

Employee Disengagement as a Process: How Organisational Experience Shapes Retention in a Continuously Connected Workforce

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Problems Addressed, Aims, and Research Questions

Employee disengagement is widely recognised not as a discrete event, but as a gradual process that unfolds over time through repeated experiences of misalignment between employee expectations and organisational realities (Gallup, 2023; Schaufeli, 2017). In continuously connected work environments, characterised by pervasive smartphone use and real-time communication, employees experience work in ways that reshape how engagement develops and declines. These dynamics are particularly significant among emerging workforce cohorts, such as Gen Z, whose expectations for responsiveness, transparency, and meaningful work may heighten sensitivity to organisational misalignment (Deloitte, 2023).

The objective of this study is to examine how organisational experience, shaped by leadership behaviours and organisational culture, influences the development of engagement and disengagement over time, and how these processes affect employee retention. This study is guided by the following research questions:

- How does organisational experience (culture) influence engagement and disengagement over time?
- How do these processes influence retention outcomes?

Justification and Importance of the Research

Employee disengagement and retention remain critical global challenges, particularly within continuously connected work environments where expectations for communication and

meaningful work are rapidly evolving. Disengagement can lead to reduced productivity, diminished well-being, and increased turnover. Prior research has examined leadership, organizational culture, and engagement, but often in isolation and as static relationships (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Schein, 2010). Research on digitally mediated work has focused on structural changes, with less attention to how employees experience these environments over time (Deloitte, 2023).

This study addresses this gap by offering a process-oriented, experience-based understanding of disengagement. By examining how organisational experience shapes engagement trajectories, it provides insight into how organisations can better align practices with evolving workforce expectations.

Theoretical Basis for the Work

This study is grounded in Transformational Leadership Theory and Organizational Culture Theory. Transformational leadership influences motivation and engagement through inspiration and value alignment (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Organizational culture shapes behaviour through shared values and norms (Schein, 2010; Cameron & Quinn, 2011). This research integrates these frameworks within a process model, conceptualising disengagement as a dynamic outcome shaped by organisational experience and the interaction of leadership and cultural alignment.

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods design. Quantitative data are collected using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass & Avolio, 1994) and the Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI) (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). Qualitative data are gathered through semi-structured interviews and open-ended responses to capture lived experiences.

This research forms part of an ongoing Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) study and is currently in progress.

Data Sample and Preliminary Findings

The study examines employees within contemporary organisational settings characterised by continuous digital connectivity. Data collection is ongoing.

Preliminary findings suggest employees often begin highly engaged but experience gradual disengagement when leadership and organisational culture fail to align with expectations related to communication, feedback, and development. This misalignment contributes to emotional withdrawal and increased likelihood of turnover.

Relevance and Practical Importance

This research reframes disengagement as a process shaped by organisational experience rather than a static outcome. It centers lived employee experiences, particularly among emerging workforce cohorts such as Gen Z, through semi-structured interviews. Gen Z represents the first generation fully socialised within continuously connected, technology-saturated environments, shaping expectations for communication, feedback, and alignment.

Findings highlight the need for organisations to align leadership behaviours and culture with evolving expectations and focus on shaping employee experience over time. The presentation will provide a conceptual model, preliminary insights, and practical recommendations for improving engagement and retention in globally connected work environments.

References

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