

PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT WHILE WORKING AT A THEME PARK IN THE UNITED STATES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to offer some insight of the employee's experiences and engagement with the company. Layoff was one of the terms that impacted many employees when the pandemic first hit them as they have never experienced this kind of situation before. The process of conducting this research was done as a qualitative method by a phenomenology approach and examined the employee's actual experiences during the pandemic. After the online interview was conducted, the three key themes emerged which are, 1) Safety Trainings and Support, 2) Emotional Engagement, and 3) Meaningfulness at the workplace. The findings showed how the organization and its employees have adapted during the pandemic crisis. The paper outlined research implications of employee engagement during the crisis pandemic for the hospitality industries and how they may have to apply new safety protocols in the future.

Keywords: workplace motivation, COVID-19, work experience, employee engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Employee's engagement working at a theme park in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic

The outbreak of the coronavirus in late 2019, in which resulted in a worldwide emergency as this disease quickly spread with a high mortality rate that resulted in a serious disruption (Yang et al, 2020). The sector that was most impacted by the extreme events was the leisure and hospitality industries, as there was a huge risk and uncertainty for operations and employees. 65% of the tourism had difficulties in paying invoices and employees during the crisis. (Bajrami et al, 2020). Therefore, in March 2020, many US states announced an emergency and ordered all employees to stay at home, which resulted in layoffs (Khan et al, 2021). Furthermore, in order to prevent this from further spreading, all outdoor services and hospitality services have been temporarily suspended. As a result, organizations such as hotels, aviation, tourism and outdoor theme parks, and recreation services have been temporarily suspended until further announcement. This results in thousands of employees being layoff for a very long period of time, without the slightest clue of when the management will call them back to work. Jones and Comfort (2020) have pointed out that a huge range of problems for the hospitality industry such as the sustainability initiative has posed, and dramatically reduced, or totally withdrawn. The impact of these various issues includes negative economic impact, employee uncertainty, business innovations, and what the future of tourism and hospitality must look like (Ntounis et al, 2021).

Therefore, nine participants from Orlando, Florida, have been selected from different job departments in this study. All of these participants are still working at this theme park and have experienced the pandemic from the very start. The purpose of this study was to understand the feelings and experiences of employees who have to undergo the process of being re-trained in the new procedures in order to prevent COVID-19 from further spreading to others. This incident was like a wake-up call for all hospitality industries as nobody experienced this kind of virus or even imagine that new variants might emerge frequently and might be prolonged for a very long period of time as most of the past viruses were easy to tackle, yet there was still a practical-knowledge gap regarding the services and engagement provided by the employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study will shed a brighter light on employees' perception of working engagement at a theme park during COVID-19 and will reveal a better understanding of how to overcome the challenges by answering the following two research questions.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

What are the challenges that the employees face in order to engage with their colleagues during COVID-19?

What are the experiences that the employees had faced in engaging with their colleagues during COVID-19?

The case for the company

Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the global conglomerates in the United States had to temporarily close and lay off almost 100,000 of its employees for a duration of 4-5 months. This results in a decline in revenue. However, the employees were then called back to work after a few months, but they all have to undergo a new procedure of safety training and precautions. Also, the team from each department had to implement ways to keep their employees engaged throughout the pandemic. This study was conducted via Zoom among the employees who were layoff and brought back to work after a few months, where they shared their individual experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Employee Engagement

During the pandemic, many lay off employees committed suicide because it became difficult for them to survive, while some that remained employed were assigned to work from home which resulted in the loss of social connectedness, stress, loneliness, and burnout. (Rubeena & Naz, 2020). Similarly, in the past, the former SARS outbreak during 2002-2003 which was spread across different countries including China, Canada, Singapore, and many more resulted in employees being asked to take annual leaves, or their contracts being terminated. However, unlike SARS, COVID-19 is still unfolding in countries like the United States, Brazil, and India with new variants (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial for organizations to restore work engagement to employees who have faced a long period of turmoil, and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic because it is associated with the contribution and performance of an employee. (Li et. al, 2021).

Employee Engagement is the degree to which a person shows preference in job roles to link the connections between self and job roles. This will then increase role performance through cognitive, emotional, and physical dimensions (Huang et al, 2022). This function plays an important role in all organizations as it reflects on the overall success of the organization. Also, employees can also be described as the amount of dedication and joy an employee feels towards their roles. If the employee is engaged, they will be more likely to care about the work, the company, and its performance (Duncan, 2021). This will result in better customer satisfaction and service levels Kumar & Sia, 2012). Furthermore, the relationship between the employees and leaders is trust, motivation, shared trust, the value of their work, and personal voice is heard which leads to the hopes, emotions, accomplishments, and ambitions of employees that help strengthen the engagement within the organization. (Patra, 2017; Adhitama & Riyanto, 2020).

Employee Engagement Framework

According to William Kahn's 1990 Employee Engagement model, consist of cognitive, emotional, and physical dimensions. First, cognitive engagement, means to be engaged, employees should know what the organization's vision, mission, and strategies are, and how can they contribute as much as possible to their organization (Sinclair, 2020). Second, emotional engagement is a relationship that employees feel or connect with their employer. A positive relationship will stimulate a sense of belonging within the workplace. This would help employees to trust the values and mission of the organization (Sinclair, 2020).

Third, physical engagement is how employees use their efforts, both physical and mental as they do their jobs (Sinclair, 2020). These three dimensions, then illustrate three psychological conditions, meaningfulness is where the employee finds the value of the job they are conducting, and if it is a work role fit, they feel worthwhile and appreciated within the team. Safety is where the employee finds the work environment secure and where they can freely express themselves. Availability is when an employee can engage themselves in work despite of distractions that might occur in the workplace (Kahn, 1990).

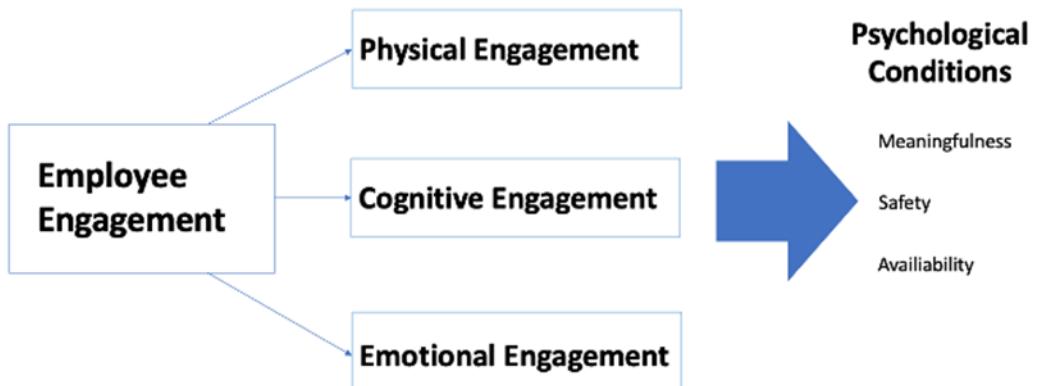


Figure 1 Kahn's model of Employee Engagement

Workplace environment

The workplace environment plays a major part in the decision-making on whether employees will choose to commit themselves to that organization. The working space is what you can't see and touch but makes you enjoy going to work and feel comfortable entering the place and even encourages people to come work at the same organization as you (Rodriguez, 2021). The workplace environment has an impact on the employee's behavior, and performance, and developed employee engagement; energy, involvement, and productiveness (De-la-Calle-Duran & Rodriguez- Sanchez, 2021). Employees deserve good workplace conditions and direction from managers in order to earn their trust, loyalty, and engagement in reaching the organization's goals (Muskitia & Kazimoto, 2017). It is important that the organization sets a clear goal which it will be recognized as a huge accomplishment for the organization (Seijts, 1998).

Furthermore, employees should be given the freedom to manage work at their own pace without being micromanaged by their managers. It will cause negative feelings which will lead to a decline in job satisfaction and individual performance. Thus, it is preferable if the managers give adequate authority to employees, delegate equal responsibilities, increase their accountability and enhance teamwork spirit. As no one likes to be hovering over the shoulders all the time (Chandrasekar, 2011). During hard times of crisis, many employees seek support and comfort from their organizations and leaders. Managers act as a significant role in this situation because they can mobilize their organizations by setting a clear goal for the response and encouraging others to discover and implement solutions to their problems (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020). First and foremost, the leader must create 'trust' among their employees. In order to tackle the crisis and move forward together, there is a need for a strong bond between the leader and the employee.

Also, managers must build resilience in order to set as a role model to others. For instance, the pandemic leaders would meet with their teams face to face in order to follow up with their employee's work and well-being. But since the pandemic, they had to change the way they interact with employees virtually. By doing so, it creates opportunities for social connectedness through virtual platforms, creates resilience as employees engage in collective sense-making about the current situation, and at the same time builds the capacity to cope during a crisis (Bagwell, 2020).

The process of planning for and responding to events that can harm an organization. The crisis generally occurred suddenly and takes up a certain amount of time, which results in a greater impact that leads to the organization likely to be permanently changed after the crisis (Strother, 2016). The emergence of COVID-19 forced many organizations to reflect back on their action plans and how they will need to cope with this ongoing pandemic. It has impacted all aspects of people's lives, leading to a change in work behaviors, family experiences, and personal well-

being. A majority of organizations had to lay off their employees for a month or even up to a year before they are called back into work. Prior to that event, there were some mixed responses from a group of employees, they expressed both sadness and appreciation for the organization leading the way in the early stage of the pandemic to temporarily close down the organization, while some stated that it was the organization's lost for choosing that decision. (Harvard, et.al, 2020) Some employees have a hard time adapting themselves to the new situation and may first have a negative attitude towards their family members. Moreover, emotion suppression causes the employee to be unable to express their genuine emotions and experience a loss of control (Trougakos, Chawla & McCarthy, 2020).

This has never been something that all employers have anticipated especially those who are working directly in the guest services and hospitality industries. It is an unexpected event that threatens to disrupt the organization's operations and acts as both a financial and a reputational threat to the organization (Coombs, 2007).

Once the situation seems to get better the top management then has to come up with a new plan to face this virus. The crisis management model facilitates many employers how to prepare their organization and employees back to work under the preparation of the new procedure that consists of crisis diagnosis, planning and implementation of changes and monitoring (Ospina Avendano, 2020). Things cannot go back to normal before the pandemic even started so everyone must be willing to adapt themselves to learn the new safety training protocols to prevent the virus from spreading further. To be able to identify the crisis, come up with new guidelines and constantly check whether the new safety procedure in the organization is effective enough. Firstly, the organization can protect its employees from the danger of contagion of the virus as guest services employees have close interaction with an unspecific number of customers during service delivery (Kim, Beomcheol & Lee, 2021).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Selection Criteria and Data Collection:

This research falls in with the phenomenology approach as to understanding experiences of human healing, and wholeness needs to consider the differences that exist (Wojnar & Swanson, 2008). A total of nine participants, two males, and seven females residing in Orlando, Florida, participated in this research. The participants in this research were from a wide range of role positions and departments such as custodial, merchandise, park operations, human resources, front desk at resorts, and safety and security, including outdoor and indoor employees.

This was conducted through an online Zoom meeting which was also recorded. Having the meeting recorded helps me to go back and also take some notes on what I may have missed out on some important details. The transcribed were then sent to the participants for member check. During the interview, the participants expressed their personal ideas and opinions about the situation that they faced. The interviews were conducted in English as the participants were Americans. The participants were selected by using purposive and snowball approaches. These two approaches are based on the purpose of the study, and the accessibility of the researcher (Glesne, 2016). The interview took around 30-45 minutes each and the time difference was also put into consideration as the participants are currently in the United States. There is a time difference with Thailand being 12 hours ahead. To maintain the confidentiality of the participant's identities, a cartoon character was used to conceal the participant's identities.

Table 1 Participant Profiles

No	Name	Age	Position	Gender
1	Minnie	33	Guest Services Education Coordinator	Female
2	Daisy	38	Guest Services Education Manager	Female
3	Pooh	28	Custodial Manager	Female
4	Tiger	35	Training Coordinator	Male
5	Mickey	48	General Manager	Male
6	Eeyore	40	Safety and Security Manager	Female
7	Pluto	28	Guest Services Manger	Female
			International Recruitment Manager	
8	Goofy	45	Human Resources Officer	Female
9	Donald	38		

Data Analysis

This research was done by thematic analysis. It is a useful tool while conducting qualitative research. There are six-step processes involved such as familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing the report (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). In which, three main themes will later emerge in this study.

The trustworthiness of this research is that it is the action of ‘credibility’, ‘transferability’, and ‘dependability’. Credibility is known to be the true value of the research, in which the respondents actually perceived social constructs. Transferability is the applicability of the outcome, and dependability is the idea of the consistency of research findings (Collier-Reed, Ingerman, & Berglund, 2009). The researcher also used bracketing to set aside personal biases and assumptions while conducting the interviews with the participants (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013).

RESEARCH RESULTS

When the pandemic first arose, all of the participants were put on furlough, the only difference is the period of duration. They were all shocked as no one has ever thought that this virus would be so contagious. However, when the situation begins to improve, slowly they were called back to work but they all had to undergo a whole new standard training and safety protocols in order to prepare for the reopening of the theme parks. Some even transitioned into another role when they returned as there was a shortage of employees in that department and they had to be reskilled and trained for the new position. The surprising factor was the person who called all of these participants back to work was not their manager but someone else who was working in a higher position. So, the factor that really determines who gets to come back to when at a certain period still remains a mystery for all the participants.

The three common themes that emerged from the analysis were: Theme 1: Safety Training and Support, Theme 2: Emotional Engagement, and Theme 3: Meaningfulness.

Theme 1: Safe Training and Support

After discussing with all the participants, all of them were fully aware that things cannot go back to normal and had accepted changes if they still wanted to be part of the organization. In which they all compromise as they did not want to get infected themselves and spread it to others around them. Even though the employees are adaptive to the new procedures, they found challenges when it comes to dealing with the customers who would not follow the safety

procedures of wearing a mask, and not maintaining social distancing amongst each other while visiting the resorts and the parks.

Below are the quotes of the participants who felt relieved that the organization provide them with the new safety training.

“There are safety protocols that you have to, that we have to follow. I would say, I always felt safe with those protocols, which was always really cool. The amount of thought that went into training, I always felt safer being at work than I did going to the grocery store.” (Tiger, 35)
Your job is to interact with guests sometimes you have to remind them of some things like wearing their mask or staying six feet away.” (Pluto, 28)

When I got back to work and there were a lot of new restrictions and requirements right for safety. So, it was pretty much every week that we would get constant updates from the company as to how the policies and procedures had changed and giving us support. (Daisy, 38)

We obviously learned a lot by managing our park from a safety perspective, COVID-19 being very prevalent, not just here in the United States, but around the world. (Mickey, 48)

We have had to force a lot of rules on our customers as well in the beginning for their safety. sometimes you have to remind them of some things like wearing their masks or staying six feet away. That would always be a challenge because some people, our kids especially would not understand the boundaries of that too. (Minnie, 33)

Theme 2: Emotional Engagement

During times when participants were being layoff, some felt anxious, confused, lost, and a bit disappointed as they did not know what was going to happen to them. In order to keep themselves motivated and not fall into depression while being layoff, they communicate with their team members and managers constantly for further updates, and some even managed to spend some leisure time together. Below are some quotes from the participants.

“On a personal level, we connect, we both loved classic movies. So we share a lot of fun stories about movies and quotes and things like that when we were all laid off. We had a movie club, so every week we would all get on zoom, I would select like try to watch this movie. Talk about what's going on in each other's lives because that was the only way we really can stay connected.”(Donald, 38)

“I was on a very small team. Our manager checked in with us a couple of times. I would make sure that I reached out to people.so I would send people messages. (Tiger, 35)

“My manager that was there at the time, was very positive. He was great that he would tell you, this is what it is and we're going to work through it. Very positive, uplifting, and honest. (Eeyore, 40)

“I have a one-on-one every other week with my direct manager. So I get to sit down with them and talk to them about how I am doing.” (Pluto, 28)

“But I'm as fortunate, Katie, my boss she's actually my neighbor. So she lives nearby my house. So we still stayed in contact that way and have a personal relationship which was great. It's just caring about each other as people.

(Daisy, 38)

“The managers were awesome, very welcoming. I'd say it felt much appreciated by the leadership there. (Goofy, 45)

Donald, Tiger, Eeyore, Pluto, Daisy, and Goofy all had their techniques of staying motivated and engaged with their managers and team members while being layoff because they also stated that under difficult times, it is always better to think optimistically and understand that everyone is going through the same situation.

Theme3: Meaningfulness

There are many components that encourage the participants to stay with the organization such as good managers, excellent services and benefits, special privileges, and great friends but most importantly, their opportunity to learn, expand their knowledge, skills, and the ability to grow

within the organization. The following states the possibility of future growth within the organization.

“So, our manager approaches each of us differently about our skillset. What things we can take on in the area? Making sure that we here providing equity and that we've someone needs more attention to do well.” (Pooh, 28)

“A manager understands that the growth of the people that they lead does not look like their own growth. (Tiger, 35)

“They have different aspirations; some people want to grow and move up in the company. Some people just want to stay here to do a job.” (Pluto, 28)

“Anybody that works for me, in their career, they want to get developed and help grow.” (Eeyore, 40)

From these quotes, Eeyore has had 20 years of being in a managerial position, so it is one of her goals to help other employees in her team grow and expand their skills to their maximum potential. While on the other hand, Pluto and Pooh just recently got promoted to a leadership position last year so they have a less experience managing their team members compared to Eeyore.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The results of this study were linked to the research questions and gave the study a broader sense of the experience that each employee is going through. The themes discovered, Safety Training and Support followed by Emotional Engagement, and Meaningfulness. Safety Training and Support give a better sense of comfort for employees to return back to work without being fearful of this disease. According to (Fisher, 2009) Most employees tend to look towards their colleagues and managers for advice and direction on how to continue with their jobs after undergoing a new set of safety training procedures. Attention should be given to workers on how they can relate to one another in addition to policies and instructions that guide employees' practice. Second, emotional engagement is linked to employee engagement if they feel valued or taken care of within their organization, they will be more productive and feel less stressed about the current situation (Sinclair, 2020). This can be noticed when employees arrange individual one-one meetings with their managers, spend motivational quotes or pictures in a shared communication group, or even spend the weekends doing leisure activities together. Another factor that keeps the employees engaged is participatory management practices balanced by the involvement of managers and problem-solving skills. (Bhatti & Qureshi, 2007). Despite all of the circumstances that they faced, the employees remained at that organization because they believe in the organization and managers as well as felt safe. Third, Meaningfulness was defined as the positive 'sense of the return of investments of self in role performance (Shuck, Rocco & Albornoz, 2011). Most of the employees there feel appreciated and valued for their services to the organization as one of the participants stated they feel as if it is a family organization. Also, safety was defined to show one's self without fear of negative consequences to status or career (Shuck, Rocco & Albornoz, 2011). Overall, the Kahn 1990 model can match the employee engagement framework, based on the interview results that they will remain in that organization because they feel a strong sense of belonging, valued, and appreciated by their managers and team members, and the possibility for them to grow in the future.

HRD Implications

Human resources professionals and other managers could benefit from knowing how to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic or how they can keep their employees engaged and informed. In fact, professionals and managers can find that this does not only limit to the theme park sector only but can also be implied to other guest services and hospitality industries such as tourism sectors, restaurants, and aviation sectors. Some ideas such the new training and safety

procedures when dealing with guests, or even how managers stay in touch with their employees during the critical period. It may use as a form of theme park resilience and could also be used in other sectors.

Future Research and Conclusion

From this research, from all of the 9 participants, the theme of new training and safety procedures occurred over 10 times in each individual transcript because it was a major factor that all of them had to put into consideration before they were called back to work to be re-trained on the new procedures. If they or the organization neglected them, they would have to prolong the re-opening dates of the theme parks.

However, for future research and with more time provided, the researcher could try to interview more employees in a different department or include other employees in a different position level to learn more about their experiences. As well, try to include more males' employees in the interview as in this research a majority are females.

Appendix:

Interview Questions

- 1) How has your experience working at the company during COVID-19 been?
- 2) How do you stay motivated at work? (optional)
- 3) What is your experience with your team members and the company during COVID-19?
- 4) How did you find the new training procedures to be like?
- 5) If you need some advice at work, how do you reach out to your team?
- 6) How would your managers, handle the situation if one of your fellow cast members got infected with COVID-19?

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