

# Employee Engagement in Health Care Service Delivery: Critical Drivers, Challenges and Way Forward for Uganda

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## Abstract

*Employee engagement is a critical driver for enhanced commitment of employees and delivering better services. This paper assesses employee engagement in the context of health service delivery in Uganda and identifies its significant drivers, challenges and way forward. The study leverages on data obtained from hospital staff at junior, management and leadership levels. Data from 136 junior staff were collected using a questionnaire while data from purposively selected sample of 8 Heads of Departments and 1 Director key informants were collected using interviews. Correlation analysis was employed to test the hypotheses that training, rewards and leadership bear a significant link with employee engagement. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Correlation results indicated that rewards, training and leadership bear a strong positive significant relationship with employee engagement ( $p < 0, 05$ ). Qualitative views generally revealed that employees in Mulago National Referral Hospital are not adequately rewarded. They are paid low salaries and allowances compared to similar staff in the private hospitals and the allowances are not paid in time. Consequently, employees are demotivated and exhibit low commitment to perform their functions towards realization of the hospital's, objectives and goal. Regarding training, employees had limited access to off-job training opportunities. They perceived unfairness and inequity in granting such opportunities. Regarding leadership, employees were found to lack adequate support in terms of mentorship, encouragement and career promotion. Besides, the relationship and trust between managers and their subordinates was found to be wanting. The study recommends that hospital administration and management expand the reward system by focusing more on the non-monetary rewards. These include delegating junior staff on activities which have allowances, regular interaction with lower level staff, providing them mentorship and opportunities for off-job training in a clear, transparent and equitable manner. Consequently, employees will get motivated, committed and more engaged with the hospital.*

**Key words:** Employee engagement, training, rewards, leadership, challenges, way forward

## Introduction

The concept of employee engagement can be traced 20 years back in the Academy of Management Journal (Khan, 1990). According to Armstrong (2009), the Hay Group generated the first interest into the concept of employee engagement and originally referred to it as “employee performance”. It evolved from focusing on employee satisfaction in the human resource management in the 1970s and 1980s when employee satisfaction was observed to have no significant connection with performance (Kahn, 2011). The concept is rooted in the social psychology theories concerning motivation and attitudes (Fawkes cited in Saks (2006).

This paper leverages on the Two Factor Theory by Frederick Herzberg, 1989 and the Social Exchange Theory (SET) developed by Blau (1964) and Emerson (1972). These theories identify the factors which motivate and demotivate employees in form of satisfiers and de-satisfiers thus opening insight into the determinants for employee engagement.

Employee engagement has been defined extensively in different contexts. Sharmila (2013) defines employee engagement as employees' positive attitude and extent of commitment to the organization. Harminder (2013) shares a similar view of this concept and observes that employees have to get committed to the organization's goal mission and vision. In view of Farndale and Murrer (2015), engaged employees express physical, emotional and cognitive attachment to accomplish their daily tasks. The aspect of commitment in employee engagement is further stressed by Karanges et al. (2015) who also observe that engaged employees will be willing to stay longer in the organization. Saks and Gruman (2014) as well as Osborne & Hammoud (2017) identify two dimensions of employee engagement that is; attention and absorption. The authors define attention as the amount of time an employee spends thinking about their role in an organization and the intensity with which they work.

Previous studies (Ganesan, 2017; Mokaya, 2014; Mutunga, 2015; Ganesan, 2017; Zainol, 2016; Harminder, 2013; Recognition; Zainol, 2016; Harminder, 2013; Mutunga, 2015; Mutunga, 2015; Zainol, 2016; Ganesan, 2017; Osbornene, 2017; Watson, 2009; Padmakumar and Gantasala, 2011; Ganesan, 2017; Zainol, 2016; Harminder, 2013; Mutunga, 2015; Zainol, 2016; Harminder, 2013; Mutunga, 2015; Zainol, 2016; Rizwan, 2014) have linked employee engagement with many factors including training, rewards and leadership. However, the effect of such factors on employee engagement necessitates a clear understanding with empirical evidence in the context of Uganda's health sector.

This paper takes a case of Mulago national referral hospital of Kampala Uganda with the objective to explore the effect of training, rewards and leadership on employee engagement. Mulago hospital has strategically positioned to foster employee engagement towards enhancing her performance. To realize this, the hospital has intervened with a number of human resource incentives such as training, rewards and improving leadership through involvement of staff in decision making among others (MOP, 2011; 2016). Despite the initiatives, employee engagement at Mulago National Referral Hospital remains low, some employees are not committed to their work and the objectives of the hospital as many of them neglect their work to go for their private health units. (Mulago Hospital, 2017).

## **Empirical literature on determinants of employee engagement**

A variety of studies have explored determinants for employee engagement across diverse fields and in different contexts such as; the banking industry in (Mokaya, 2014); Fatma et al., 2015); Abbaas & Ikhlas Ibrahim (2012); Service sector in Pakistan (Rizwan, 2014); Telecommunications industry in Kenya (Mutunga, 2015); Health care sector in Malaysia (Ganesan, 2017); Hotel industry in Malaysia (Zainol, 2016; Osbornene, 2017)

The studies identify a significant link between employee engagement with; remuneration (Mokaya, 2014; Mutunga, 2015; Ganesan, 2017); rewards (Zainol, 2016; Harminder, 2013); Recognition (Zainol, 2016; Harminder, 2013; Mutunga, 2015); appreciation (Mutunga, 2015); leadership (Zainol, 2016; Ganesan, 2017; Osborene, 2017; Watson, (2009); Padmakumar and Gantasala, 2011; internal communication (Ganesan, 2017; Zainol, 2016); training development (Harminder, 2013; Mutunga, 2015; Zainol, 2016); career growth (Harminder, 2013; Mutunga, 2015; Zainol, 2016). Consistent with training development and career growth, some studies have associated employee engagement with employee empowerment (Rizwan, 2014; Osborene, 2017) and broad personal development and performance management system (Mokaya, 2014).

## **Rewards and employee engagement**

Rewards have in previous studies been linked with employee engagement. The common understanding is that rewards enhance employee motivation, excitement and ultimately readiness to identify with the organization strategies, goals and objectives. A rewards system has a great influence and effect on employee engagement and commitment. Besides, it makes the staff more motivated, excited, interested and ready to positively identify with the organization. This is what is known as psychological empowerment which has been identified to influence employee empowerment in many studies such as; Hassan and Shoaib (2014) and Khan and Altaf (2015) and Prabhakar (2011). According to Armstrong (2009), rewards can be categorized into extrinsic or intrinsic. Extrinsic rewards are tangible rewards and these are external to the job or task performed by the employee. Some of these include salary, allowances, pay incentives. They can also be monetary or no-monetary. To this end, literature opens insight into the fact that rewards can only be meaningful to motivate employees towards their engagement if substantive enough (Birungi, 2003).

### ***Staff training and employee engagement***

Training is defined as the act of boosting knowledge and skills of employees with an aim to enhance their performance (Ologbo and Sofian, 2013). Training development is vital to enhance employee engagement through enhancing employee performance (Khan and Altaf, 2015; Tahir, Yousafzai, et al., 2014; Rashid, et al., 2011). Employee training and employee engagement leverage on the notion that all employees have personal goals and need to work towards achieving them. Any support in form of training or career growth builds employees' sense of value to the organization. Training is vital in building a sense of belief that employees are accepted, respected, and included in the organizational decision-making process towards enhanced employee engagement (Belle, et al., 2014). Training is also essential in building human resource with the requisite knowledge and skills which according to Ugwu, et al. (2014), is a means of empowering employees to perform and get more engaged. Besides, training enables employees to develop a sense of being valued which in turn helps them feel connected to, and identify with the organization. Overall training is perceived as a means of empowering employees to do their jobs towards their enhanced engagement (Vallerand, 2012).

### **Leadership and employee engagement**

Leadership has been linked with employee engagement on account of authentic leaders being likely to influence employees to get engaged with the organization (Nicholas & Erakovich, 2013). The significance of leadership behavior on employee engagement is further evidenced by Datche and Mukulu (2015) in a study on employees in state corporations in Kenya, and Xu and Thomas (2011) in a study on employees in service organizations. Datche and Mukulu (2015) identified a significant and positive influence of transformational leadership on employee engagement.

Where leaders directly relate with their subordinates, employee engagement was enhanced (Lowe, 2012). In the view of Souba (2011), leadership is vital to provide vision and direction to employees. Effective leadership necessitates communication. Communication is defined as an internal organizational process of sharing information towards enhancing trust among employees (Rynanen, et al., 2012). The significance of communication to employee engagement is evident from studies in Indian private banks (Sarangi and Srivastava, 2012) and Australian organization employees (Karanges, et al., 2015) which observe that listening is an essential element in helping employees reach their personal goals and feel empowered. They provide a chance for employees to know the available opportunities for career growth and the criteria for meeting the requirements. Employees yearn to advance up the ladder and should be informed of the available opportunities for advancement.

Generally, the literature reviewed underscores the significance of rewards, training and leadership among other factors which influence employee engagement. The studies indicate that employees will more likely get engaged with the organization if they are adequately rewarded, trained or provided with transformational or supportive leadership. The studies however remain in the context of other countries like Kenya, India, Malaysia, Pakistan and no specific study has been conducted in the context of referral hospitals in Uganda. Building on this body of knowledge, this paper explores the determinants of employee engagement in the context of Mulago national referral hospital.

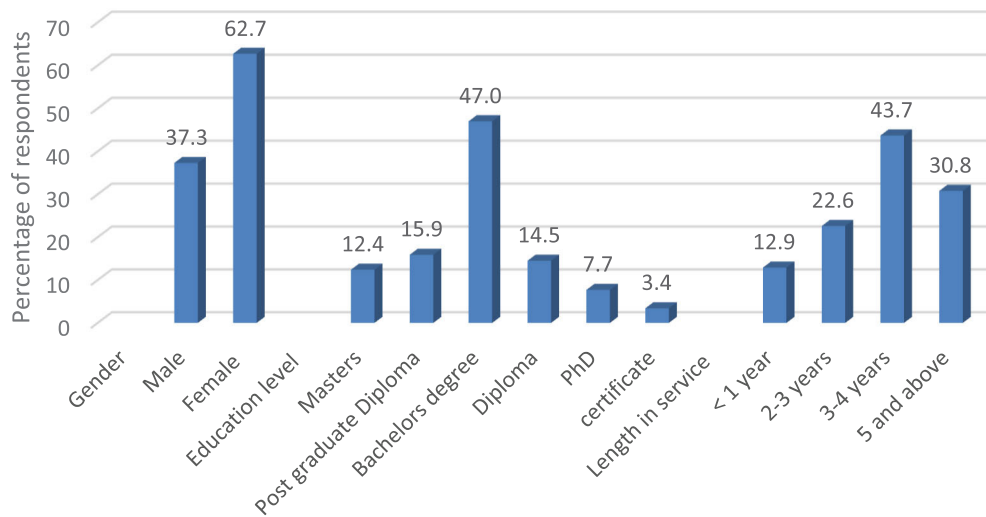
### **Methodology**

The paper leverages on findings generated from a study which adopted a cross-sectional survey design with a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods (Neuman, 2011). The design allows collection of data on various issues from a section of a population at a particular point in time. The quantitative approach was applied to test the study hypotheses while the qualitative approach provided in-depth analysis of the study phenomena. Data was collected from Mulago National Referral Hospital staff comprising of one Director, 8 Heads of Departments and 127 junior level staff members. Purposive and theoretical sampling techniques were applied to select hospital Directors and Heads of Departments. Purposive sampling ensured deliberate inclusion in the study since by virtue of their role, they were expected to be more knowledgeable in the subject matter under study. Theoretical sampling ensured inclusion of key informants until the point of saturation, the point where no more diversity in views was reached. Data from these key informants

was collected through interviews to adequately comprehend the determinants of employee engagement. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis of key informant views. In contrast data from the junior staff was collected using a questionnaire which standardized responses to allow quantitative analysis to test the hypotheses on the significance of training, rewards and leadership to employee performance. Specifically, a regression model was estimated for the effect of training, rewards and leadership to employee performance.

## Sample description

**Figure 1: Percentage distribution of respondents by gender, education and work experience**



Regarding gender, the majority of respondents were female (62.7%) compared to male (37.3%). Important to note, the distribution represents an adequate composition of male and female which is vital to ensure generalization of the study findings to the population of the staff in Mulago Hospital. Regarding the education level, the majority (47.0%) of respondents had attained a first degree. This was followed by 15.9% of respondents who had attained Postgraduate Diploma. Notably, all respondents had attained some level of education. This education distribution indicates a possible knowledge and skills which is vital to build their engagement capacity in Mulago national referral hospital. In terms of working experience, the majority (43.5%) had acquired 3 to 4 years. This was followed by 30.8% of respondents who had 5 and more years of working experience in Mulago national referral hospital. This period can arguably be considered adequate for staff to understand and build loyalty towards enhanced employee engagement.

## Findings and discussions

This section presents correlation results on the determinants of employee engagement. The section further presents the challenges in rewards, training and leadership structure which undermine employee engagement drawing from analysis of key informant views.

### **Critical drivers of employee engagement**

Correlation results were estimated for the relationship between leadership (transformative and supportive) and employee engagement at Mulago national referral hospital. The objective was to determine the strength, significance and nature of relationship between these variables. Results are presented in table 1.

**Table 1: Correlation results for the relationship between leadership and employee engagement**

Variable	Correlation statistic	P-value
Supportive	.344	0.001
Transformative	.533	0.001
Communication	.070	0.409
Overall Leadership	.385	0.001

Source: Field survey data

The overall correlation coefficient for the relationship between leadership and employee engagement was 0.385, positive and statistically significant since its respective probability value was less than 5% significant level. This indicated a positive and statistically significant relationship between leadership and employee engagement. This finding was true for supportive and transformative forms of engagement for which the correlation coefficients were 0.344 and 0.533 respectively. And similarly, their respective p-values were less than 5% significance level. Notably however, the correlation coefficient for the relationship between communication and employee engagement was 0.070 which was very low and its respective p-value was greater than 5% significant level. This indicated that communication had no significant relationship with employee engagement. This finding suggested that transformative and supportive leadership rather than communication, were significantly related with employee engagement.

### **Challenges in rewards training and leadership structure**

Despite the significance of rewards to employee engagement, key informant views revealed critical gaps in the rewards structure particularly low salaries and allowances as well as delayed payments. These demotivate employees leading to their low committed and limited engagement. A detailed interaction with key informants revealed that the staff of Mulago including nurses, doctors and administrative staff remain among the least paid employees in the Uganda Public Service. Though Government has of recent taken steps to enhance their salaries and allowances, they generally remain low compared to the general cost of living. This means that motivating employees for their enhanced commitment and engagement may necessitate a higher salary and allowance than is currently provided.

The established link between rewards and employee engagement is consistent with the findings by Shoaib (2014) and Khan and Altaf (2015) that reward systems has a great influence on employee motivation commitment and subsequent engagement. Specifically, rewards render employees more motivated, excited, interested and ready to positively contribute to the



realization of the organization's objectives and goals. This is what is known as psychological empowerment which has been evidenced to influence employee empowerment. The concern of inadequate salaries and allowances in this study is consistent with the findings by Birungi (2003) that rewards can only be meaningful to motivate employees towards their engagement if substantive enough. The significant influence of salaries is an important determinant of employee engagement (Kline & Hsieh, 2007).

Regarding training, critical gaps were identified despite its significant link with employee engagement. Specifically, there was limited access to off-job training which however seem more pleasant and motivating to employees. In addition, accessing off-job training was associated with the risk of losing a position or job station through study leave. In addition, there was some feeling among employees that there is unfairness and inequity in granting training opportunities. Consistently, Khan and Altaf, (2015); Tahir, et al. (2014) and Rashid, et al. (2011) observed that training development is vital to enhance employee engagement through enhancing employee performance. In support of the significance of training observed in this study, Belle, et al. (2014) observed that all employees have personal goals and that any support in form of training or career growth builds employees' sense of value to the organization. The significance of training identified in this study is also consistent with the findings by Ugwu, et al. (2014) and Vallerand (2012) who identify training as a means of empowering them to perform and get more engaged. The authors further observe that training enables employees to develop a sense of being valued which in turn helps them feel connected to, and identify with the organization.

Finally, with regard to leadership, the study established that, despite its positive significance to employee engagement, the nature of leadership provided by managers and leaders to subordinates was found to be lacking support in terms of career promotion, good working relationship, trust, encouragement among others. The general view was that employees need to grow which growth comes with self-esteem and opportunities for increased salary and allowances which have in the study been significantly associated with employee engagement. It was also observed that employees work under an environment which is complex and challenging. They are often overwhelmed with volumes of clients who they must serve within an environment of shortages in equipment and drugs. Such a situation necessitates leaders who understand the working conditions and were willing to respond positively to any excuses for delays in service delivery, or support in terms of the missing equipment and facilities.

The significance of supportive leadership to employee engagement is consistent with the findings by Datche and Mukulu (2015) and Thomas (2011) in their studies on employees in state corporations in Kenya and in service organizations in Indonesia respectively. The studies revealed that providing support in terms of encouragement, technical guidance to employees contributed to their motivation and engagement with the organization. The significance of supportive leadership identified in the study also agrees with the findings by Souba (2011) that good leadership provides a clear vision and direction to employees rendering them to remain motivated, committed and ultimately engaged with the organization.

Findings on the significance of transformative leadership to employee engagement are

consistent with the findings by Datche and Mukulu (2015) in a study in Kenya which underscored the significant relationship of employee engagement with transformational leadership. Findings in this study are consistent with the assertion by Lowe, (2012) that employees were motivated, committed and more engaged when leaders directly relate with their subordinates. Findings also agree with the general notion from literature that organizations need to design human resource strategies providing for employees 'growth in leadership positions.

## Way forward

Findings of the study provide valuable insights into potential strategies by hospital management and administration towards enhanced employees' engagement and improved service delivery of health care workers.

First, it is imperative for the hospital administration and management to expand the reward system by focusing more on the non-monetary rewards. These include delegating junior staff on activities which have allowances, providing them with mentorship and expanding opportunities for career growth which come with increased pay. Consequently, employees get motivated, committed and engaged. These recommendations also consider that Government has made attempt to increase salaries of health workers which remain insufficient to motivate them and yet more increased pay could remain a dream amidst government's resource

Secondly, the hospital administration and management need to explore ways of expanding employees' access to off-job training. In addition, the system of granting off-job training opportunities such as study advancement for career growth, applications to attend conferences and workshops should be improved to ensure transparency and equity to avoid negative perceptions which demotivate employees limiting their engagement. In addition management should explore ways to grant off-job training and study leave without disadvantaging the beneficiary in terms of ensuring that they retain some job security.

Finally, the hospital administration and management need to adopt transformative and supportive leadership style which hold greater potential to enhance the much needed employee engagement.. Senior staffs need to interact with junior level staff to understand their strength, weaknesses, devise means to build their confidence trust and competence, and delegate them. This consequently inculcates in them, a sense of feeling that they are valued and consequently gets motivated, committed and engaged with the hospital



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