions were conducted on a timely basis to make the employees feel connected with the organisation. Also, companies ensured that once the restrictions were relaxed team lunch, dinners, informal social events were organised for the team on a smaller scale and as per the norms to keep the employees engaged (Harvard Business Review, 2021).

Employee engagement is one of the most crucial factors which leads to better employee performance, productivity, and a longer tenure in the organisation. However, there is often a mismatch between the practices which are adopted by the employers to engage the employees and the actual needs of the employees. The present study tried to identify the various practices which were adopted by the organisations and the perception of employees regarding the relevance and benefits to them. One female respondent mentioned,

*“There were no specific employee engagement activities. We were just doing our work. Being a smaller organisation, and a sudden switch to remote working environment we had fewer resources to conduct such activities. Yes, but to a great extent employees were demotivated due to that.”*

One of the women managers working for an IT firm stated about the various engagement activities organised by her company. But as a woman it is often challenging to participate in such events or sometimes, they lack interest to participate due to pressure of handling household work, domestic duties.

*“Yes, in my organisation, during the pandemic times, various events, fun activities were conducted like online treasure hunt, music concerts, birthday celebration, couple activities so that*

*families also are involved etc. HR used to conduct these sessions twice in a month in the evenings. But honestly, I never participated in all such activities as I had to look after other household work, look after my child, elderly people as there was no domestic help, nanny available at that time."*

A female senior executive working with a bank shared her experienced and said

*"The company lacked in conducting any employee engagement activities during the covid times. An annual award function was conducted virtually and I along with few team members and with HR support conducted Diwali fun quiz. But as such there was no effort from the company to engage their employees. The biggest problem in virtual events is the participation of employees. Many people go on mute, switch off their videos and continue to do their work. Many employees felt it was more of formality and didn't feel connected in the event. When people are in a physical work setup, they enjoy more than sitting in front of laptop where there is no personal connect or interaction."*

A female HR executive working with an audit and consulting firm stated that they conducted various events regularly in the workplace. However, numerous challenges were experienced such as connectivity issues, availability of participants, administering events virtually, branding and creating curiosity of the event in virtual mode was difficult. It is much easier when events are conducted in a physical work setup and the employees also stay more connected.

*"Activities mainly involved fun games as most people required unplugging from routine and the need, thrust for laughter and fun environment. Events such as happy hours, virtual Pictionary, online treasure hunts, virtual Olympic league, talent shows etc were conducted to keep the employees engaged and to give them some stress-free time to keep the mind away from work and personal life issues".*

Many employees experienced depression, stress, anxiety issues due to the uncertainties created by the pandemic. Some organisations proactively conducted health awareness sessions, counselling sessions, meditation classes, Zumba, or yoga classes, gave family gifts, coupons, lunch sessions for its employees. While the engagement activities proved to be beneficial for few employees, the effectiveness was more when events were conducted in-person than in a virtual setup. The employee engagement activities are useful for the new joiners who need to meet, interact, and know their team members, seniors, colleagues. It gives them a good networking opportunity to know about people from other teams and departments. However, with a remote work setup the impact of such sessions was limited and kept the employees engaged only to a certain extent.

## **Results and Implications of the study**

The results of present research study show that all the three factors including work-life balance, leadership, and human resource practices were a great challenge during the time of pandemic and it created a serious impact on the engagement of employees. Most of the employees felt disengaged at work and had fear of job loss, demotion, salary cuts etc. Even while companies invested a lot to implement several engagement initiatives on a virtual basis, it only helped to a limited extent to keep the employees engaged at the workplace. Women in particular who were married and had children faced a greater challenge of managing personal and professional duties together. Hence, their level of engagement at the workplace was much lower. Similarly, in terms of impact of leadership, employees were not fully satisfied as most of them felt a loss of communication, connection with the managers. Additionally, it was difficult to connect with the supervisors virtually and communicate with them on a regular basis for queries, clarifications. The results of the study imply that the pandemic situation created difficulties for the employers as well as employees from different perspectives. Today, it is important for the organisations to timely address the concerns of employees as the hybrid model of work is going to sustain and the challenges of varied nature would arise in terms of engaging employees.

## **Conclusion**

Covid-19 created a havoc in the lives of people across society, nations with tremendous loss of lives and economic disruption. Organisations which proactively took initiatives to engage their employees had greater satisfaction and a better sense of job security, trust as compared to those where companies paid little attention in engaging them. There are several factors which impact the extent to which employees remain engaged in the organisation and the present study highlighted some of these factors to understand the concept of employee engagement in a better way.

The pandemic has impacted the businesses in the long run. Today, situation of covid-19 has improved across the world, businesses and daily life of people is getting back to normal, schools, colleges have opened, precautionary vaccines are being given to a huge set of population. However, as experts suggest the future of business looks to be like a hybrid work model where work from home and work at office are integrated. It has raised the need to review the situation, challenges with a different perspective and provide an intervention to address the needs of the new normal. While organisations have already taken effective measures to address the needs of the employees, there is still scope to review or reframe the policies to better engage them in these uncertain times.

## **Limitations and Scope for Future Research**

The present research study has focused on the factors impacting the engagement of employees especially during the pandemic times. The present study is based on the

qualitative analysis whereby interviews of working professionals in Information Technology, Banking and Financial Services, Audit and Consulting firms were included. Future studies can explore few other sectors where usage of technology is limited such as manufacturing, FMCG, or in academics. Industries other than IT faced severe challenges such as adapting with the technology, limited availability of internet, facilitating laptops and desktops to employees throughout the organisation. Hence, understanding the challenges faced by employees in these sectors would enhance the knowledge about the subject area. Secondly, an empirical analysis would be beneficial to measure the impact of these factors on the employee engagement. It would be useful to conduct a similar study to analyse the post pandemic situation where most of the employees are getting back to work and few are still working remotely. It would be imperative to understand the challenges faced by the employers today to engage its employees in a hybrid work model which is also considered as the future way of work.

Similarly, other than the external or organisational factors there are several other reasons including job characteristics, organisation size, personality traits including high self-esteem, internal locus of control, extroversion which impact the engagement of employees. Other than that, demographic factors such as age, gender, nationality, marital status may also have a significant impact on the way and extent to which employees remain engaged to a firm. Hence, future studies can consider these factors to understand their impact on employee engagement.

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