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**Exploring Key Drivers of Employee Engagement from an
HR Perspective in the Industrial Sector of Sohar, Oman**

دراسة عوامل الإرتباط الوظيفي من وجهة نظر الموارد البشرية في مؤسسات
القطاع الصناعي في صحار، سلطنة عمان

by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

Today employee engagement is an issue of significance to organisations as it has been linked to organisational success and advancement. Many studies have been conducted to investigate the concept and drivers of employee engagement (Al Maktoum 2015; Simha & Vardhan 2015). Lots of organisations have begun different initiatives to build an engaging work environment. However, organisations, and HR in particular, do not exactly know what builds and leads to engagement in their particular context.

The issue of employee engagement and its drivers are under-researched in the Omani context and in the wider context of the Middle East. Thus, in a non-Western context, this study examined the HR perspective on the meaning, importance, drivers and enhancement of employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar, Oman. For this purpose, recent literature relevant to drivers of employee engagement and other related issues was reviewed. An explorative case study method was implemented to investigate employee engagement. By using a mixed method approach, the perceptions of ten HR managers from industrial companies in Sohar were examined about the concept and importance of employee engagement, and the key drivers leading to it. The study also investigated the challenges and factors associated with engaging employees and the possible ways to overcome these challenges to enhance the level of engagement among employees in this vital sector in Oman.

The study revealed that employee engagement can contribute to the development of the private sector and the process of economy diversification in Oman. Overall, the study showed that organisational leadership, training and career development, effective communication, rewards and recognition, teamwork, work-life balance, and job security are the most important drivers to lead engagement in this context. There are certain socio-cultural factors which may have impact on the execution of engagement plans, however, a further study is needed to deeply examine this issue. Several recommendations are suggested at the end of the study to ensure a better engagement. The study should draw the attention of HR personnel and policy-makers in Oman to seriously consider supporting and fostering employee engagement in order to develop and prosper the private sector in the country.

أصبحت قضية "الإرتباط الوظيفي" من أهم القضايا الحديثة التي تستحوذ على اهتمام العديد من المنظمات لارتباطها بالنجاح والتطور المؤسسي. العديد من البحوث أجريت لدراسة العوامل التي تؤدي إلى الإرتباط الوظيفي، كما بدأت العديد من المؤسسات بتطبيق إجراءات مختلفة لخلق بيئة عمل تشجع الموظفين على الإرتباط بالوظيفة. ولكن بعض المؤسسات وعلى وجه التحديد أقسام إدارة الموارد البشرية بهذه المؤسسات قد لا يمتلكون المعرفة الكافية عن العوامل التي تقود إلى الإرتباط الوظيفي.

في سلطنة عمان على وجه الخصوص وفي منطقة الشرق الأوسط على نطاق أوسع، هناك نقص كبير في عدد البحوث التي تتناول موضوع الإرتباط الوظيفي. ولذلك تأتي هذه الدراسة لبحث أهم العوامل التي تؤدي إلى الإرتباط الوظيفي من وجهة نظر إدارات الموارد البشرية في القطاع الصناعي بولاية صحار في سلطنة عمان، وتهدف الدراسة أيضا إلى بحث أهمية الإرتباط الوظيفي وأساليب تعزيز مستوى هذا الإرتباط بين موظفي هذا القطاع المهم في السلطنة.

ولتحقيق هذا الهدف قام الباحث بمراجعة أهم الدراسات السابقة ذات العلاقة بموضوع الإرتباط الوظيفي، وتطبيق أسلوب دراسة الحالة الإستكشافي لبحث هذه القضية في شركات القطاع الصناعي في صحار. ومن خلال استخدام الإستبيان وإجراء المقابلات تم بحث آراء عشرة مدراء موارد بشرية عن معنى الإرتباط الوظيفي وأهميته وأهم العوامل التي تؤدي إليه، بالإضافة إلى ذلك تناولت الدراسة أهم التحديات المرتبطة بمحاولة الشركات لزيادة مستوى الإرتباط الوظيفي لدى موظفيها والسبل الممكنة للتغلب على تلك التحديات.

أوضحت الدراسة أن الإرتباط الوظيفي يساهم بشكل كبير في تنمية القطاع الخاص وعملية التنويع الإقتصادي في السلطنة. وبشكل عام، خلصت الدراسة إلى أن أهم العوامل التي تحقق الإرتباط الوظيفي في القطاع الصناعي بصحار هي كالتالي: القيادة المؤسسية، فرص التدريب والتطوير الوظيفي، التواصل الفعال مع الموظفين، نظام المكافآت والتحفيز، العمل الجماعي، التوازن بين متطلبات الوظيفة والحياة، والأمان الوظيفي. كما أن هناك عوامل إجتماعية وثقافية قد تؤثر على مستوى الإرتباط الوظيفي في منطقة نطاق الدراسة ولكن هذا الموضوع يحتاج إلى بحث متعمق يتناول هذا النوع من التأثيرات.

بناء على نتائج الدراسة يعرض الباحث في آخر البحث مجموعة من التوصيات التي من شأنها أن تساهم في رفع مستوى الإرتباط الوظيفي لدى موظفي هذا القطاع. ويأمل الباحث في أن تكون هذه الدراسة سببا في جذب انتباه مسؤولي الموارد البشرية وصناع القرار في القطاع الخاص لتوجيه الإهتمام إلى قضية الإرتباط الوظيفي والعمل بجدية لرفع مستوياتها لدى الموظفين من أجل تنمية وتطوير هذا القطاع الحيوي والفعال ليساهم في عملية التنويع الإقتصادي في سلطنة عمان.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Employee engagement has been the interest and focus of HR practitioners and academics alike as they realise that organisational goals can be achieved through ensuring a high level of engagement among staff. This chapter introduces the background of employee engagement and highlights the significance, scope and objectives of the study.

1.1 Research Background

Industry today has become a challenging environment especially after financial crises. For industrial organisations to be able to continue being competitive in the marketplace and guarantee the achievement of their goals, they need to consider their workforce as the most valuable asset. This is because human capital is a vital strength of organisations and a key competitive advantage in achieving organisational objectives (Anitha 2014; Baumruk 2004; Sundaray 2011). Because of this, firms should adopt effective policies to make sure that their employees are reliable and supportive during hardships in particular (Gallup 2013). They also need to fulfil employees' financial and psychological needs. One significant strategy organisations can rely on in this regard is employee engagement. According to Gallup (2013), employee engagement can aid organisations to overcome economic downturn and difficult times and remain effective and competitive. Engaged employees are aware of their roles in the organisation and they encourage their workmates to contribute to the successful achievement of business objectives (Sundaray 2011).

An increasing number of organisations have realised the significance of employee engagement as an effective tool through which many positive outcomes can be attained. These include low turnover, talent retention, productivity, and improved business performance (Gupta & Sharma 2016; Kapoor & Meachem 2012; Smith & Macko 2014). This encouraged practitioners, mainly in HR fields, to join researchers in the process of investigating employee engagement and its drivers. As a concept, there does not exist a specific definition for employee engagement as it has been defined in many various ways (Albrecht et al. 2015; Bakker & Demerouti 2008; Witemeyer 2013). Kahn (1990) is the most cited study as the first attempt to identify engagement in a work-related setting. Many definitions summarise employee engagement as employees' emotional and psychological connection to their workplace which leads them to want to put in extra voluntary effort for the benefit of the organisation. The issue of conceptualising and defining employee engagement will be highlighted in chapter two.

There have been many studies conducted on the issue of employee engagement trying to conceptualise the concept, identify its significance, and explore its underlying factors. Many studies have revealed that employee engagement is a main source of organisational success (Halbesleben & Wheeler 2008; Kular et al. 2008; Radda et al. 2015). For example, Smith and Macko (2014) found that there exists a relationship between the level of engagement and employees' satisfaction, performance, turnover and behaviour. The significance of employee engagement will be further discussed in chapter 2.3.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Realising the importance of employee engagement is not enough for organisations to attain its associated advantages. Since employee engagement is a critical issue in terms of conceptualisation, measurement and implementation, proper attention on employee engagement will make organisations more effective and productive. Nonetheless, Bhuvanaiah and Raya (2015) report that the process of engaging employees is not an easy task for employers. This is because the scope and drivers of employee engagement can be different from one business setting to another (Mmako & Schultz 2016).

There are several possible challenges firms may face before they can have an engaged workforce. For a start, some corporations tend to mix employee engagement with other issues such as employee motivation and satisfaction, while they can mean totally different things (Cook 2008; Popli & Rizvi 2016; Robinson et al. 2004). That is to say that a motivated or satisfied employee is not necessarily an engaged one. Also, some organisations lack a strategy or policy for employee engagement and they only depend on unsystematic activities to engage the workforce (Al Maktoum 2015). As for measurement, some of the tools used to measure the level of engagement are not reliable and thus do not provide an accurate reflection of engagement. To overcome such drawbacks, organisations should put in place policies which enhance engagement, and use analysis-based tools to measure employee engagement levels.

A current problem is the misidentification of employee engagement drivers. Research has specified that the factors leading to engagement are diverse and may vary across cultures and industries (Mmako & Schultz 2016; Rigg 2012). It is worth mentioning, too, that the majority of the academic work on employee engagement is done in Western settings. Thus, there is not enough knowledge on employee engagement in non-Western contexts.

Failure to identify the actual drivers of engagement in a particular firm will mean employee engagement will not be realised. This is a major difficulty that companies face especially if

they depend on factors identified in a work context that are not relevant for their own. To have engaged employees, industry practitioners should first recognise the factors driving employee engagement in their particular socio-cultural setting.

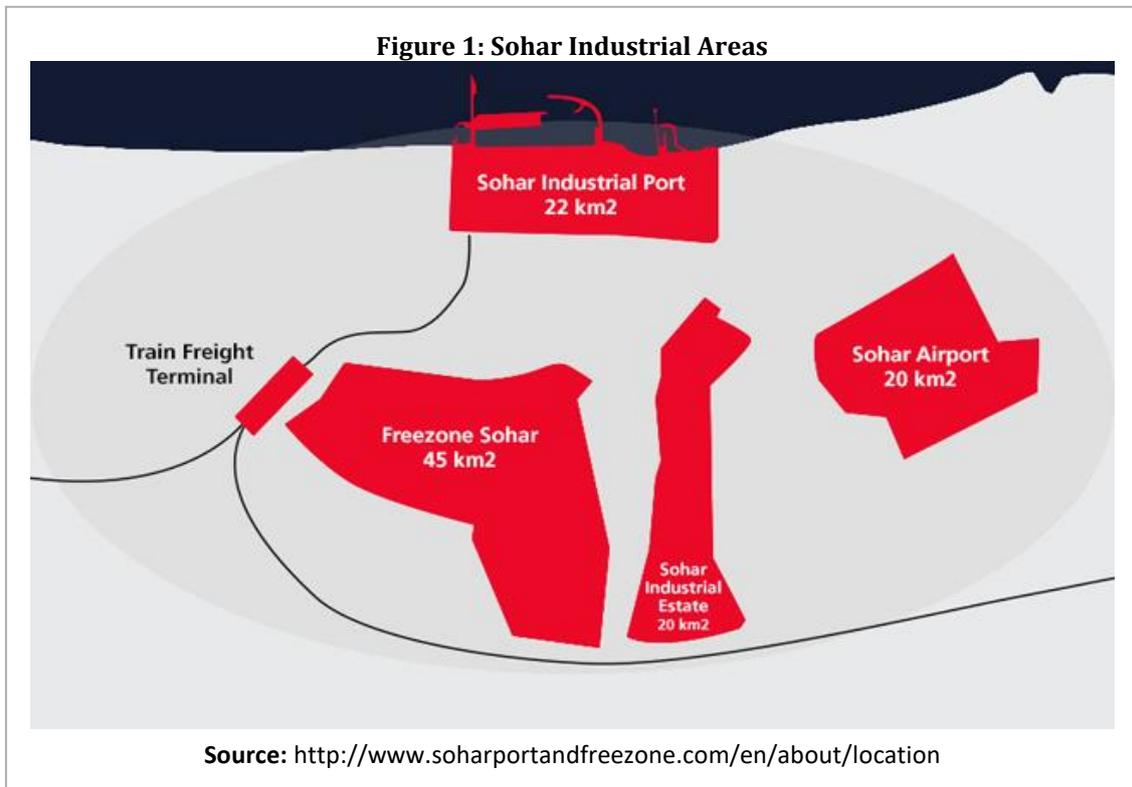
A major issue many organisations currently encounter is an inadequate engagement level among their existing employees. Many studies have revealed that a substantial percentage of the global workforce is not engaged (Dessler 2013; Gallup 2013). Jha and Kumar (2016, p. 25) attribute this rise in employee disengagement to “competition, pressure, work-life imbalance and other factors”. It is claimed, in addition, that the percentage of the disengaged workforce is higher than those engaged, and engagement degree is low among existing labour forces (Kular et al. 2008; Radda et al. 2015). In their study on the level of employee engagement among public sector managers in India, Mohapatra and Sharma (2010, p. 296) found that 37% of the workers were found to be fully engaged and 63% of them were partially engaged.

As per the above studies, disengagement can be a serious problem facing some organisations. A disengaged workforce is considered to be a major drawback to achieving business goals. To avoid negative outcomes and maintain a competitive advantage by remaining a key player in the marketplace, organisations should prioritise employee engagement and link it to an organisation’s vision and strategy. Industry practitioners, particularly HR managers, also need to identify employee engagement drivers in their particular context.

1.3 The Context of the Study

This study focuses on employee engagement in the Middle Eastern context, namely the private sector in Sohar city in Oman. This setting offers a particularly interesting setting to study employee engagement because the Omani private sector, which embraces employees from different socioeconomic backgrounds, is evolving and is thought to be a significant contributor to the national economy. The private sector in Sohar city in Oman has recently expanded in terms of the type of industries, number of projects, and number and type employees. Due to the strategic location Sohar enjoys, the Omani government has established huge industrial projects in the area. Sohar contains three main industrial areas: Sohar Industrial Port, Freezone Sohar, and Sohar Industrial Estate (Figure 1). All companies in this context operate under the Omani commercial law and abide by the same set of rules and regulations. It is also important

to mention that Sohar and the regions around it, where most of local employees live, are more rural than urban areas.



This area embraces different types of companies involved in various types of industries such as oil, chemical, steel, aluminium, cement, food, etc. The employees working in these industries are diverse in terms of nationality, level of education, and cultural backgrounds, which makes any management of employee engagement particularly challenging. The local Omanis workforce plus the workforce coming from India form the majority of the employees. Ensuring a high level of employee engagement in the industrial sector in Oman is a fundamental element for its success. This vital sector is expected to be a major contributor to the national wealth especially with the current heavy reliance on oil and the fact that dropping oil prices have caused an economic downturn in the country.

This study mainly explores the most important drivers of employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar. It focuses on a sample of HR managers from ten companies to examine their perspectives on drivers, importance, and enhancement of employee engagement. It also aims to offer insights on employee engagement in the Middle Eastern context and the challenges of managing it within a diverse workforce.

1.4 Research Gap and Significance of the Study

The majority of employee engagement studies have been conducted in Western contexts (Kular et al. 2008; Rothmann 2014) where there are different cultural aspects and HR policies than in the Eastern. It is important to understand that the existing literature has not touched on employee engagement in the Middle Eastern context. This study aims to fill this void by studying employee engagement in the private sector in Oman. The aim is to study the extent to which drivers of engagement identified in different contexts are applicable to other more general contexts and to the industrial sector in Oman in particular. It is interesting that the current research will also fill the literature gap since there has been no research conducted on employee engagement in this context.

In order to bridge the gap in literature on employee engagement in the Middle Eastern context, this dissertation tries to investigate the perceptions of HR managers in the industrial sector of Sohar in regard to the main drivers of employee engagement. The existing work on the drivers of employee engagement directs the purpose of this study. It will attempt to rectify in some small way the lack of research in this area. Industry practitioners should recognise the drivers of employee engagement in the industrial sector. Thus, combining the perspectives of both academics and practitioners will provide useful practical information for HR managers in these companies on how to increase employee engagement level. It is also expected that the findings of this study will pave the way for future studies particularly into employee engagement in the Middle Eastern context and to the expansion of academic knowledge on employee engagement beyond the West.

1.5 Research Objectives

To deal with the problem stated and contribute to the research gap identified, the general aim of this research is to investigate the key drivers of employee engagement in the Omani private sector. Specifically, the study will present a local understanding of the drivers of employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar from an HR perspective. Primarily, the objectives of this study are:

- To find out how companies' HR representatives in the Sohar industrial sector understand employee engagement and its significance.
- To determine the key drivers of employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar from an HR perspective.

- To discover HR practices which are enhancing employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar and how can they be improved even more.

After meeting the objectives of the study, the researcher will assess whether if the industrial sector in Oman is a unique socio-cultural context with reference to the way it perceives employee engagement and its underlying factors.

1.6 Structure of the Study

This thesis consists of six chapters. The first chapter introduces the topic of employee engagement and briefly discusses its background. It also presents the scope, significance, objectives of the study and the research gap. Chapter two reviews the latest ideas and arguments in the existing literature related to conceptualisation, models and drivers of employee engagement and draws a theoretical model based on previous research.

Next, chapter three lays out the design of the study. It describes the research methodology and specifies the study population and sample, data collection methods, and ways of doing an analysis of the data. Chapter four presents the main results of the study. These results are later discussed in chapter five which in turn also explains how the findings are related to the literature review. Chapter six is the last chapter of the study and it outlines the main conclusions of the study. Recommendations, limitations of the study, and implications for future research are highlighted as well. The thesis ends up with a list of references and appendices.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Recently, employee engagement and its drivers have become the focus of a lot of research in the field of HR and organisational behaviour. This interest stems from the benefits organisations could achieve through having engaged employees. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the existing arguments and thoughts in the literature about the conceptualisation, definitions, models and drivers of employee engagement.

2.1 Conceptualising Employee Engagement

To start with, a brief historic review. Numerous studies state that Kahn (1990) was the first researcher to define engagement in an occupational setting and that his theory paved the way for the emerging employee engagement definitions. Saks (2006) traces the origins of employee engagement as an evolving concept and claims that engagement is a distinctive construct involving intellectual, behavioral, and emotional factors related to employee performance. The definition of employee engagement remains inconsistent and unclear in the literature. But, is ‘employee engagement’ really too vague or broad to be concisely defined?

Some studies have addressed the issue of inconsistency in conceptualising employee engagement and attributed this to many factors (Albrecht et al. 2015; Al Maktoum 2015; Bakker & Demerouti 2008; Elewa 2013; Newman & Harrison 2008; Witemeyer 2013). Besides, cultural aspects have also contributed to the ambiguity in determining what the precise meaning of the concept as engagement can be affected by different factors in different cultural contexts (Elewa 2013; Markos & Sridevi 2010). Macey and Schneider (2008) identify the different definitions the concept has and provide a concrete framework containing three engagement-related components. They contend that a large number of definitions has led to confusion in recognising what employee engagement really means and includes. Instead, Frese (2008) argues that the academic work on employee engagement does not cause confusion in defining employee engagement, but rather presents models to better understand it.

It is also worth noting that Bhuvanaiah and Raya (2015, p. 93) evaluate this issue and comment that, “individual engagement with the work role may vary due to multiple unfavourable condition”. To illustrate, employees may not be engaged by the same factors on a daily basis; i.e. what engages a worker today might not make him engaged tomorrow. This is because engagement level is affected by different factors as well as the different conditions of employees and their work environments.

Interestingly, Sharma and Sharma (2010, p.192) argue that despite what is stated in the literature, employee engagement should not be considered a new term but rather a combination of previously known concepts such as, “job involvement, organisational commitment, loyalty, work motivation and productivity”. This point of view is also adopted by other researchers who believe that employee engagement overlaps with the above mentioned concepts (e.g. Cook 2008; Gibbons 2006; Kahn 1990; Kular et al. 2008; Mohapatra & Sharma 2010; Popli & Rizvi 2016; Radda et al. 2015; Robinson et al. 2004).

Controversial debate on conceptualising employee engagement continues in the literature as Markos and Sridevi (2010, p. 90) state that up to the present time, there is no specific and largely recognised definition for the concept. This leaves employee engagement very broad in scope and ambiguous in meaning (Macey & Schneider 2008; Witemeyer 2013), in the hope that one day a sententious and unanimous definition may emerge.

2.2 Defining Employee Engagement

As discussed earlier, employee engagement has many definitions (Krishnaveni & Monica 2016; Kular et al. 2008; Smith & Macko 2014), however, it still lacks one that is clear and concise. This may be because the concept is ambiguous (Al Maktoum 2015), and associated with other similar concepts (Albrecht 2011; Radda et al. 2015). As a construct, employee engagement has had many different definitions. The following table provides a number of employee engagement definitions in existence in previous academic work.

Table 1: Definitions of Employee Engagement

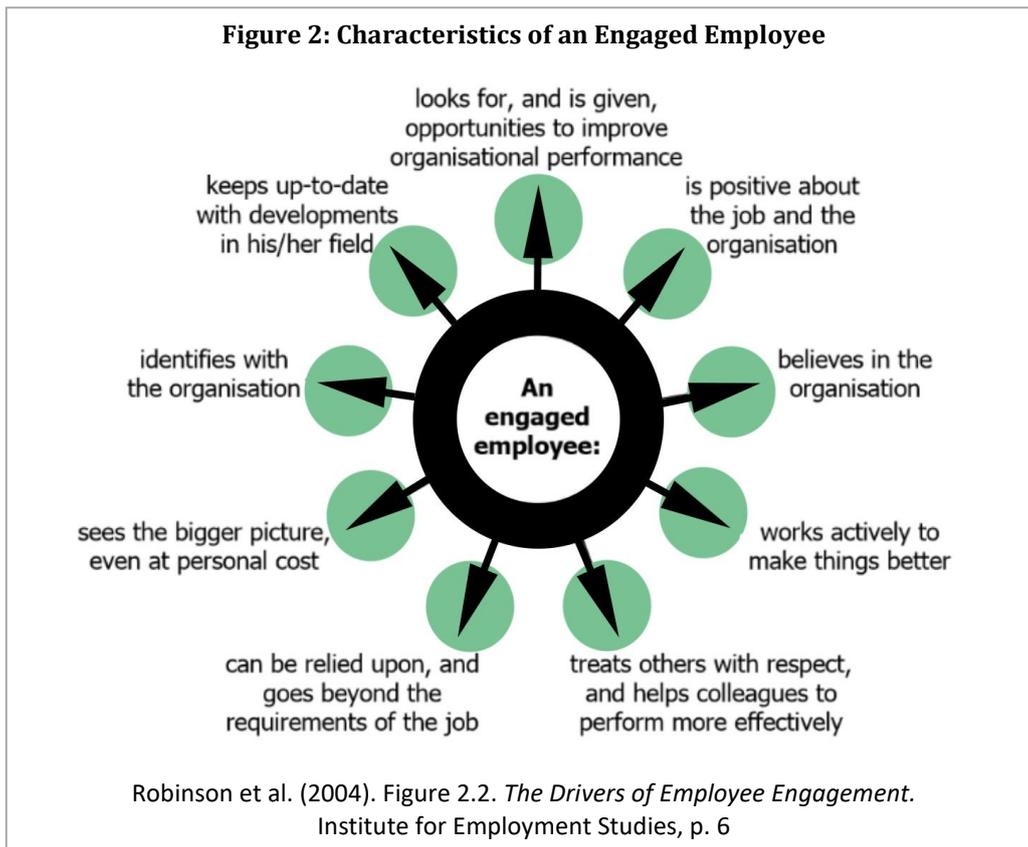
No.	Definitions
1	“Harnessing of organisation members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (Kahn 1990, p. 694).
2	“A positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context, and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organisation” (Robinson et al. 2004).
3	“A heightened emotional and intellectual connection that an employee has for his/her job, organisation, manager, or co-workers that, in turn, influences him/her to apply additional discretionary effort to his/her work” (Gibbons 2006, p. 5).
4	“The passion and energy employees have to give of their best to the organisation to serve the customer. It is all about the willingness and ability of employees to give sustained discretionary effort to help their organisation succeed” (Cook 2008, p. 3).
5	“Someone who feels involved, committed, passionate and empowered and demonstrates those feelings in work behaviour” (Mone & London 2010, p. 17).

6	“The state in which individuals are emotionally and intellectually committed to the organisation as measured by three primary behaviors: Say, Stay and Strive” (Susi & Jawaharrani 2011, p. 475).
7	“The level of commitment and involvement an employee has towards their organisation and its values. When an employee is engaged, he is aware of his responsibility in the business goals and motivates his colleagues alongside, for the success of the organisational goals” (Anitha 2014, p. 308).
8	“The emotional commitment the employee has to the organisation and its goals” (Simha & Vardhan 2015, p. 1).
9	“The willingness of employees and their ability to help their organisations achieve success in their activities by providing consistent discretionary efforts” (Al Maktoum 2015, p. 19).
10	“A degree of employee emotional and intellectual commitment that exist in association with accomplishing the organisation’s vision and mission” (Gupta 2015).

Gallup (2014) puts employees, in terms of engagement, into three groups. These are: the engaged, the not engaged, and the actively disengaged employees. Bhuvanaiah and Raya (2015) comment on Gallup’s model and explain that ‘not engaged’ employees can become ‘engaged’ if the organisation leads them to attain their own goals. Yet, employees who are ‘disengaged’ are useless to the organisation. Robinson et al. (2004) present a comprehensive diagram of characteristics of engaged employees (Figure 2).

2.3 Significance of Employee Engagement

It is very obvious that employee engagement has become a popular subject and is gaining a significant amount of attention among academic researchers and HR practitioners alike. As Yadav (2016, p. 21) confirms, “engagement is seen to promote employee performance, excellence, retention, productivity and overall business growth”. Much significance is given to engagement because it has a wide twofold effect on both the employee and the employer (Kapoor & Meachem 2012; Markos & Sridevi 2010; Rigg 2012). Also, employee engagement can serve as a predictor of employee performance and behaviour (Dessler 2013; Hough et al. 2015; Saks 2006).



In the same way, other studies linked employee engagement with turnover, which is a very important aspect of an employee's behaviour. For example, Kapoor and Meachem (2012) believe that when employees at a particular firm are highly engaged, they are more likely to continue working for the same firm. Equally, Smith and Macko (2014) support this statement through the results of their research in which they explored the effects of employee engagement on employee turnover in a large food industry retailer in the United Kingdom. The results revealed that the high level of turnover in the company was linked to the low level of engagement among the workforce. They assert that the high level of turnover was a result of low employee engagement (Smith & Macko 2014, p. 67). Therefore, employee engagement is an effective means of reducing or avoiding turnover.

Furthermore, recent studies have found that the level of employee engagement in an organisation influences job performance, employee retention, productivity, and customer satisfaction positively (Al Maktoum 2015; Halbesleben & Wheeler 2008; Harter et al. 2002; Radda et al. 2015; Simha & Vardhan 2015; Sonnentag 2003; Towers Perrin 2003). Employee engagement also enables organisations to enhance business performance, achieve goals and gain competitive advantage (Anitha 2014; Gupta 2015; Gupta & Sharma 2016; Popli & Rizvi 2016). Likewise, the opposite is true as Rigg (2012) and Truss et al. (2013) contest that

disengaged employees are ineffective and unwilling to work for the organisation's general benefit. Other major benefits of employee engagement include: building a healthy, safe, and inspirational working environment, and creating a positive employee attitude (Kapoor & Meachem 2012; Sundaray 2011). Previous studies recognise several advantageous outcomes that may be reached as a result of achieving employee engagement. These include: passion, commitment, productivity, motivation, job satisfaction, profit growth, punctuality (Cook 2008; Kapoor & Meachem 2012; Macey & Schneider 2008; Popli & Rizvi 2016; Simha & Vardhan 2015).

Al Maktoum (2015, p. 7) states that the significance of employee engagement has increased at late in the current changing business world due to technology and globalisation. For companies to sustain and develop, high levels of employee engagement need to be achieved. He affirms that, "organisations must strive to ensure employee engagement as the oil that drives organisational performance and competitiveness". Furthermore, Kapoor and Meachem (2012, p. 18) introduce five key metrics of employee engagement outcomes: "employee retention, company performance, innovation, customer satisfaction, profitability". In addition to this, they extract several benefits of employee engagement from different studies and that includes: less absence due to sickness, meeting customer needs, and advocating an organisation's product or service.

The effects of employee engagement on the employees has also been studied. Al Maktoum (2015, p. 8) states that,

"Engagement promotes their wellbeing, hence allowing them to be more productive. Employees who have high levels of engagement are more secure and energetic. They have a positive influence on the organisation's name and brand. In addition, with a higher employee engagement, an organisation is more likely to achieve its goals and becoming more successful and competitive. This outcome promotes loyalty from the employees".

Furthermore, Kapoor and Meachem (2012) mention that employee engagement helps the employer meet employees' needs and by so doing the individual could move to the next level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and the higher they get on Maslow's pyramid the more engaged they become. A very important point in this sense is emphasised by Krishnaveni and Monica (2016) who report that when employees' needs are addressed, they start engaging

themselves. Susi and Jawaharrani (2011, p. 474) remark that the benefits of employee engagement go beyond the worker and the firm and reach into the community.

2.4 Models of Employee Engagement

As discussed above, employee engagement as a concept remains ambiguous and broad despite the numerous definitions existing in the literature. A lack of precision and accuracy in defining employee engagement has resulted in a false interpretation of what the concept actually means and includes, which in turn causes inconsistency in terms of measuring employee engagement and determining its drivers. Therefore, some researchers and scholars have tried to provide a better understanding of employee engagement. In their attempts to conceptualise and understand employee engagement and its underlying determining factors, they developed several theoretical frameworks. Four models of employee engagement will be briefly highlighted: Kahn's (1990) model, the WIFI model (Cook 2008), the JD-R model (Demerouti et al. 2001), and the 4H[©] model (Elewa 2013).

2.4.1 Kahn's Engagement Model

Kahn (1990) originally touched on the term engagement by talking about 'personal engagement'. Kahn theorises that engagement is connected to three psychological conditions: "meaningfulness, safety, and availability". Meaningfulness can be defined as the feeling of return and value on what employees perform at work. This sense results in creativity, autonomy, self-appreciation, and inclusion. Safety is connected to the status in which the employee can prove themselves and work freely without any negative results. This feeling of safety aids in offering support, trust, honesty, and flexibility. When employees feel that they have the physical, emotive and mental tools necessary to perform their tasks, the condition of availability is fulfilled (Kahn 1990, p. 705).

Furthermore, Sistonen (2016) makes the point that meaningfulness is the condition in which employees feel that what they do at work is significant, meaningful and eventually appreciated. As for safety, it entails that employees in a trusting environment can be what they want to be at work without any kind of fear or negative consequences to self-esteem (Witemeyer 2013), while availability refers to the accessibility of all resources employees require to perform their jobs meaningfully and safely. Kahn's theory was criticised for not completely explaining why an employee would react to the three proposed psychological conditions with variable amounts of engagement (e.g. Hirschfeld & Thomas 2008; Saks 2006). However, other studies (Crawford

et al. 2010; May et al. 2004) prove that Kahn's framework identified principal conditions in which the employee can get engaged at work since "psychological conditions such as meaningfulness, safety and availability to be significantly and positively related to engagement" (Mohapatra & Sharma 2010, p. 284).

2.4.2 The WIFI Model

Another model of employee engagement is the WIFI model which was developed by Cook (2008). According to Cook, this model comprises four effective components: well-being, information, fairness and involvement. These four components are effective when they are connected to each other. The well-being factor is mainly about work-life balance which leads to engagement when it is achieved. Also, the more employees are aware of their roles and the organisation's vision, goals and performance, the more engaged they are. The next factor is fairness and it is about the organisation being fair to its employees from the first stage of selection and recruitment onwards. When fairness is thoroughly achieved, a high level of employee engagement is highly likely. The last component to ensure engagement in Cook's model is involvement which includes opening an effective channel of communication with employees. This in turn allows them to be involved in all aspects of their work life (Cheallaigh 2015; Cook 2008).

Cook (2008, p. 4) also illustrates that engagement is about "what employees think rationally about their employers, what they feel about them, their emotional connection, as well as what they do and say as a result in relation to their co-employees and their customers".

2.4.3 The JD-R Model

The Job Demand-Resources (JD-R) model of engagement was initially introduced by Demerouti et al. (2001) and has become a common framework to explain and understand employee engagement. The JD-R model emphasises that work requires interaction between job resources and personal resources to reach the level of engagement. To be more precise, Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) state that job resources and job demands are different in the sense of mechanism. Job demands exploit employees' energy, whereas the availability of individual and work resources boosts employee engagement (Sistonen 2016).

In turn, Elewa (2013) suggests that the unavailability of required resources to perform work duties affects engagement and performance in general. The idea is that the availability of resources helps relieve employees from work demands such as job-related physical, social and

psychological requirements (Bakker 2011). The consequences of the lack of the necessary resources to do the job are highlighted by Elewa (2013, p. 38) when he said, “employee burnout would eventually occur at situations where resources are lacking... affecting the quality of life of the employee and disturbing the work-life balance, with major effects on the social and family life standards”.

Therefore, organisations should provide all resources employees require to perform their tasks effectively. According to Bakker (2011), the modified JD-R further allows employees to expand their personal resources thorough enabling them to recognise their own tasks, give and receive feedback and join professional development activities.

2.4.4 The 4H[©] Model

Based on the results of his study on globalising employee engagement, Elewa (2013, p. 132) proposes the 4H[©] model to conceptualise and explain employee engagement and its determinants (Figure 3). He hypothesises that employee engagement consists of four key components: “the Head, the Heart, the Hand, and the Hope, representing how employees use their intellectual power, affection power, behavioural power and common vision to benefit their work place”. The modern 4H[©] model contributes to the recognition of employee engagement and its fundamental factors as a construct because it addresses all aspects of engagement.

In order to clarify, as per the 4H[©] model, employees utilize their heads to execute strategies and involve themselves in problem-solving. When they are engaged they act and behave in a way that reflects that they own the organisation. When the head component is achieved through involvement in intellectual activities, employees get passionately engaged since they carry a positive feeling about the organisation and therefore they use this whole-heartedness for the betterment of the company. If the workforce at an organisation is engaged at the head and heart levels, this will definitely lead to a positive reaction and effective performance in the fulfilling of organisational goals. Besides, the coming together of management and employees’ vision and objectives and effective communication make employees feel hopeful about the organisation and their job prospects (Al Maktoum 2015, p. 52-54). This is to say that the 4H[©] model consists of four harmonically connected elements which drive employee engagement at work. However, it is important to consider the extent to which organisations in different contexts can realise this model and draw practical implications from that to ensure employee engagement in the four components: the head, the heart, the hand and the hope.

Figure 3: The 4H[®] Model for Defining Employee Engagement



Elewa, T. (2013). *Globalising employee engagement: myths and reality a Middle East perspective*. PhD Thesis. Robert Gordon University, p. 254

2.5 Drivers of Employee Engagement

The term ‘drivers of employee engagement’ has become common in the literature. It has received this popularity due to the interest of consultancy firms and HR personnel. A driver is a tool that directs individuals’ behaviour (Mohapatra & Sharma 2010, p. 284). Several recent studies on employee engagement have focused on what drives employee engagement. In addition to the definition, the drivers of employee engagement are not definite as they may differ across individual, organisational and cultural contexts. According to Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, a society’s culture has an impact on the values and behaviour of that society’s members (The Hofstede Centre 2017). Therefore, researchers need to be aware of cultural differences because it is a main factor that can be related to a particular behaviour in a particular social context. Applying this paradigm to employee engagement, what may be a key driver of engagement in one context, can be of less significance in another. O’Neal and Gebauer (2006) put forward that the drivers of employee engagement vary considerably worldwide, and they are inter-related (Mmako & Schultz 2016).

Despite this, there exists a common ground on factors leading to employee engagement as the literature shows. It is worth mentioning too that many research papers have tended to try and

find employee engagement drivers in order to identify the factors enhancing engagement in various organisations and contexts (Markos & Sridevi 2010). Organisations tend to put the focus on the drivers of employee engagements for them to be able to develop policies leading to them having engaged employees. Furthermore, Al Senani (2016, p. 30) suggests that there are endless drivers of employee engagement, and therefore grouping these drivers in main categories would give proper focus to the most significant ones, and also help organisations create an effective engagement strategy.

A significant work on the drivers of employee engagement was presented by Mohapatra and Sharma (2010, p. 287). They classify factors predicting engagement into two main groups: situational factors and personal attributes. They clarify that the majority of research projects explore situational factors while personal factors are largely ignored. They conclude that lots of research proved that both situational and personal factors are crucial attributes to employee engagement (e.g. Kumar & Giri 2007; Sharma 1997; Sharma & Mohapatra 2009).

2.5.1 Organisational Leadership

A large proportion of the research has identified organisational leadership as a strategic driver of employee engagement. Many studies stress that leaders in organisations need to put a lot of focus on employee engagement strategy (e.g. Al Maktoum 2015; Dessler 2013; Saks & Gruman 2011; Simha & Vardhan 2015). Elewa (2013) states that leadership is directly and indirectly related to employee engagement and that leadership style has a direct influence on organisational performance.

There are many roles leaders can play to ensure a high level of engagement among their subordinates. A major role leaders could play to enable engagement is to set a clear vision and goals (Towers Perrin 2003), and create good and caring HR policies (Kapoor & Meachem 2012, p. 20). As a result, staff becomes very clear about their roles and career future (Al Maktoum 2015; Ebert & Griffin 2015; Gibbons 2006). However, to achieve this, leaders should have particular qualities and skills to be able to set a clear vision and goals and build effective teams (Jha & Kumar 2016; Kapoor & Meachem 2012). According to McKenna (2012, p. 419), charismatic leaders have qualities and skills to be able to do that and to have an astonishing impact on their followers. Only effective leaders allocate role effectively, motivate, inspire, spread trust, and create autonomy (Andrés et al. 2015; McKenna 2012; Robbins & Judge 2015).

Another dimension of the leadership effect on engagement is the relationship between leaders and the followers. To put more emphasis on this, Markos and Sridevi (2010) point out that a strong manager-employee relationship is a main factor of driving employee engagement. In other words, the stronger the relationship between leaders and subordinates, the more engaged employees are (Al Maktoum 2015; Truss et al. 2013).

Another aspect of leadership affecting employee engagement is leaders acting as role models for their subordinates. Al Maktoum (2015) says, employees imitate their leaders and hence, leaders must be competent, effective, and show moral attributes such as transparency, integrity, and justice (Hough et al. 2015; Jenkins & Delbridge 2013). In this regard, it is claimed that when people at the leadership of the organisation set a good example, employees are more likely to get engaged. And it cannot be better said than how Anitha (2014, p. 311) puts it, “engagement occurs naturally when leaders are inspiring”

Furthermore, Robinson et al. (2004) imply that making employees feel valued (Jha & Kumar 2016) and involved is a very strong promoter of engagement. To accomplish this, firms can involve employees in decision-making and allow them freedom to express their ideas and concerns (Lytle 2011; Robinson et al. 2004). This is in line with what Al Maktoum (2015) describes as employee empowerment which is a key enabler of employee engagement. They urge organisations to empower employees by giving them the authority to contribute in the decision-making process, providing them with counselling (Kapoor & Meachem 2012), and supporting them through an effective talent management policy.

It is very obvious that organisational leadership contributes to the advancement of engagement at work as it is not only linked to many aspects of engagement, but also to other key drivers of employee engagement. In today’s developed business world, leaders really need to be up to the challenge of understanding and supporting their followers and know how to best engage them in the workplace.

2.5.2 Effective Communication

Effective communication is a main criterion identified as a fundamental factor to achieve employee engagement (Gupta 2015; Jha & Kumar 2016; Robinson et al. 2004; Simha & Vardhan 2015). Al Maktoum (2015) suggests that communication should not only be open from managers to employees only, but also from employees to managers. Mishra et al. (2014) assert that communication requires a mutual and dual flow of information. This dual open

channel, if effectively activated, would definitely increase the process of feedback, decision-making, and staff involvement. This is further proven by the results of the study of the 2005/2006 Communication ROI which found that,

“Firms that communicate effectively are 4.5 times more likely to report high levels of employee engagement versus firms that communicate less effectively... Companies that are highly effective communicators are 20 percent more likely to report lower turnover rates than their peers” (Hobson 2006).

The 2003/2004 “Watson Wyatt Communication ROI Study” proves that effective communication increases organisational performance (Yates 2006, p. 71). By having an increased focus on communication from the leaders’ side, communication becomes a main factor leading to employee engagement since it allows staff members to give feedback and present views to the top management (CIPD 2006; Kapoor & Meachem 2012). Additionally, effective communication requires that employees gain available access to information they need to complete their tasks (Hamann 2007). Here, Saks (2006) stresses that communication with employees should be clear and constant to enhance the engagement level.

Mishra et al. (2014, p. 183) examine the correlation between internal communication and engaging employees and conclude that “internal communication” is essential for creating an atmosphere of disclosure amongst leadership and subordinates, and enriching employee engagement. They review previous research about the effect of internal communication on organisational performance and list a number of positive outcomes such as an increase in productivity, trust (Kapoor & Meachem 2012), revenue, customer satisfaction, loyalty (Bhuvanaiah & Raya 2015), and obviously employee engagement level.

2.5.3 Professional Development and Training

Professional development is a dynamic factor for achieving employee engagement in an organisation. Many studies have introduced professional development as a key driver of employee engagement (e.g. Gupta 2015; Jha & Kumar 2016; Kapoor & Meachem 2012; Mishra & Mohanty 2016; Towers Perrin 2003; Sharma & Sharma 2010; Simha & Vardhan 2015). Dessler (2013) agrees that professional development certainly influences the level of employee engagement in organisations in a positive way.

This importance of career growth as a key driver of engagement stems from the fact that equipping staff with the essential skills and information to do their job tasks effectively makes

them continue working for the same organisation (Cheallaigh 2015; Sundaray 2011). Also, Hughes (2013) and Cheallaigh (2015) list several factors that lead to better employee retention rates and among these they prioritise career development. It is then thought that employees tend to get engaged with the organisation which they know would offer good chances for them to grow, learn and develop. Career development also encourages employees to put extra effort into helping the organisation to achieve its goals (Hughes 2013).

In contrast, Sundaray (2011) mentioned that the absence of professional development opportunities leads to a high turnover of employees. Therefore, it is worth investing in professional development (Madsen & Cook 2010) because it makes employees feel they belong to the workplace (Ahmadi et al. 2012), boosts their confidence, motivation and engagement (Anitha 2014).

2.5.4 Rewards and Recognition

A rewards and recognition policy is determined to be a key predictor of employee engagement, in previous studies. Through rewarding schemes, in the form of pay, benefits, incentive, and honouring best achievers (Kapoor & Meachem 2012), a high level of engagement can be achieved among employees (Al Maktoum 2015; Bratton & Gold 2007; Buckingham & Coffman 2005; Simha & Vardhan 2015; Towers Perrin 2003).

Research has also revealed that money alone cannot be a motivating element. This is reinforced by Markos and Sridevi (2010, p. 92) who state that the majority of factors leading to employee engagement are non-financial. According to Anitha (2014, p. 312), compensation includes both “financial and non-financial rewards”. This shows that appreciation and recognition of work is a fundamental element to be considered in the process of engaging employees (Kapoor & Meachem 2012; Sharma & Sharma 2010). Employees love to be praised, valued and appreciated for their achievements and that in turn greatly improves their level of engagement.

Al Maktoum (2015, p. 42) specifies that employees prefer to join organisations which offer increments in salaries and benefits and employ a good appreciation system. In such organisations, engaged employees would do voluntary work to aid the organisation to achieve all their business objectives. Therefore, firms should link any reward and recognition policy to their organisational objectives and ensure that the policy is effectively implemented.

2.5.5 Work-life Balance

Work-life balance is a strategic driver of employee engagement as many researchers conclude (e.g. Kapoor & Meachem 2012; Mishra & Mohanty 2016; Susi & Jawaharrani 2011). According to Armstrong (2012), work-life balance is the balance between employees' work tasks and their duties and commitment outside work. In this aspect, some studies discuss family support as a factor of work-life balance leading to employee engagement. For instance, Greenhaus and Powell (2006) claim that family has a strong effect on employee performance as family members can provide support, encouragement and meaning to the job. Kapoor and Meachem (2012, p. 20) add that family gatherings makes employees feel that they belong to the organisation and that they want to work hard to make the organisation prosper. Also, families are a good source of "emotional and material support" (Elewa 2013 p. 39) and a reliever form work stress, especially in cases of difficult times and crisis (Spector et al. 2007). Magnini (2009) further examines this issue and argues that if work-life balance does not exist employees will feel unsatisfied and disappointed because they are not spending enough good time with their families. Likewise, Dibben et al. (2011) stress that achieving this kind of balance positively affects employee engagement, motivation and employee retention. Work-life balance also helps employees become self-confident, hopeful, supportive and attached to their organisation. Such a balance should be created to save personal resources and make sure they are not fully utilized by work demands (Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker 2012, p. 545).

From the above, it is understood that a work-life balance is essential to achieving a high level of employee engagement. However, Elewa (2013) questions what a good amount of work-life balance is. He comments that firms need to consider employees' families benefits and grant employees convenient leaves for them to spend holidays and occasions with their loved ones.

2.5.6 Other Drivers

It is of interest to note that some studies have regarded the organisation's image as a factor leading to employee engagement (Al Maktoum 2015; Simha & Vardhan 2015). This is to say that organisations may improve the level of workforce engagement by building a positive and attractive organisation image. Rothbard (2001) mentions that organisations could create a positive image through the active involvement of employees in various organisational activities.

Recent research has also linked employee engagement to corporate social responsibility (CSR). Gupta and Sharma (2016, p. 68) study the effect of organisational CSR activities on achieving engagement among the workforce. They found that “both external and internal CSR impact engagement leads to organisational performance”. By implementing effective and sustainable CSR projects which have benefit for both the society and individuals, organisation can foster the level of engagement.

Teamwork and co-worker relationship is another key driver of employee engagement. Building effective teamwork with clear goals and tasks will definitely make employees more engaged (Anitha 2014; Al Maktoum 2015), and build good relationship between colleagues. Gibbons (2006, p. 6) studies the drivers of employee engagement and highlights some drivers leading to engagement including confidence, honesty, person-job fit, and the relationship between managers and employees. Not far away from other research findings, Jenkins and Delbridge (2013) found that employee engagement depends on organisational values, job features, social relations, and employee voice.

Bhuvanaiah and Raya (2015, p. 95) categorise several drivers of employee engagement and they detail what psychological need each driver serves. Their list consists of four main organisational factors to inform employee engagement: “decision making authority, opportunities for growth and development, empowerment and fair treatment, and leadership”.

Other drivers of engagement cited in studies include: ethical standards, creativity and innovation, induction program, motivation system, leisure events, employee autonomy (Bhuvanaiah & Raya 2015; Gupta 2015; Kapoor & Meachem 2012; Mishra et al. 2014; Simha & Vardhan 2015; Truss et al. 2013).

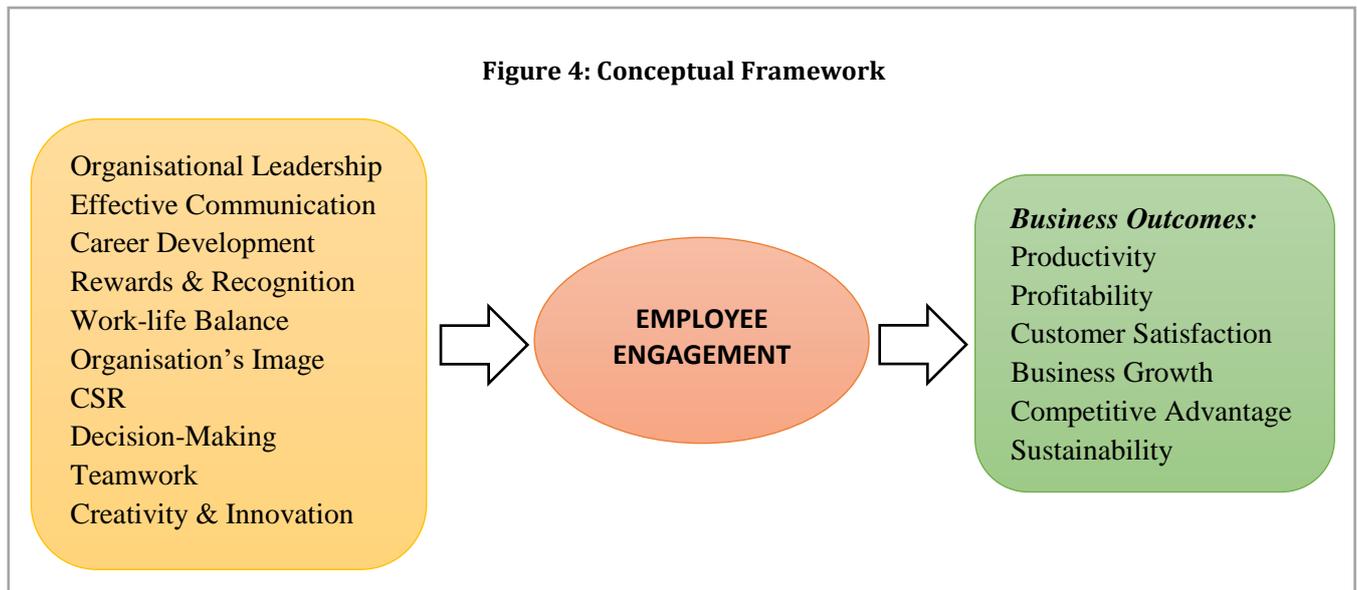
On the other hand, Brad Shuck et al. (2011) argue that there is no one way to engage employees that could fit all organisations. For each business or industry sector it may be challenging to identify particular factors leading to engagement in the organisation. From the evidence and discussion so far, it is apparent that organisations should spend time investigating the drivers of employee engagement in their contexts as the current business situation requires an engaged workforce to enhance efficiency, production, and organisational success. Key drivers of employee engagement which appeared in this literature review are summarised in Table (2) below.

Table 2: Drivers of Employee Engagement

	Employee Engagement Driver	Source
ORGANISATIONAL LEADERSHIP	<p><i>Effective leaders:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set clear vision, goals & HR policies • motivate, inspire & spread trust • create autonomy & treat fairly • establish strong relationship with employees • empower employees 	Al Maktoum (2015) Bhuvanaiah & Raya (2015) Dessler (2013) Gupta (2015) Saks & Gruman (2011)
EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION	Effective communication is a two-way, clear & constant exchange of information which allows employees to access information they need to complete their tasks. It enhances feedback, staff involvement & transparency.	Al Maktoum (2015) Gupta (2015) Mishra et al. (2014)
CAREER DEVELOPMENT	Equipping staff with necessary skills and knowledge to perform their job tasks effectively.	Al Maktoum (2015) Bhuvanaiah & Raya (2015) Gupta (2015) Kapoor & Meachem (2012) Simha & Vardhan (2015)
REWARDS & RECOGNITION	Financial and non-financial rewards.	Al Maktoum (2015) Kapoor & Meachem (2012) Markos & Sridevi (2010) Simha & Vardhan (2015)
WORK-LIFE BALANCE	Balance: work duties & commitment outside work Balance: work vs. home demands Provide family support Recreational activities	Elewa (2013) Kapoor & Meachem (2012) Markos & Sridevi (2010)
ORGANISATION'S IMAGE	Organisations may increase the level of workforce engagement by building a positive and attractive image for themselves.	Kapoor & Meachem (2012) Simha & Vardhan (2015)
CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY	Implementing (external & internal) effective and sustainable CSR projects which have benefit on both the society and individuals.	Gupta & Sharma (2016)
PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING	Involving employees in the process of decision-making.	Gupta (2015) Kapoor & Meachem (2012) Markos & Sridevi (2010) Simha & Vardhan (2015)
TEAMWORK	Building effective teamwork with clear goals and tasks.	Al Maktoum (2015) Kapoor & Meachem (2012) Simha & Vardhan (2015)
CREATIVITY & INNOVATION	Allow employees to be creative and think of innovative ideas.	Gupta (2015) Kapoor & Meachem (2012)

2.6 Conceptual Framework

This proposed conceptual framework (Figure 4) is developed based on the literature review of this study. The model illustrates the key drivers and business outcomes of employee engagement recognised by previous studies.



Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter presents the design of the study by first presenting the research approach and research questions. Then, the sampling process and study population is described. After this the chapter discusses the data collection methods and the rationale for the tools used, in addition to explaining the data analysis methods. The chapter finally talks about validity, reliability and the ethical considerations.

3.1 Research Approach

Generally, there are two research approaches (deductive and inductive) that a researcher can choose to conduct a study with. The selection of either approach depends on the nature of knowledge the researcher pursues. The inductive approach is associated with qualitative research. Unlike the quantitative method of research, the qualitative research does not focus on statistics but it is more related to knowing about reality, and the participants' practices and knowledge through investigating and understanding their own contexts (Harwell 2011). Therefore, the researcher in this study mainly selected the inductive approach which is in general uses interviews for data collection (Bryman & Bell 2011). The inductive approach also enables the researcher to be more explanatory and flexible while gathering the data (Ghauri & Gronhaug 2005), and this feature best suits the purpose of this study. However, the quantitative method is used with a limited scope as will be explained later.

The aim of this study was to explore employee engagement in a vital part of the private sector in Oman to provide an understanding of its drivers and significance within this context. To provide such a contextual essence, the researcher implemented an explorative case study method as a general research design because it provides a chance to explore the issue in its particular real context in depth and gain an insight into the topic (Feagin et al. 1991; Yin 2013). Saunders et al. (2012) identify conducting interviews with experts in the subject to be a main tool to do explorative research through detailed contextual analysis.

The case study method can be a single case study where the researcher investigates the topic in one organisation, while in a multiple case study the researcher studies two or more organisations. As for this research, the case study of the industrial sector of Sohar is investigated with multiple cases including ten industrial organisations. It is important to note that these ten organisations represent a single case study context because they are all industrial in nature and follow the Omani commercial law. According to Yin (2013), using multiple cases

under one case study enriches the research findings. Using this method, the researcher mostly defines a small geographical region and limited participants.

3.2 Research Questions

The study primarily aims to investigate an HR managers' perspective (perceptions and experiences) about the key drivers of employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar. Also there is an attempt to discover how employee engagement is perceived in the organisations, and how it can be improved. Mainly, the study is designed to answer the following questions:

1. How do the companies in the industrial sector of Sohar perceive employee engagement and its significance?
2. What are the key drivers of employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar as per an HR perspective?
3. What are the procedures HR departments implement/ should implement to enhance employee engagement?
4. Is the industrial sector in Oman a unique socio-cultural context in terms of understanding employee engagement and its drivers?

By analysing the perceptions of HR managers from different companies in the industrial sector of Sohar, the study will reveal what the HR perspective in each company is regarding the nature of employee engagement, its significance, and the main drivers leading to it. It is expected that answering the research questions will provide important insights on issues related to employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar. Such an examination of the HR perspective will provide practical implications for HR managers for building an engaging work environment. More importantly, at the end of the research, it is expected that the study will be able to reveal whether the industrial sector in Oman is a unique socio-cultural setting in terms of understanding employee engagement and its main drivers.

3.3 Sampling and Study Population

This study uses a focused non-probability sample which is chosen to best represent the study population. This sampling method allows the researcher to select the sample which meets the study aims and reveals useful relevant data for the purpose of answering the research questions (Robson 2002). Qualitative research normally demands a smaller sample size which should reflect feedback for most perceptions. Obtaining this feedback leads to saturation which happens when respondents are not really adding additional information or perspective (Crouch

& McKenzie 2006). Based on this, a total of ten HR managers from companies in the industrial sector of Sohar were chosen from the study population as a sample for the present study. Data saturation is often reached with about 11-12 participants in a particular similar group (Guest et al. 2006; Latham 2013). The selected sample of ten HR managers is considered to be enough and informationally representative. As the research is generally qualitative and the participants are homogeneous, data saturation was observed to have occurred after conducting six interviews. The sample assures that most important perceptions of participants were revealed, and that the data was not repetitive.

The rationale behind carefully selecting this sample is first to serve the research objectives because it is investigating employee engagement from an HR perspective. Second, to realise the areas of harmony and conflict in the perception of HR managers about what drives employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar. The ten HR managers representing the sample were from different nationalities having a considerable amount of experience in the field of HR management. The researcher did not want to categorise the participants as per their age, nationality, gender or years of experience as these are not variables in the study.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

As stated above, this study uses a case study approach. The case study approach establishes grounds to apply more than one research method. The selection of a particular research tool to collect data should be appropriate to achieve the research objectives (Bryman & Bell 2011). This case study is employing a ‘mixed methods’ approach to collect data, quantitative and qualitative, with more focus on qualitative research. The qualitative method is more important for this research design and the application of quantitative method through the use of the questionnaire is for triangulating the data and increasing its validity.

Such mixed methods approach permits the researcher to deal with complex research questions, gather richer data, and enhance the findings by extending the range of exploration (Bryman 2006; Kiessling & Harvey 2005; Yin 2013). Greene (2008) claims that mixed data collection tools are required to tackle complicated phenomena such as employee engagement. For example, the quantitative method may not be the best way to get data on the perception and significance of employee engagement, whereas the questionnaire can provide accurate data about identifying the most important drivers of engagement in the context of the study. It is expected that such thorough examination will provide a wider understanding of employee engagement in the private sector in Oman.

3.4.1 The Quantitative Method

The quantitative method was first applied through the use of a small questionnaire to explore the most important drivers of employee engagement. The quantitative method allows the researcher to triangulate the data and further enhance its validity and objectivity (Saunders et al. 2012; Creswell 2013). Findings from previous research were used to design the questionnaire. The paper questionnaire consists of a list of ten drivers of employee engagement extracted from earlier studies and frameworks (e.g. Al Maktoum 2015; Gupta 2015; Kapoor & Meachem 2012; Markos & Sridevi 2010). The questionnaire was handed to the respondents to fill out before the start of the interview to rate drivers of employee engagement based on a five point Likert scale from (1) 'very important' to (5) 'not important', to explore the importance of these drivers in engaging employees in the industrial sector of Sohar (Appendix 1). The five Likert scale is useful as it is simple to use and understand, and the data can be easily analysed and presented.

3.4.2 The Qualitative Method

The qualitative method is the main approach for the design of this research and the qualitative data is collected through the use of in-depth face to face interviews. According to Baxter and Jack (2008), interviewing is the most common method in business research. Flick (2008) states that qualitative research focuses on the respondents' perspectives on their knowledge and practices in their own contexts. Kvale (1996, p. 1) specifies that the purpose of the qualitative research interview is to "understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of people's experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations". This method is the most suitable tool for this case study as it allows the researcher investigate in depth and understand employee engagement in its natural realistic specific context.

The qualitative research was used to further explore the participants' responses on the questionnaire through the use of the semi-structured interview. The interview was also used to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives on the nature, significance and enhancement of employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar through face to face discussion. Many studies have identified qualitative interviews as a beneficial method to collect data. The semi-structured interview allows the respondents to explain their perceptions on the topic freely. Also, the semi-structured interview is a flexible way to gather data as the interviewer can adapt the interview questions to address issues that arise during the interview, whilst directing the discussion on the main research focus (Flick 2009; Patton 2002; Robson 2002). One interview schedule with a similar set and sequence of questions was followed with all participants. This

process has the advantage of allowing the researcher to ask probing questions in response to the respondents' answers. The interview questions were formed on the basis of the aims and questions of the study.

The interview schedule (Appendix 2) which consists of 13 questions, was built on the four domains of the research questions: (1) perceiving employee engagement, (2) drivers of employee engagement, (3) significance of employee engagement, and (4) enhancement of employee engagement. The questions in the first part focus on discovering how employee engagement is understood by HR managers in the industrial sector of Sohar. It is important to find out how the companies perceive employee engagement while investigating its drivers. The researcher in the second set of questions aims to explore the significance of employees and their contribution to the development of the private sector in Oman. Then the in-depth interview investigates the factors leading to employee engagement in the context being examined. The last section concentrates on the practices the companies take or need to take to have a more engaged workforce. All interviews were conducted during the last week of March 2017 and at times which best worked for the interviewees. Every interview was 20-40 minutes long and was audio-recorded. Recording the interviews has many advantages as it ensures accurate, safe and detailed keeping of data (Table 3).

Table 3: Interview Cases

No.	Company	Position	No. of interviews	Date of interview	Duration of interview
1	Case company A	HR Manager	1	23/3/2017	22 minutes
2	Case company B	OD Superintendent	1	23/3/2017	24 minutes
3	Case company C	General Manager	1	23/3/2017	20 minutes
4	Case company D	HR Consultant	1	26/3/2017	37 minutes
5	Case company E	HR Manager	1	26/3/2017	20 minutes
6	Case company F	HR & Admin Manger	1	27/3/2017	20 minutes
7	Case company G	HR Manager	1	29/3/2017	33 minutes
8	Case company H	HR & Admin Manger	1	29/3/2017	20 minutes
9	Case company I	HR Officer	1	30/3/2017	40 minutes
10	Case company J	HR Specialist	1	30/3/2017	29 minutes

3.5 Data Analysis Methods

The items on the questionnaire and the interview questions were based on the study's conceptual framework (see page 23). The data collected, using the questionnaire to identify the most important drivers of employee engagement, was analysed using the statistical package for the social sciences software (SPSS). Although the sample size was small and not very suitable for statistical testing, SPSS was used to obtain the descriptive statistics of the sample for triangulating the data and strengthening the validity.

A thematic analysis approach is used to analyse the qualitative data. There are several ways of conducting thematic analysis. However, to show the data which answers to the research questions in a way that displays logical coherence and link the different issues explored in the study, the theoretical and semantic thematic analysis was applied. This method is appropriate to analyse the qualitative data as it is a primary analysis driven by the theoretical framework of the study and fits into an established coding frame based on the research questions. It is also an explicit analysis which presents less descriptive but more detailed data analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006).

After transcribing the data, the researcher started to read the transcription to be familiar with the data. Since the analysis is based on the theoretical approach, the data was coded based on the research questions. After coding the data, the themes were recognised within the explicit meaning of the data since the analysis is only focusing on the participants' apparent responses and ideas. It is worth noting here that the researcher identified a few evolving and reoccurring themes about the challenges facing companies in the industrial sector of Sohar and how unique this context is to global drivers of employee engagement. Later, the themes were reviewed and named, and based on this, the researcher finally started to write up the findings.

3.6 Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are essential criteria in the process of data collection to assure quality, accuracy and consistency of data. To be more precise, reliability ensures accuracy of data and consistency of findings, i.e. similar results can be repeated if the same study is conducted using the same methods. Validity ensures that the study measures what it really intends to measure (Yin 2013). A challenging aspect of research validity and reliability is the researcher bias. In some cases, the researcher or the research tool may direct the interviewee towards a certain answer. A biased conduct of interviews would affect the validity and reliability of the findings (Regoniel 2013).

In the current study, the researcher took several steps to eliminate this kind of bias and ensure validity and reliability of data. First of all, the researcher used a mixed methods approach (questionnaire and interview) to triangulate the data and increase its validity. Second, adequate preparation was given for research tools, and each item on the questionnaire and the interview schedule was carefully analysed, aligned, designed and approved by the supervisor to elicit the required specific information from the participants.

Furthermore, a good study sample was objectively and randomly selected to ensure that the results generated from the data are representative of the industrial sector of Sohar context. In some cases, the participants received the interview schedule and the questionnaire via email to acquaint themselves with the questions. If not, the participants were allowed ample time to go through the questions before the interview started. Also, the researcher established a good rapport and interaction with the participants in order to collect more straightforward responses, and they were allowed to freely express their views during the interview. The researcher did not manipulate the data to reach a favourable result but adhere to what the data presented.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Oppenheim (2003) stresses that ethical standards must be maintained in all parts of the study by stating that, “the basic ethical principle governing data collection is that no harm should come to the respondents as a result of their participation in the research”. To get access to the targeted companies to meet HR managers there, each company was officially contacted by the researcher who submitted an official document from The British University in Dubai stating the purpose and procedure of the study (Appendix 3).

Participation in the study was made ultimately optional to all respondents. Prior to the start of data collection procedure, the researcher provided a brief about the purpose of the study and obtained consent to audio-record the interviews. The participants were assured that they would remain anonymous, and the information they provided would be dealt with in a highly confidential manner and that it would be only used for the purpose of the study.

Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter analyses the data and presents the results from the quantitative data collected by the questionnaire and the qualitative data from the interviews. Elaboration and discussion of the finding will be presented in the following chapter. On the questionnaire the respondents rated the importance of ten employee engagement drivers, while the interviews investigated in-depth their perceptions on several issues related to employee engagement.

4.1 Demographics of Participants

The quantitative data was analysed through SPSS to obtain statistics from the respondents and to visualise their ratings of employee engagement drivers. The participants of the study were working at HR departments for industrial companies in Sohar. Six of them were Omanis and four were expatriates (2 Indians, 1 Kenyan and 1 Filipino). The length of service in Oman shows that 80% of participants have more than five years of experience in the HR field. This percentage is important as it indicates that the majority of the study sample have substantial experience in the field of HR which in turn entitled them to effectively reflect on their experience and present their opinions on employee engagement issues (Table 4).

Table 4: Participants' HR Experience in Oman

Years	Percent
0-5 years	20%
6-10 years	40%
+10 years	40%

4.2 Data Analysis

The researcher adopted a thematic analysis approach to analyse the data collected through interviews. The questions on the interview schedule, which are based on the research questions, are identified as themes in the data analysis. Ten HR people were interviewed to explore their perspectives on the importance, drivers, and improvement of employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar. In the analysis the researcher is examining the interviewees and their direct quotes having accorded each of them a letter only to ensure their anonymity.

4.3 Characteristics of Employees

The interview started by asking the participants about the most prominent features that characterise the employees in the industrial sector of Sohar in terms of educational level,

income level and living standard. The employees in this context did not have similar level of education, income and living standard because the companies were not alike in terms of their economic level and leverage. In each company there were employees belonging to different socioeconomic statuses depending on their level of education and the positions they held.

According to the participants, the majority of the labour group were skilled and technically-qualified regardless of their educational level which mainly ranges from high school certificate to diploma. Employees received technical and vocational training either before or after joining the workplace, to acquire the necessary skills needed for the job. As for income, most of employees were on an average income and they had a good living standard in general. Another prominent feature about this group of employees is that most of them lived at home, not far from their workplaces, as they came from Sohar and its vicinity.

4.4 Describing Employee Engagement

When the interviewees were asked about how they would describe an engaged employee, they gave quite similar characteristics. For them, an engaged employee is a person who is positive, hardworking, enthusiastic, productive, passionate, dedicated, loyal, involved, motivated, optimistic, satisfied and punctual. In terms of behaviour, one respondent said that an engaged employee *“goes the extra mile and tries to achieve the goals... he’s always looking to achieve the instructions and the targets given... and always willing to help and be a team player – interviewee (B)”*. Another participant mentioned the same thing, stating that engaged employees are *“not only doing what’s supposed, but also doing above and beyond what’s called of them – interviewee (A)”*. Some participants described engaged employees as employees who want to explore more and more in their job and try to get the maximum output. Also, they achieve their job tasks without unnecessary observation.

It is interesting that most of the respondents linked some qualities of engaged employees to the difficult times that the company may encounter. For example, one respondent pointed out, *“when the company starts to face problems, engaged employees don’t complain, they just keep doing their work because they’re positive... they try to do their best and perform their tasks and responsibilities without complaints, they give suggestions to improve the company – interviewee (A)”*. Others made it clear by saying that engaged employees are willing to stay after working hours, and they have a positive attitude. They are ready to perform different tasks and roles as assigned by the management. They also accept new challenges, consider work as

family, work with a different culture and diversity, and care for the company. One also added that they do not always think about the financial benefits.

4.5 Factors Influencing Employee Engagement

Talking about the factors that could have an impact on employee engagement, the participants were not all in agreement on how factors like nationality, age, experience and cultural background could influence employee engagement. As for nationality, most of the participants seem to agree that nationality does not have a direct impact on engaging employees. They explained that regardless of nationality employees can be engaged, although a multi-national workforce may be engaged by different factors. They believed that nationality makes no difference in the process of engagement as long as the organisation creates a good environment and believes in diversity and inclusion.

The age/experience factor generated various responses though. Some respondents thought that age and experience could have an effect on employee engagement. One commented, *“as for age, more aged people would be married, with family, their children going to school, having issues about medical and other things, while a single employee who is young and on the go, would have different concerns in life. Once the company knows what employees want and what would make them engaged, there should be no difference in terms of engaging these kinds of employees – interviewee (B)”*. Another participant mentioned that age plays a role in engagement to a certain degree. He explained that it is sometimes difficult to change the mindset of old employees who have been in the company for many years to make them see things from a different perspective. Similarly, experienced employees tend to see themselves as knowledgeable and not willing to explore new things. On the contrary, other participants stated that old people with experience are easier to engage.

Interestingly, the analysis of the results above suggested that people from particular nationalities and cultural backgrounds can have different reasons for engagement. One manager argued that, *“absolutely, there’s a difference in engaging Omanis and expats. Their needs and preferences are different, for example, an expat coming here would just be content about having a job and if he’s assigned many tasks he will gladly do them to ensure that he keeps his job for a very long time, while an Omani would have more requirements other than only having a job. But it’s not more difficult to engage Omanis as long as the company knows what they want – interviewee (B)”*. In their opinion, some employees cannot be empowered as they see themselves as followers, not leaders. Interviewee (D) argued that Omanis need to be

trained to have self-confidence and be able to take decisions. Some employees cannot take decision or assume accountability when they face a situation, because they equate how much risk could be associated with that decision. Another issue related to the nationality effect on engagement is that *“Omanis are easier to be engaged by the sense of ownership – interviewee (E)”*. The interviewee explained that through making Omanis realise that since this business is in Oman and they will acquire and own it in future, Omani staff can be engaged. Interviewee (H) added, *“the mentality of many Omanis is that they need to improve, and work hard to reach the objectives of the country”*.

4.6 Challenges of Employee Engagement

After identifying the main aspects of what employee engagement means and describing several features and behaviour of engaged employees, the participants were asked about the possible challenges their companies may face in their attempts to engage the workforce. To start with, they identified that lack of trust between the management and employees is a main challenge. Some employees do not believe what managers say, especially when they transparently explain the financial situation of the company.

Another challenge that hinders companies from enhancing employee engagement is lack of resources. An interesting fact observed about this issue is found in the following quote, *“resources of the company aren’t always unlimited to achieve the basic needs of the labour group. When the company becomes open with employees about what can be given and can’t be given, this is the first conflict with management. Some employees also think that when they demand, they will receive as they demand, and this is not always the case – interviewee (B)”*. It is worth noting that one manager specified that a lack of resources does not qualify the company to offer training opportunities for employees. In addition, a participant commented that in some cases an HR department cannot implement engagement activities because of top management disapproval. In one company, the HR manager raised a critical point when he claimed that the foreign top management does not support giving financial rewards and development opportunities for Omanis to avoid succession and financial cost. He added, *“top management should change their attitude about Omani labour and be ready to develop them and promote them, not to keep them in the same low level – interviewee (F)”*.

Furthermore, other interviewees mentioned that employees’ level of understanding, mentality, maturity, and social integration are additional obstacles to employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar. It makes employees have wrong expectations about what they should

get. This also can appear in the feeling of entitlement, as one put it, *“employees need to understand that they aren’t entitled to get the job, and that recruitment is the company’s choice which is based on the company requirements – interviewee (D)”*. The same respondent mentioned that another challenge is the low level of technical preparation candidates have before starting a job which requires special technical skills.

It is noteworthy that two HR managers from the participants touched on the modernity of industry in Sohar and the unpreparedness of Omani employees to join industry as challenges to engage them more deeply. For example, interviewee (C) argued, *“the industrial development happened in Oman in the last 40 years, and in the last decade in Sohar, and people aren’t exposed to this working environment, and they aren’t mentally prepared for the industry, this can’t be changed overnight”*. Similarly, interviewee (E) stated that, *“this area has been lately introduced to industrialisation, so a lot of discipline is required for this industry. It takes time till some people get dedicated and disciplined to drive the job... steel industry is new in Oman, and we can’t find experienced Omanis in steel industry”*.

4.6.1 Overcoming the Challenges

As for practical suggestions to overcome these challenges to engage employees in the industrial sector of Sohar, almost all participants stressed the importance of opening a transparent communication channel with employees in the form of meetings, dialogues and discussions. One HR manager revealed that, *“HR should have meetings (sometimes individual) to discuss issues about their personal life to understand the situation, top management should explain everything with details and evidence with employees to make them understand the situation... transparency is very important to engage employees – interviewee (A)”*. This includes being open with employees about the available resources for employees to ensure the right level expectation. However, it is interesting to note that although effective communication was regarded as a key driver of employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar, it seemed that companies should concentrate on communication as an effective tool to overcome engagement obstacles. This can be achieved through the practical implementation of effective communication.

Providing induction and preparation programs is a further suggestion to overcome the challenges of employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar. Participants suggested that companies should not directly immerse employees into work. Alternatively, fresh employees could join a preparation program which basically gives them a gradual transition to

the workplace, and teaches them how to work dynamically with different diverse groups, and deal with cultural differences. Interviewee (H) added, *“they need to be involved through good education”*. Such an educational and preparatory program is also important to make employees understand how their job is important for them, the society, and the country. Moreover, HR should empower employees and give them more authority and freedom to take decision.

As for dealing with top management disapproval, it is suggested to *“restructure the system, HR need to draw plans to convince management that employees are the asset as they operate the company – interviewee (H)”*. Another respondent pointed out that the government should work hard to gather all HR managers together to share experiences and information on how to engage employees because more cooperation between organisations is needed.

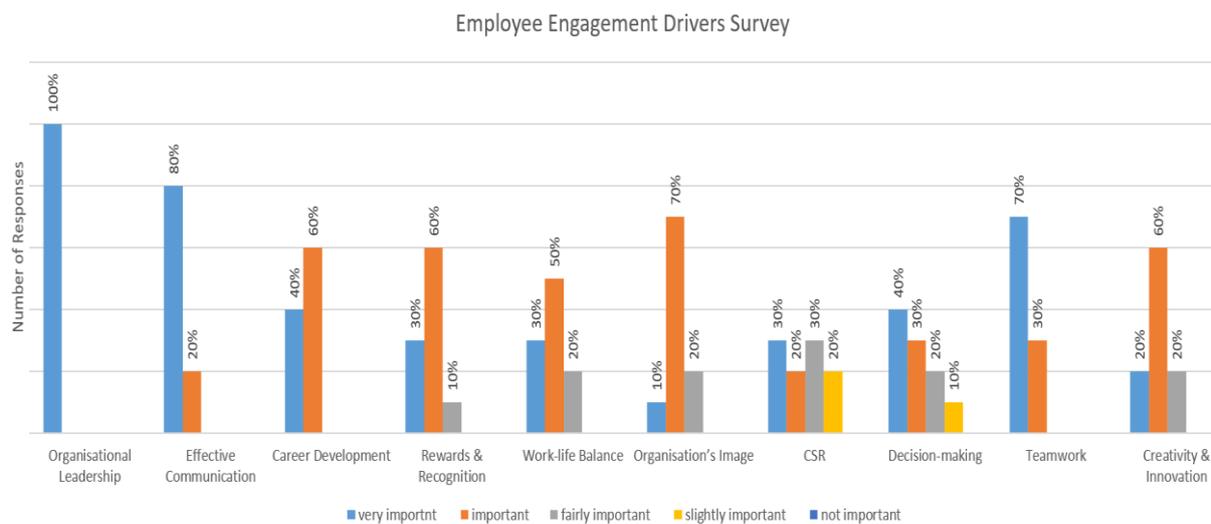
4.7 Developing the Private Sector

On the question of whether or not employee engagement can contribute to the development of the private sector and the process of economic diversification in Oman, the participants agreed that employee engagement plays a big role here. Overall, all respondents have very positive beliefs in this regard as employee engagement can result in high performance and low turnover. According to one participant, *“yes absolutely, because high engagement can only be translated to high performance level. When employees are performing at high level, the company will perform well and make better profit, and that would advance the private sector in the region – interviewee (B)”*. Remarkably, two managers mentioned that engaged employees may think about opening new businesses and start joint-venture projects and this contributes to the development of diversification of industry and economy. One added, *“employee engagement also makes employees do what they should do to ensure that the company would sustain and survive – interviewee (D)”*.

During an economic downturn, organisations can resist and survive when the employees are engaged because they are aware of the situation, and they might positively influence their colleagues to understand the difficult times the organisation is going through. This is indeed nicely put in the following quote, *“engaged employees can give good ideas and generate innovative ideas for the development of the private sector and the process of economy diversification in Oman... engagement makes employees help the company in difficult times like solving shut down problems and staying after working hours. They also understand and consider when the company cannot deliver a promise due to financial problems – interviewee (I)”*.

4.8 Drivers of Employee Engagement

The interviewees were asked to fill in the questionnaire and rate the importance of the drivers of employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar on a five point Likert scale from (1) ‘very important’ to (5) ‘not important’ to explore the importance of these drivers in engaging employees. Then, in the interview they were asked to further elaborate on the three most important drivers to obtain more in-depth information. The analysis of the questionnaire showed that the five most important drivers of employee engagement were organisational leadership, effective communication, teamwork, career development, and rewards and recognition (see the bar chart below).



On the question of the most three important drivers of employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar, the most reoccurring drivers in the participants’ opinion were: setting clear goals (by leadership), benefits, and professional development. Commenting on organisational leadership as a significant driver of engagement, one HR manager asserted, “*first of all having a clear sense of direction from the executives, this will never be done without the leadership, and it starts from leaders – interviewee (B)*”. Other highlighted drivers include: effective communication, effective leaders, confidence, employee wellbeing, social activities, and corporate social responsibility. A significant point found in this study was that three participants recognised ‘job security’ as a key determinant of engagement. One of them said, “*If employees think that this company may collapse at any time, they cannot focus on their job... stability of the organisation, financial stability of the company is important – interviewee (C)*”.

Furthermore, the participants were asked to give their perceptions on three main drivers of employee engagement identified in the literature, namely career development, rewards and recognition, and work-life balance. They revealed similar beliefs and perceptions as they all agreed that these factors are very important to drive employee engagement forward in the industrial sector of Sohar. One stated that, *“on many research these three factors always come at the top of the list, so definitely they will help improving employee engagement... when addressing them the level of engagement will increase – interviewee (B)”*. These findings in turn do not contradict the questionnaire data. Interviewee (A) pointed out that working in Sohar is advantageous for employees from Sohar and its vicinity as they are close to their homes, *“this is an advantage for them when they take leave and in terms of living cost as life in Sohar is cheaper than Muscat”*.

In addition to financial rewards, participants also stressed the importance of non-financial rewards in engaging employees. In their opinion, training and career development makes employees more engaged and loyal to the organisation. It also increases job security as it reflects that the organisation’s plans for the long term and prepares employees for the future. Interestingly, two managers emphasised that the HR department should conduct a training needs analysis (TNA) before conducting any training. This is because through the TNA the HR could identify training areas and topics needed. The study also revealed that these drivers would effectively work to engage employees from a low socioeconomic status.

The comparison between the questionnaire results and the interview results showed no material difference between the most important drivers of employee engagement. This corroborates the collective questionnaire and the interview findings.

4.9 Western vs. Eastern Drivers

The study also examined the perception of participants on the difference between employee engagement drivers in Western vs. Eastern contexts. The analysis showed that the majority of interviewees seemed to agree that there is no difference about engagement drivers in the two contexts because the same factors can work in either setting if they are properly employed.

However, some participants think that there could be a difference between drivers in both contexts in terms of employee needs and priorities. This is to say that a top driver in a context may not be very important in the other context although they both lead to engagement. One participant commented that *“completely different things are needed as we have different*

culture and different social commitments, in the west they follow rules with no exception or consideration, and they're more materialistic – interviewee (I)''.

This interviewee here meant that Omani employees have more social obligations and customs which, if considered by HR, would enhance engagement. Since Sohar and the towns around it are more rural places, Omanis in this region still maintain strong ties that bind not only family members and relatives but also neighbours at societal level. For example, it is important to participate in social events and attend weddings and funerals of people in the village. He added, *“we also created a special list for social and family commitments. Cases like attending neighbour funerals and taking relatives to hospital are considered as emergency leave – interviewee (I)''.*

Another HR manager highlighted money vs. family priority when she said, *“Western employees are mainly driven by the perspective that earn more to live better... here, quality of life starts more with family not with earning more money, family comes first and then the rest come. In the Western context money comes first, this is very different – interviewee (D)''.*

Medical insurance and health care are another identified area of difference between the two contexts. One respondent claimed that, *“there could be some differences there. If pay and benefits is a top priority here, having a job for long term would be a priority there. Besides, health care in the Middle East is very good in comparison with some Western countries, where there're problems with healthcare. Here employees don't even think about it because companies provide health insurance and government provides free healthcare as well – interviewee (B)''.*

4.10 Improving Employee Engagement

Participants were also asked about ways to enhance employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar. Based on the findings from the interviews conducted, participants from all companies agreed that what they are currently doing to engage employees is not really enough and there is always room to do more. In the same vein, there were varied suggestions on how to increase the level of employee engagement in this context. In the first place, they referred to the vital role training and development could play in engaging employees. They also emphasised the need for improving the rewards system and incentives, and focusing on social activities and family get-togethers, because engaging families will lead to engaging employees. Providing expanded medical insurance and housing loans, and creating a friendly and

supportive working environment would definitely enhance the level of engagement among staff in the industrial sector of Sohar according to the participants.

This indicates that even though the HR in the Sohar industrial companies are aware of employee engagement drives, this does not mean that they are implemented in practice. It also indicates that some key drivers such as training, rewards and work-life balance need more attention to foster engagement in this context. The discussion chapter will further explore this issue and link it to the challenges of engaging employees.

Chapter Five: Discussion

In this chapter, the researcher discusses the findings of the study presented in the previous chapter. Significant results from the data analysis are discussed to address the research objectives taking into account the relevant literature and the context of the study. The study is primarily aimed at investigating the key drivers of employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar from an HR perspective.

5.1 Understanding Employee Engagement

Before giving their perceptions of the meaning of employee engagement, the participants were asked to identify the most prominent characteristics of the workforce in the industrial sector of Sohar. Overall, the employees in this context are diverse in terms of nationality, background, education, and living standard, and they come from an average and sometimes below average socioeconomic status. To improve the level of employee engagement in this situation, the characteristics of this labour group may require particular engagement measures to deal with the challenges associated with employees at this level of diversity. Such challenges and practical implications will be discussed later in the chapter.

At a contextual level, and as a response to the question about what employee engagement means in the industrial sector of Sohar, the study aims to offer a context understanding of employee engagement from an HR perspective. The participants were not asked to define employee engagement but rather to describe engaged employees. This is because it is difficult to define employee engagement as a concept, especially when no specific definition exists in the literature (Albrecht et al. 2015; Bakker & Demerouti 2008; Witemeyer 2013).

What was notable here is that the HR managers in the industrial sector of Sohar were to a large extent aware of what employee engagement means and they did not confuse it with other concepts. This finding, however, contradicts other scholars (e.g. Cook 2008; Robinson et al. 2004; Sharma and Sharma 2010, p.192) who claimed that employee engagement overlaps with other HR-related concepts such as “job involvement, organisational commitment, loyalty”.

It was very interesting, too, to see how many qualities of engaged employees mentioned in previous studies are identified by the study participants. They could potentially agree with the characteristics of engaged employees proposed by Robinson et al. (2004) who illustrated that in a diagram (see figure 2, page 10). These include: looking for opportunities to improve, going beyond the job requirements, and being positive, hardworking, and committed. This is also similar to the findings of (Anitha 2014; Cook 2008; Mone & London 2010) who recognised

the same qualities in engaged employees. However, unlike some previous studies (Gibbons 2006; Simha & Vardhan 2015; Susi & Jawaharrani 2011) there was no mention of the emotional and intellectual connection to the organisation as an aspect of engagement, although they are central components of the 4H[®] model (see page 14) for defining employee engagement by Elewa (2013). A possible explanation for this might be that HR people tend to focus on the measurable performance and behaviour of employees more than their implicit connection to their work, or they meant to include both factors when they mentioned commitment and dedication to work.

5.1.1 Influences on Employee Engagement

The study revealed that there are some factors which influence employee engagement. To put more emphasis on this, employees from different nationalities and backgrounds can have different reasons and sets of priorities for engagement. Employees with a mentality which is based on a particular way of thinking and cultural behaviour tend to bring this way of thinking to the workplace. Some employees may not respond to engagement attempts as they do not want to leave their comfort zone and are reluctant to take a new task or responsibility. Therefore, HR need to understand their employees' preferences and situations and take this matter into consideration when trying to engage them.

Moreover, it was found that education has an impact on engagement. To be more precise, the educational level of employees and their families affects employee attitude and their level of understanding at work. This is because educated employees are expected to be more self-directed and see the big picture in what they are doing. They would more readily respond to the HR engaging policies, and their level of understanding would enable them to be positive and considerate. Since engagement is linked to high performance and development of the private sector in Oman, the government needs to take into account improving the quality of education, which prepares people for industry and life in general to achieve national objectives. This, however, was not supported by the literature and therefore the impact of education on employee engagement is worth studying.

This could be because most of the literature on employee engagement has been conducted in Western countries where a certain level of education is taken as given. This does not present itself in other socio-economic systems, such as in Oman, that relies on a large number of semi-skilled and even unskilled expatriate labour force. For them, the education level is not as high as what is considered to be 'normal' in the West. Therefore, studies focusing on employee

engagement in non-Western settings would need to research the role and significance of education to employee engagement.

5.1.2 Challenges of Employee Engagement

This study also looked into participants' beliefs on the main challenges of engaging employees in the industrial sector of Sohar. The participants identified three main challenges: lack of trust, lack of resources, and educational level. First, in their opinion, a lack of trust between the management and employees was considered an obstacle for engagement. This lack of trust could be due to past situations where the management could not deliver a promise to employees. In fact, trust seems to be a critical factor as trust is the common ground on which the two parties should meet. Transparent and honest communication are important for building and maintaining trust and confidence. Top management should get down to the level of their employees, have positive attitude about them, support them, and define a clear direction for them (Kapoor & Meachem 2012; Towers Perrin 2003).

Second, another challenge identified was a lack of resources. Availability of resources is vital to implement procedures that lead to engagement. This result relates to the JD-R model (see page 13) which explains that the unavailability of necessary resources affects employee engagement and performance negatively (Bakker 2011). The private sector in Oman has recently been affected by the current economic downturn caused by dropping oil prices. Given this situation, it is assumed that private sector companies may experience challenges in maintaining their employee engagement under such an unstable and unpredictable economic situation. Managers should prepare for this by striking a balance between the top management expense reduction plan and HR development plan. This compromise would eliminate the effects of a lack of resources for engaging employees in the industrial sector of Sohar.

Third, the interviewees revealed that employees' education level is another challenge to engage employees in this context. The education level is connected to employees' comprehension skills and understanding, which in turn is associated with the cognitive ability and maturity of the employee. Referring again to education and its role in creating positive and engaged employees, good education can produce thoughtful and respectful citizens and employees who care about the development of their nation, and have the right mental attitude and expectations.

5.2 Importance of Employee Engagement

A main issue this study aimed to investigate was the importance of employee engagement in developing the industrial sector of Sohar and the private sector in Oman. Here, the study

revealed a substantial degree of similarity between participants. In their opinion, employee engagement leads to high performance and low turnover and this contributes to the success of the private sector and the process of economy diversification in Oman. Yadav (2016) explained that engagement promotes employee performance and business development (see also the conceptual framework, page 23). Supporting the above findings, previous studies revealed that when employees are engaged, they tend to continue working for the same organisation and with a high performance (Kapoor & Meachem 2012; Smith & Macko 2014).

More importantly, this study found that employee engagement supports the national economy during economic downturn by helping firms to remain competitive. These results support the literature that having a high level of engagement among staff helps business to be sustained and survive (Anitha 2014; Gupta 2015; Popli & Rizvi 2016) since the employees are understanding and aware of the situation. Engaged employees also present practical and innovative ideas to help the organisation overcome the recession (Truss et al. 2013). These areas of agreement in the respondents' views on the importance of employee engagement in developing the private sector and the national economy reflects the significant role engagement can play in this vital area.

5.3 Drivers of Employee Engagement

The present study set out primarily to investigate beliefs and perceptions of HR managers about the key drivers of employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar. In this regard, the study revealed findings that were able to answer the research questions. It is noteworthy too that no significant mismatch in beliefs was found among participants in identifying the most important drivers of engagement. Generally speaking, the interview findings support the survey findings which are similar to results in the related literature on factors leading to employee engagement. For example, organisational leadership, communication, teamwork, training, rewarding, and work-life balance were rated and identified as key drivers in the industrial sector of Sohar, as will be addressed below.

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that what participants consider as important factors leading to employee engagement do not basically materialise in practice on an organisational level. In other words, what HR managers identified as a driver of employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar is not necessarily influencing the policies and decisions of organisations in terms of catering for these drivers. This observation can account for why HR

managers identified some challenges for engaging employees. The three main challenges were discussed earlier.

5.3.1 Organisational Leadership

The respondent's views confirmed that organisational leadership is crucial for increasing engagement amongst employees in the industrial sector of Sohar. In fact, this should be of no surprise since lots of earlier research found that organisational leadership is a key driver of employee engagement (e.g. Al Maktoum 2015; Gupta 2015; Saks & Gruman 2011). This finding shows that the participants are aware of the role of leadership in building and improving engagement in their organisations. It is normal to involve leadership when talking about engagement since by their leadership style leaders set visions and goals and values through which engagement can be realised.

5.3.2 Effective Communication

Previous research conducted on the drivers of employee engagement has suggested that effective communication is a very important tool to foster engagement at the workplace (e.g. Al Maktoum 2015; Gupta 2015; Mishra et al. 2014). The study sample had similar views to these studies in relation to this matter. If the participants did not see the importance of communication, they would not emphasise it when talking about overcoming the challenges of engaging employees and dealing with cases of lack of trust, misunderstanding and wrong expectations. Under this view, they explained that through opening an effective and transparent channel of communication with employees, HR managers can tackle lots of issues.

5.3.3 Training and Career Development

One anticipated finding in regard to the key drivers of employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar was training and career development. All participants believed that professional development opportunities have a major impact on driving engagement. Actually, this is not a surprising finding as those beliefs and explanations corroborate a great deal of previous work and discussion on this subject (e.g. Bhuvanaiah & Raya 2015; Kapoor & Meachem 2012; Simha & Vardhan 2015). As a matter of fact, some respondents went beyond this and indicated that TNA needs to be carefully conducted to provide employees with the type of training they need. In some cases training is not based on TNA and hence does not equip employees with the necessary skills and knowledge.

Turning to the challenges of engaging employees in the industrial sector of Sohar, training and development was introduced as a solution to overcome many of the challenges encountered.

For example, training can address the issue of lack of trust. It can also address the issue of the modernity of industrialisation in Sohar and the unpreparedness of employees to join a new industry through providing candidates with tailored training to prepare them for participation in the strategic sector in Oman.

5.3.4 Rewards and Recognition

Kapoor & Meachem (2012) and Markos and Sridevi (2010) emphasised rewards and recognition as significant drivers of employee engagement. Al Maktoum (2015) stated that employee engagement requires the implementation of different appraisal and rewarding schemes to satisfy employee needs. Equally, recognition has assumed a good deal of significance due to the results of the study. This can be attributed to the fact that HR managers understand that people like to see their work and achievements recognised and rewarded. A good system for rewards and recognition would certainly enhance the engagement of employees in the industrial sector of Sohar.

5.3.5 Work-life Balance

Examination of work-life balance as a factor leading to employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar indicated that there is total agreement among the study sample on the importance of it as a key driver in this context. These findings in the current study are consistent with those of Elewa (2013) who found a positive relationship between employee engagement and work-life balance. The importance of this factor in the Sohar context stems from the fact that the nature and culture of this context requires realisation of a work-life balance since people have social and cultural commitments as highlighted in the previous chapter.

5.3.6 Teamwork

Findings additionally revealed that teamwork is an essential driver of employee engagement in the context of the study. Basically, this driver can be associated with organisational leadership as a lot of research found that leadership plays a chief role in building effective teams at work (e.g. Andrés et al. 2015; McKenna 2012; Robbins & Judge 2015). Having earlier said that the context of the study is more rural than urban, companies should have no problems trying to get Omanis teaming up with each other as they like to be together and it is a part of their culture.

5.3.7 Job Security

One unpredictable driver of employee engagement is job security. Through the interviews, several participants placed value on job security as a workplace condition leading to engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar. This finding does not fit the results of previous

studies reviewed for the purpose of this study except for Kahn's (1990) model. The effects of job security on employee engagement has not been broadly investigated (Celestine 2015). However, it cannot be claimed that job security is not an important driver of engagement in Sohar. In making their argument, the participants clarified that the financial stability of the organisation is linked to employee engagement and employees need to feel safe about their future career. Interestingly, the interviewees mentioned that training enhances the feeling of security at work as it shows that the organisation has future agenda, and cares about their employees when they invest money into their training. That sends a strong message that the employees are valuable and that the organisation wants to keep them.

In addition to the above drivers, the study as well revealed other factors which can lead to engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar but perhaps were less importance from the respondents' perspective. In this sample, the participants rated an organisation's image, CSR, participation in decision-making, and creativity and innovation as less significant drivers. The evaluation of these drivers could be influenced by some social and cultural factors, however, this claim requires further investigation. For example, the role of CSR on employee engagement has not been studied much, and HR managers may not fully acquire CSR's authentic meaning, scope, and impact on employee engagement. As for participation in decision-making and creativity, this may reflect that HR departments do not tend to involve employees in CSR activities and other plans, and that is why they do not see them as key drivers of engagement in Sohar industrial companies.

5.4 Enhancement of Employee Engagement

While speaking about what HR departments of companies in the industrial sector of Sohar could do to enhance employee engagement, the participants offered a variety of suggestions. HR managers also showed that what they are currently doing for engagement is not enough, and this reflects that they are concerned about engagement and they are well aware about its significance. It is important to note that these suggestions are based on and linked to the main drivers of engagement identified by the participants themselves. These include: training opportunities (*Career Development*), improving financial and non-financial incentives and benefits (*Rewards and Recognition*), focusing on social activities (*Work-life Balance*), and creating a healthy working environment (*Organisational Leadership*).

5.5 The Omani Context- Unique?

The discussion in this section focuses on the last research question which looks into whether or not the industrial sector in Oman stands as a unique socio-cultural context in terms of understanding employee engagement and its drivers. Regarding the perceptions, importance and drivers of employee engagement, the study findings did not reveal any major difference in this regard which would imply uniqueness in this setting. Put simply, the participants were able to identify characteristics of engaged employees which are fairly similar to the ones existing in the literature (see figure 2, page 10). The same applies to the drivers of employee engagement as previous research recognised similar drivers (see table 2, page 22).

Notwithstanding this, there are certain observations and considerations that might be special to the Omani private sector with respect to the socio-cultural paradigm of the Omani context. As clarified above, the priority of drivers may be different as they are associated with some cultural preferences. This observation concurs with Hofstede's cultural dimensions which explain that the culture in any society affects the attitude and behaviour of the people in that society (The Hofstede Centre 2017). For example, although money has usually been considered an important part of employee engagement (Bratton & Gold 2007; Buckingham & Coffman 2005), it can be of less importance in Oman. Also, the nature of the socio-cultural factors such as educational level, cultural background and lifestyle have an impact on employee engagement in this context (as discussed in 5.1.1 and 5.1.2).

However, this study was not primarily designed to investigate how the Omani private sector as a context would be unique to other contexts in terms of socio-cultural factors. It is beyond the remit of this study. In order for the researcher to be able to make judgments and generalisations of this kind on the context, a further in-depth investigation on this subject would need to be conducted.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

This is the final chapter of this study. It concludes the thesis by drawing major conclusions and suggesting recommendations based on these conclusions. It then discusses the limitations of the study, and finally the implications for future research.

6.1 Main Conclusions

Employee engagement has increasingly become a significant parameter for business organisations as it is associated with organisational success (see the conceptual framework, page 23). Achieving a high level of engagement strengthens the organisation's capacity to attract and retain good employees, and attain wonderful outcomes through high performing employees. According to the literature, the term employee engagement does not have a precise definition as it has been defined in diverse ways (Albrecht et al. 2015; Bakker & Demerouti 2008). However, it has lately gained a great deal of interest among HR practitioners and scholars due to the significant role it plays in organisational growth and prosperity. Through different models and studies researchers could identify many drivers of employee engagement.

This study aimed to investigate the HR perspective on the key drivers, the importance and improvement of employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar. It also attempted to explore how employee engagement is perceived in this dynamic sector in Oman, to discover if the Omani private sector is unique in this sense. The hope was that such an investigation of HR perceptions and beliefs would lead to a better understanding and identification of employee engagement and its underlying factors in an Omani setting.

Through the application of questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to collect data from ten HR managers from the industrial sector of Sohar, the study has revealed significant results. In general, the participants of the study reported similar rather than different perceptions towards employee engagement and its related issues in the sector. They showed a good awareness and understanding of the meaning of employee engagement since they could identify the main characteristics of employee engagement which were in the literature, including: being positive, loyal, committed, dedicated, hardworking, and a high performing employee who is eager to improve and willing to take extra responsibilities to help the organisation achieve its business goals. As they believed the companies in Sohar were facing challenges to engage employees, they presented various suggestions to overcome these challenges. They suggested that through good education and training programs, an engaging working environment can be created.

The study also revealed that the participants placed a high value to employee engagement as it can, on a large scale, contribute to the development of the private sector and the process of economy diversification in Oman, particularly during a period of economic slowdown. In addition, the analysis of the results showed that HR personnel in the study context could identify the key drivers of employee engagement. These drivers were not different from other main drivers identified in previous studies. For example, factors like organisational leadership, effective communication, teamwork, training and professional development, rewarding systems, work-life balance, and job security, were all very important to drive engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar. The study also found that companies need to dedicate more time to the planning and execution of steps designed to engage the workforce in this context. The suggestions they provided were linked to the main drivers they personally identified.

As per the study findings, it can be concluded that the Omani private sector does not stand as a unique socio-cultural context in terms of understanding and identifying employee engagement and its drivers. Nevertheless, there are certain special socio-cultural elements that may influence employee engagement in the private sector in Oman namely educational level, cultural background and living standards, etc. What is of concern, however, is that regardless of the uniqueness of the Omani private sector, companies need to effectively tackle the challenges associated with engaging employees and understand the factors which influence the engaging process since employee engagement is very important for the development of this sector.

This study will contribute to employee engagement research by investigating the phenomenon and its drivers in the Omani private sector context. Moreover, the findings can be used to provide recommendations and practical implications on how to increase employee engagement in other sectors in Oman and in organisations in the Middle East region.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the conceptual framework (see page 23) and the analysis of the study findings, the researcher suggested the following recommendations to build and enhance employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar:

- The HR departments in the industrial companies should know the characteristics of their employees (educational level, cultural background, living standard, etc.) very well, and apply engagement need analysis (Elewa 2013) to execute engagement procedures which best fit the context.

- HR departments should identify the obstacles that hinder engagement, and suggest means to overcoming these obstacles.
- Implementing the key findings on the drivers of employee engagement.
- Senior managers should be trained in the importance of employee engagement and the best methods to apply it in the workplace (Al Maktoum 2015).
- The leadership of the companies need to have a clear strategy and systemic plan for employee engagement (Gupta 2015). It should be a constant process of exploring, enhancing, and execution, which is aligned to its organisational values, culture and goals.
- Since training is a key driver of employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar, organisations in Oman should invest in TNA-based training and professional development programmes (Al Maktoum 2015; Bhuvanaiah & Raya 2015; Kapoor & Meachem 2012).
- Applying effective financial and non-financial rewarding systems (Markos & Sridevi 2010; Simha & Vardhan 2015). This can include extended medical insurance and interest-free house loans.
- Opening a transparent channel of communication with employees (Mishra et al. 2014; the WIFI model)
- Striking effective balance between life vs. work commitments (the WIFI model).
- Involving employees in problem-solving (the 4H[®] model), and decision-taking (Lytle 2011; Robinson et al. 2004).
- During an economic downturn, companies should strike a balance between the top management expense reduction plan and HR developmental plan. This compromise would eliminate the effects of a lack of resources on engaging employees in the industrial sector of Sohar.
- The government should take the initiative to support more cooperation between HR departments across the country to share ideas and practices on how to best enhance engagement and utilise its benefits.
- Spreading awareness among Omani employees about the ownership (the 4H[®] model) of industrial business and its vital contribution to the country would help create an engaging environment and increase engagement. This awareness could be spread through good education and need-based preparation and training programs.

6.3 Limitations of the Study

It is expected for a small-scale study of this nature to have limitations. One study cannot cover all HR managers' perceptions about employee engagement in the industrial sector of Sohar. Although this study succeeded in producing significant findings and conclusions about the

importance of employee engagement and its drivers in the context being investigated, there is a lot left to be discovered. The study was limited in some ways. First of all, the study did not explore the perceptions of top management and policy makers about the issue. Investigating their opinion and comparing that with the HR perspective would provide intriguing insights and lead to more valid results and more meaningful conclusions. Also, the sample of the study was limited. Studying a larger sample could have provided richer data and findings.

6.4 Implications for Future Research

It is recommended that more studies be conducted on employee engagement in the private sector of Oman since employee engagement could make a big contribution to the development of the private sector and the economic diversification process in Oman. In addition, future research could possibly study a larger sample and investigate the effects of cultural dimensions on employee engagement. It may also be insightful to examine the opinions of policy makers and top management to collect richer data and create a clearer picture of the situation. Another important observation is that further research might present more practical and context-based implications to be directly implied by HR departments to ensure a higher level of engagement in the private sector in Oman. It is also proposed that future studies on employee engagement in Oman measure the level of engagement amongst employees and also test the theoretical models of employee engagement.

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Appendix 1: The Questionnaire

Questionnaire

Research Title: Exploring Key Drivers of Employee Engagement in the Industrial Sector of Sohar, Oman.

Researcher: Ahmed Al Saadi

Purpose: Dissertation of MSc in HRM

University: The British University in Dubai.

Dear Respondent,

This study investigates the key drivers of employee engagement in the Sohar industrial sector. In this particular socio-economic context, **employee engagement is the extent to which employees are committed at work and willing to do over and above what is required of them to help the company achieve more success, even during an economic downturn. It is also about employees' readiness to continue working for the company because they are psychologically and emotionally connected to it.**

Participation in this study is optional. Your responses are highly confidential and anonymous and will be only used for the purpose of the study. Honest responses to all questions are expected and appreciated. If you have any questions, please contact the researcher on 2015112100@student.buid.ac.ae or (+968 95141245). Thanks for your time.

Appendix 1: The Questionnaire (cont.)

A. About the Respondent

1. Nationality: -----

2. Years of experience in Oman? 5 years or less 6 – 10 years + 10 years

B. Drivers of Employee Engagement

This Likert Scale questionnaire aims to measure the importance of 10 key drivers of employee engagement identified in academic research. Kindly rate the following statements based on a Likert scale from ‘Very important’ to ‘Not important’ and assess if these drivers are important to engage employees in the Sohar industrial sector.

Drivers of Employee Engagement		Very important	Important	Fairly important	Slightly important	Not important
1	Organisational Leadership: setting clear vision and goals & empowering employees.					
2	Effective Communication: clear exchange of information which allows employees to complete their tasks effectively.					
3	Career Development: equipping employees with necessary skills & knowledge to be effective.					
4	Rewards & Recognition: provided to employees for a work well done.					
5	Work-life Balance: between work demand & family commitment.					
6	Organisation’s Image: positive & attractive reputation about the firm.					
7	Corporate Social Responsibility: sustainable & beneficial CSR projects.					
8	Decision-making: involving employees to in the decision-making process.					
9	Teamwork: building effective teamwork with clear goals & tasks.					
10	Creativity & Innovation: encouraging employees to be creative & think innovatively.					

Appendix 2: The Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule

A. Understanding Employee Engagement

1. What are the most prominent social and economic factors which characterize your labour group (e.g. education level, income level, living standard)?
2. How would you describe an engaged employee in this socio-economic context (industrial companies in Sohar)?
3. What kind of challenges might your company face with engaging employees in this context?
4. How can companies in the Sohar industrial sector overcome the challenges of engaging employees from low socio-economic backgrounds?
5. Do the following factors have an impact on employee engagement (nationality, age/work experience, cultural background)?

B. Importance of Employee Engagement

6. Can employee engagement contribute to the following and if so how:
- Development of the private sector in Oman?
 - The process of economy diversification?
 - Supporting the national economy during an economic downturn?

C. Drivers of Employee Engagement

7. In your opinion, what are the most three important drivers of employee engagement in the Sohar industrial sector, and why?
8. Will these drivers be able to engage your employees, especially from low socioeconomic status?
9. Would providing the following for employees in the Sohar industrial sector increase their engagement level? How?
 - Training and career development
 - Rewards and recognition
 - Work-life balance
10. Are the drivers of employee engagement in a Western context different from those in a Middle Eastern context?

D. Enhancement of Employee Engagement

11. What is your HR department currently doing to engage the different types of employees in your company?
12. Do you think that what the HR department is doing is enough to create an engaging culture within the organisation?
13. What additional things could your HR department do to enhance employee engagement in this specific context?

Appendix 3: Thesis Letter



21 March 2017

To Whom It May Concern

This is to certify that **Mr Ahmed Mohammed Al Saadi** with ID number **2015112100** is a registered part-time student on the **Master in Human Resource Management** programme in **The British University in Dubai** since **September 2015**.

Mr Al Saadi is currently collecting data for his dissertation (Exploring Key Drivers of Employee Engagement from HR Perspective in the Industrial Sector of Sohar, Oman).

He is required to gather data that will help him in writing the final report. Your permission to conduct his research in your organisation is hereby requested. Further support provided to him in this regard will be highly appreciated.

This letter is issued on Mr Al Saadi's request.

Yours sincerely,

Amer Alaya
Head of Student Administration



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