



Engaging Employees at SMEs: An Insight from a Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The study aims to make a comprehensive investigation of the phenomenon of employee engagement in SMEs. The rationale for the study is the acknowledgement of the fact that engaging employees at work is significant for its success and survival. Also that there is a lack of such comprehensive studies on employee engagement in the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir of India in general and in SMEs, in particular. With an aim to make such a comprehensive investigation into the phenomenon of employee engagement, the study investigated into the phenomenon of employee engagement in SMEs through qualitative research design. The findings of the study showed that in order to drive an organization towards engagement, there are broadly four themes, the person, the culture, the management and the HR practices. With respect to the consequences of employee engagement, the findings showed that there are four themes namely, one's intention to quit, commitment, productivity and health. The respondents manifested engagement through 'job orientation'.

Key Words: Employee Engagement, SMEs, Qualitative, India

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Introduction

'Engaging the employees at workplace' has been documented for its contribution towards developing sustainable organizations. The engaged employees improve business performance, contributing to its success (Aon Hewitt, 2012). This becomes more relevant in the context of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), which to a large extent depend upon employees to invest their 'discretionary effort' in delivering the business results. Empirical evidence suggests that in SMEs, employee engagement is an important antecedent to attain enterprise objectives (Duberley and Walley, 1995), and is likely to provide necessary impetus for the sustainable competitive advantage. An understanding of the enablers and inhibitors of employee engagement in SMEs is central to effective policy intervention by the owner-manager of an enterprise, yet our understanding of the same is rather limited and has been primarily derived from our understanding of the phenomenon of employee engagement in the large enterprises (Swatee & Sushma, 2012). The objective of the study is, therefore, to empirically investigate the phenomenon



of employee engagement in SMEs of Jammu Region, J&K (India). An understanding of the phenomenon of employee engagement in the context of SMEs is likely to provide useful insights for effective human capital policy interventions to be placed by owner-manager of the firms. Further, the study is likely to contribute by providing insights into the phenomenon of 'employee engagement' in the context of Jammu Region. This is relevant as the development and growth of SMEs is crucial for the Union Territory of J&K (MSME-DI Annual Report, 2011-12).

The Concept

Employee engagement, though promoted by consulting companies, is a less researched phenomenon in academics (Wefald and Downey, 2009). The empirical research in the area of employee engagement is also a recent phenomenon (James et al., 2011). Though, the notion of employee engagement is a relatively new one, yet it is increasingly becoming popular (Dawsey & Taylor, 2011; Saks, 2006). Although the researchers agree that 'employee engagement' significantly differentiates amongst organizations on financial and marketing performance parameters (Schneider et al., 2009), yet the concept lacks clarity. Kahn (1990) was one of the early academic researchers to define the concept of employee engagement per se. He viewed engagement as the 'harnessing of organizational members' themselves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances' (Kahn 1990). Past studies have identified a few antecedents and consequences of employee engagement at work.

Antecedents of Employee Engagement

The empirical studies have paid attention to the organization and individual specific factors as antecedents of 'employee engagement'.

Organizational Specific Variables and Employee Engagement

Many past studies suggest that the phenomenon of employee engagement can be influenced by variables which may relate to the organizational system and the person's working in the organization and the interaction between the two. For example, previous studies indicate that the characteristics of the job can determine the engagement of employees at work (Saks, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) Also, the studies have suggested that employee engagement is high in those organizations that facilitate employee sustenance through adequate job resources (Bakker et al., 2007; Nikolova et al., 2019), workplace flexibility and supportive work-life policies (Richman et al., 2008), organizational and supervisor support (James et al., 2011), enabling organizational climate (Chaudhary et al., 2011) and job security (Schalkwyk et al., 2010). Employee engagement is positively associated with the 'employee job fit' (Chaudhary et al., 2011). Employee engagement is high in those employees whose expectations from the job are met (Mone et al., 2011). The research also points out that the rewards that employees receive for their contribution to the organization also have a significant impact on their engagement (Anand et al., 2016; Kahn, 1990; Scott et al., 2010; Shehri et al., 2017). Employee engagement can also be driven by the perceived organizational justice (Bhatnagar & Biswas, 2010).

Amongst relevant others working in the organization, studies suggest role of leadership (Anitha, 2014; Bhatnagar, 2007; Pugh and Dietz, 2008), supervisor (James et al., 2011; Pati & Kumar, 2010) and co-workers (Avery et al., 2007) in determining engagement of employees at work. The dynamics of communication in leadership teams is found to drive engagement (Wiley et al., 2010). Kahn (1992) and MacLeod and Clarke (2009) have also highlighted the role

of communication in driving engagement at work. In line with Kahn's (1992) research, May et al. (2004) and Saks (2006) indicated the importance of supportive supervisor relations for engagement. Bakker and Demerouti (2007) and Bakker et al. (2007) also showed that supervisor support was instrumental for augmenting engagement at work.

Individual Specific Variables and Employee Engagement

The empirical evidence suggests that individual specific factors like the personality make up of an individual may significantly influence the employee engagement (Chaudhary et al., 2011; Gil-Beltran et al., 2020). The degree to which a person believes that he/she is the master of his/her own fate may determine his/her engagement level (Chandani et al., 2016). Literature also suggests that engaged employees are happy and healthy, passionate about their work (Demerouti et al., 2010) indicating that disengaged employees will be experiencing exactly the opposite way and may also be burnt out. The research demonstrates that burnout is an erosion of engagement with the job (Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

Past studies also indicate about the role played by demographic factors in influencing the phenomenon of employee engagement (Garg, 2014). Some past studies underline positive role played by demographic variables on employee engagement like Anand et al. (2016) found that age, gender, monthly income, employment level and the experience of the employees influence the employee engagement at work. Also, Jaupi and Llaci (2015), while studying employee engagement in the banking sector, found that age and years of experience impact the engagement of employees. Nevertheless, it is also evidenced that gender (Jaupi and Llaci, 2015; Swaminathan and Ananth, 2009; Krishnan and Wesley, 2013), age (Krishnan and Wesley, 2013), experience (Krishnan and Wesley, 2013) and education (Swaminathan and Ananth, 2009) did not have any significant association with engagement of employees. There is also evidence that engagement is inversely related to tenure (Brim, 2002; Robinson et al., 2004). Many past studies indicate that with the increasing tenure, employees may experience more disappointments which may be associated with disengagement from work (Deery et al., 2006; Montes and Irving, 2008; Robinson and Rousseau, 1994).

Finally, researchers have also argued that interaction of individual specific factors with firm specific factors is likely to influence the phenomenon of employee engagement (Macey & Schneider, 2008).

Consequences of Employee Engagement

The studies focusing on the consequences of employee engagement have specifically focused on business and human resource (HR) related outcomes. Empirical evidence on business related consequences suggests that employee engagement leads to favorable business outcomes (Bhatnagar & Biswas, 2010) Further, the extent of employee engagement lowers employee intention to leave (Anand & Banu, 2011), improves commitment and citizenship behavior (Bhatnagar & Biswas, 2010; Jung and Yoon, 2016), and promotes innovation and performance (Gorgievski et al., 2014).

Specifically, prior studies indicate that engaged employees have positive work-related experience (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Sonnentag, 2003) and, therefore, they may not intend to leave the organization (Simpson, 2008). There is empirical evidence which suggests that engaged employees in organizations can have an influence on their commitment towards the organization (Lolitha and Johnson, 2015). Committed employees take part in positive workplace behaviors which contribute to business results. By influencing organizational commitment, engaged

employees can deliver positive business consequences for the organizations (Cheche et al., 2017).

Engaging Employees in SMEs

The above mentioned prior studies on antecedents and consequences of employee engagement have been undertaken in many different contexts of large scale organizations like Banking (Albdour & Altarawneh, 2012; Rashid et al., 2011; Sardar et al., 2011; Swatee, 2012), BPO (Thiagarajan & Renugadevi, 2011), manufacturing and service (Abraham, 2012; Chaudhary et al., 2011; Ravichandran et al., 2011), sales and marketing (Sange & Srivastava, 2012), education (Bakker and Bal, 2010; Hakanen et al., 2006; Hakanen, 2002) yet the literature on employee engagement in the context to SME sector has not adequately evolved and is wanting (Swatee & Sushma, 2012). Moreover, due to their distinct characteristics, the phenomenon of employee engagement in SMEs is likely to be different from the large enterprises. First, in the context of SMEs, in majority cases, owner is both principal and agent (Moore and Spence, 2006). According to the 4th Census of MSMEs in India, an overwhelming majority of small business in India are either proprietorships or partnerships. Only 3 per cent of MSMEs are incorporated as companies (Nair Committee, 2010). Hence, the SMEs may present a different picture of engagement of employees at work. Second, SMEs lack resources, human as well as capital. This leads to high level of informality in their business practices (Havenga, 2008) Third, shortage of resources requires employees to take on multitasking and firefighting roles. Fourth, the measurement of the existence of employee engagement has focused on employee attitudes while manifestation of employee engagement has not been adequately captured (Welbourne, 2007).

The above discussion construes that there is a need for a comprehensive investigation of the phenomenon of employee engagement in SMEs.

The overall objective of the study is to empirically investigate the phenomenon of employee engagement in the context of SMEs of Jammu Region, Jammu and Kashmir (India). The specific research objectives of the study are (i) to investigate the antecedents of employee engagement in the context of SMEs (ii) to investigate the manifestation of employee engagement in the context of SMEs (iii) to investigate the consequences of employee engagement in the context of SMEs (iv) to suggest policy implications, based on the findings of the study, to owner-manager and other stakeholders.

Research Methodology

The sample frame consisted of employees of the SMEs of six industrial estates of Jammu, J&K, India. The six industrial estates were requested to give a detailed list of SMEs operating in each one of them. The list of SMEs was then used to contact the owner/manager of SMEs. They were briefly informed about the study and a preliminary consent/meeting was sought by the researcher and the staff. On meeting, a detailed overview of the study was given by the researcher and the staff.

Qualitative research design has been used to explore the themes related to the objectives of the study. Semi-structured interviews of the employees of the sample SMEs have been conducted to get an inside view of the phenomenon. Open-ended questions were asked which allowed the respondent to tell about employee engagement in SMEs in their own words. It allowed getting an in-depth insight into the antecedents and consequences of employee engagement in SMEs. It also helped the researcher in withholding any preconceived notions about employee engagement and remain focused on the subjects. Purposive sampling technique with snowball method was

used to identify the respondents. Basically, the respondents who were willing to give a face to face detailed interview were identified and their subsequent references were used to collect the data.

The goal was to identify a small number of respondents who will give maximum information about employee engagement, helping in developing in depth information of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). An adequate sample size is which should create sufficient data for a qualitative study (Auerbach & Silverstein 2003). Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested assessing theoretical saturation for arriving at an appropriate sample size. A total of sixteen participants were interviewed. Saturation of data was seen at twelfth respondent, yet rest of the interviews were conducted for validation purposes.

The instrument used for conducting semi-structured interviews contained open-ended questions. Thus, the interviews began with the respondents' idea of what engagement is and enquiries about the precursors to engaging employees like the role of management, culture, organizational policies and programs? Respondents were prompted to describe the barriers of employee engagement in SMEs. Further they were probed about the ways to remove these barriers which reflected the themes on antecedents. Each respondent was asked to describe the consequences of engaging employees in SMEs. The instrument for semi-structured interviews was pilot tested in October 2016 to assess the validity, language and relevance of the questions included in the instrument. Four respondents from SMEs were contacted to review the instrument. Comments were made to improve the clarity of the questions. The respondents who indicated a willingness to be a part of the study were contacted for time, venue and date for the interview. The preference of the respondent was taken into consideration for deciding the time, venue and date. The interviews were held either at the workplace or at a location as per the convenience of the respondent. The approximate time for the conduct of the interview was thirty minutes to one hour. At the very outset, the confidentiality of the responses was conveyed to the respondents. The value of the research was also emphasized at the outset of the interview.

The responses were transcribed verbatim for content analysis. Software Atlas ti. Version 8.0 was used to do the content analysis of the transcripts.

The transcribed data was subject to thematic analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The interview transcripts were studied and independently coded by the researcher and the project staff. The Coding took place line-by-line and was discussed several times to identify emerging concepts. The intra code reliability was arrived at by coding same segments of data at two different periods of time (Miles and Huberman, 1984). It helped in confirming that the coding was the same in both periods of time. These concepts were not preconceived or restricted and were identified as they emerged from the existing data. These concepts eventually led to categorization of themes.

Results and Discussion

Several factors were identified that facilitated the engagement at workplaces. The consequences of engagement were also reflected upon. The respondents also explained the way they manifest engagement at work. The findings demonstrate their engagement experience through data excerpts. The themes and sub themes have been discussed based on the strength of the relationship between the attributes coded in the themes and sub themes. On the lines of Bakar (2013), the study assessed the strength of a relationship based on three aspects (refer Table 1): (1) the number of employees who mentioned something about the concept. (2) the number of times the attributes have been mentioned (N), and (3) the quality of the discussion of the relationships.

Table 1: Strength of Discussion based on the number of employees

Sources (Number of Employees)	Strength
12-16	Extremely Strong
8-11	Strong
3-7	Moderate
Less than three	Weak

The study assessed the sub themes that relate to the themes and demonstrated evidence of the relative significance of the themes from the strongest theme to the weakest theme.

Antecedents of Employee Engagement

The following set of themes describe the antecedents to engaging employees at SMEs. Broadly, four themes have emerged which represent the precursors to engaging employees at SMEs (Table 2). The themes are named as the person, the culture, the management and the HR practices. The sub themes that form part of the theme 'the person' are the personal self, stress, person-job fit and personal circumstances. The sub themes that form part of the theme 'the culture' are helping relationships, informality and co-worker support. The sub themes that form part of the theme 'the management' are supervisor support, result orientation, trust and treatment. The sub themes that form part of the theme 'the HR practices' are 'recognition' and 'rewards'.

Table 2: Themes representing antecedents to Employee Engagement

Theme	Sub-Themes	N	Description
The Person	Personal self	43	-Personal feeling -personal willingness -perception
	Stress	10	-ability to handle stress -work burden -health
	Person-job fit	04	-Task of interest -Type of work
	Personal Circumstances	03	-Memories -Family
The Culture	Helping Relationships	37	-Help in need -superior-subordinate relationship -management support -employee as center
	Informality	15	-informal relationships -co-worker attitude
	Co-worker Support	07	-co-worker support
The Management	Supervisor Support	25	-Coaching -Communication
	Result Orientation	04	-performance orientation -Employee involvement
	Trust and treatment	05	-Treating the person as a whole
The HR Practices	Recognition	17	-word of mouth recognition -employee of the month
	Rewards	14	-salary -sharing profits

The person

The theme 'the person' has emerged as the major theme underlying the antecedents of engaging employees at SMEs. The interview excerpts indicate that respondents consider 'the person' to be at the center stage for determining engagement at work. This theme was discussed by all the respondents. Table 2 shows that this theme has been 60 times referenced in the interview transcripts. In essence, the personal self, the stress, the person-job fit, and the personal circumstances of the individuals determine their engagement at work.

All the respondents emphasized that engagement at work is determined by the individual. It is a personal feeling, so it cannot be commanded. Even if the organizations provide all the facilities, unless it comes from inside (the feeling of getting engaged), it will not happen. One respondent quoted, 'Give me any kind of environment, I engage myself at work because I want to.....not because Somebody else wants me to'.

Another respondent said, 'when I am stressed, I see how I can overcome it. That helps me to get engaged at work. Because the stress will not go unless I work to overcome it. And yes, it works.'

Some respondents explained the importance of fitness between their selves and the job they are doing at work. One respondent quoted, 'I feel happy to work when I am interested in it, when I like it. So, doing what you yourself like and are interested is important for engagement.' The personal circumstances also determine the level of employee engagement at work. The respondents (6 per cent) also narrated the importance of past experiences and family issues in influencing their level of engagement. With past experiences in mind, the employees choose to engage or less engage themselves at work. One respondent quoted, 'I requested for a financial loan to meet pressing financial needs. The organizations did not facilitate. Now, I do what is expected of me,.....not more than that.'

The Culture

The next major theme that has emerged from the interview transcripts is 'the culture' of the organization. This theme was also discussed by all the respondents. Table 2 shows that this theme has been 59 times referenced in the interview transcripts. Specifically, helping relationships, informality and co-worker support drive the employee engagement in SMEs. Amongst the three sub-themes, helping relationships has been quoted by all the respondents to be at the cornerstone of employee engagement.

Reflecting from their personal accounts, employees underlined the importance of a good team to feel engaged at workplace. For example, respondents quoted, 'I like to come to work here. First, I enjoy the work I do. And Second, I like my friends here...who are my co-workers. I enjoy with them. Work is like play because we crack jokes, laugh, party, eat and what not. Work gets done quickly. Any troubles are faced together.'

At the same time, animosity and hatred feelings at workplace drive employee engagement the other way. Like, one respondent said, 'I hate coming to work. The supervisor does not like me. He is not ready to extend any help, if I ask for it. I am new at this job. I feel alone.'

Another respondent illustrated evidence of this by stating, '[Organization] has an informal culture. Here everybody is responsible for everything. Due to this, nobody can do anything. That is why you will always see people here busy and doing one thing or the other. And this is not because it is written somewhere in the rule book. We like it'

The Management

The respondents considered 'the management' to be an integral wheel for driving engagement at work. The findings also indicated that management attitude (including those entrusted with management i.e. supervisors/managers) plays an integral role in building engagement at workplace. Majority of the respondents (81 per cent) explained the importance of management support for ensuring a work environment that is engaging and fulfilling for the employees. In line, one respondent quoted, 'I tell you...if the people managing us do not believe that we can perform then the message percolates down to every employee.....strikes deep within his heart.....and the employee starts meeting the expectations of non-performance.'

For some of the respondents the quality of relationship with their immediate supervisor was instrumental in feeling engaged at workplace. One respondent quoted, "When I work hard..... put in more than expected.....the supervisor's face tells me that I am appreciated. And that is enough to feel respected and appreciated. He is a hard task master but whoever does good.....he is a buddy to them. I like being pushed that way."

While emphasizing trust in the leadership, one respondent said, "if anything wrong happens, we collectively express our dissent. And Management is happy to solve it. That, reinforces our trust in the management."

The way the employees are treated at workplace also influences the phenomenon of engagement in SMEs. One respondent when referring to treatment they get stated that '[Employer] Sir treats me like I am an integral part of this organization. He shares the wins with us including profits. In good times we earn a lot.....then why not to share the bad times. We try to give our best and it is only because Sir is good to us. He doesn't treat us as inferior'.

Another respondent stated, "The attitude of the top management may make us feel like we do not belong here...always out of place. Always different....always at mercy. Then why should we commit ourselves fully.'

One more respondent said, " 'In this sector....., (referring to SMEs), everything depends on the top management, the way they treat us. If they treat us good, we feel committed. I have spent last twenty years in this organization. I am valued, recognized and respected. What else do we want. Salary is equal what I will get elsewhere. But I choose to stay here because I enjoy working here, I have good rapport with the owner. In previous organization, the owner was a dictator. He didn't listen to his employees. So we did what was expected of us.....nothing more. But, here we do more.....in fact,.....we choose to do more' .

The HR Practices

Another theme that has emerged from the interview transcripts relates to the HR Practices followed in the organization. Predominantly, the HR practices relate to the rewards and recognition for the efforts of the employees of the organizations. Table 2 shows that this theme has 31 coded references. 75 per cent respondents have quoted the rewards and recognition to be the precursors to engaging employees in SMEs.

For example, one respondent quoted, 'There are different policies for different people. They look at the face before awarding and rewarding. If they like it.....the person will be rewarded.....if they don't.....then no matter how hard that person works, he will not get much. We don't have options.....otherwise.....(silence). Then I also do only that much which is enough required to be done.' Another respondent quoted, 'Supervisor treats everyone in

the same manner. There are set rules for performance and rewards.....oh, yes for promotions too.....there are no complaints. Everyone, here, puts up his best." One respondent quoted, 'When I work hard.....put in more than expected.....the supervisor's face tells me that I am appreciated. And that is enough to feel respected and appreciated.'

Consequences of Employee Engagement

The following set of themes describes the consequences of engaging employees at SMEs. Broadly, four themes have emerged which represent the consequences of engaging employees at SMEs (Table 3). The themes are named as intention to quit, commitment, productivity and health.

Table 3: Themes representing Consequences of Employee Engagement

Theme	Sub-Themes	N	Description
Intention to Quit		20	-Work suffers -looking for job elsewhere -low morale -health
Commitment		18	-feeling of gratefulness -feeling of indebtedness -emotionally attach
Productivity	Results	4	-Mistakes -Reduced Efforts
	Cost	04	-delays -loss of time
Health		03	-happiness -miser

Intention to Quit

All respondents have emphasized on the development/inhibition of an intention to quit as a consequence of engaging employees at work. This theme has 20 coded references which show that it is a major outcome for engagement at work. One respondent quoted, "*Engagement helps sustain in an organization for long term.*" Another explained, 'I don't like it here. Although I do my job honestly, I am looking for another job elsewhere. Here, politics is too much.' One more respondent said, "No matter how hard I try, management is never happy. I exert so much that my health has started deteriorating. I wish I could get another job.'

The interview excerpts indicate that such an intention to quit is prevalent in the employees who consider themselves engaged (56 per cent) as well as those who do not consider themselves as engaged (44 per cent).

Commitment

Commitment is another major theme that has emerged from the interview excerpts. This theme has 18 coded references and it was quoted by 81 per cent of respondents. The respondents described this theme by expressing their feelings of gratefulness, indebtedness and being emotionally attached with the organization. For example, one of the respondents said, 'I needed a loan to meet pressing financial needs. The owner gave me, considering my service of 7 long years. I am now having even more confidence and commitment towards my organization. I owe it to this organization. I am grateful.' As quoted earlier one respondent said, 'In this sector....., (referring to SMEs), everything depends on the top management, the way they treat us. If they

treat us good, we feel committed. I have spent last twenty years in this organization. I am valued, recognized and respected. What else do we want. Salary is equal what I will get elsewhere. But I choose to stay here because I enjoy working here, I have good rapport with the owner. In previous organization, the owner was a dictator. He didn't listen to his employees. So we did what was expected of us.....nothing more. But, here we do more.....in fact,.....we choose to do more' .

Productivity

Productivity is another theme that has emerged from the qualitative study. It has two sub themes 'results' and 'cost' which together have 8 coded references. 18 per cent of respondents have quoted this theme in their interviews. The respondents indicated that engaging employees would help achieve the goals and will help reduce the cost to the organization by minimizing delays, reducing mistakes and delays. For example, one respondent quoted, 'In my organization, there is a practice of listening to employee opinions and using them to make changes at work. It makes us feel engaged and we are always looking for ways to improve things.' Another said, 'Engagement leads to work completion. Disengagement only shows that people work but they work for the sake of showing. They do it half-heartedly. They do not put their best. Work suffers.'

Health

Another theme related to the consequences of employee engagement that has emerged from the interviews is named as 'Health'. This theme has 03 coded references and has been quoted by 12 per cent of the respondents. The respondents indicated about physical as well as psychological health of the employee because of his/her engagement at work. For example, the respondent quoted, '*Engagement leads to happiness and Peace. Happy people make other happy and the circle goes on.....*' Another respondent said, "*Disengagement brings misery, helplessness, lack of dignity and respect.*'

Manifestation of Employee Engagement

When the respondents were asked of how they manifest engagement at work, all the employees indicated about one major theme that is 'job orientation'. Table 4 shows that this theme has 49 coded references and its sub themes are 'task orientation' and 'job involvement'.

Table 4: Themes representing Manifestation of Employee Engagement

Theme	Sub-Themes	N	Description
Job Orientation	Task Orientation	45	-complete the job in hand -doing job for a greater number of hours
	Job Involvement	04	-Learn something new -Apply Something new -Create Value

Job Orientation

The major theme regarding the manifestation of engagement at work relates to the job orientation of the employees. The task orientation of the employees has been quoted by all the respondents to be the manifestation of engagement at work. At SMEs, the employees' primary focus is on getting the job done. The respondents said that the job was important to be done. For example, one respondent said, 'I listen to customers. I gather their feedback and make suggestions

to the management for improvement in the processes or products. I just do my job. Most importantly, they listen.....and I feel valued.” Another respondent said engagement is, ‘Doing your job only’. One another quoted, ‘My job requires focus and I focus’.

Qualitative data indicate (Table 4) ‘job involvement’ to be another sub theme that manifests engagement at work. It has four coded references and has been quoted by 12 per cent of the respondents. The theme of ‘job involvement’ indicates respondents’ propensity to learn new things, apply something new and create value for the organization. Table 4 shows that this theme has 04 coded references and has been quoted by 12 per cent of the respondents. For example, one respondent said, ‘My way of showing engagement is when I am learning new things.’

The findings of this study are likely to have implications for practitioners. This study may facilitate practitioners to understand why employees of SMEs are more engaged or less engaged. First, considering the pivotal role played by ‘the person’ in determining engagement at SMEs, the practitioners need to be aware that ‘one program fits for all’ approach may not work at SMEs. The management needs to give attention to the person. Hence, a customized and contingent approach, which focuses on employees’ needs, to engaging employees may be required in SMEs.

Second, the study implies that the practitioners may employ selective staffing, training and retention strategies to examine the person first (with a view to judge whether the candidate is fit with being engaged or not, considering all other factors constant). For example, selective selection of already high spirited candidates may help boost engagement of employees at SMEs. Hence, the HR team and the top management must investigate relevant techniques for selecting and attracting the right candidates for the jobs within the organization. Also, considering whether the person is fit with the job or not, may forewarn the HR team and the management about subsequent high or low engagement at work.

Conclusion

The study advances the literature on employee engagement by facilitating an understanding of the phenomenon in a completely different light, that is, by using qualitative research design and examining the various antecedents and consequences. This study advances the previous research on the phenomenon of employee engagement that has primarily focused on the quantitative method of analysis. The study is unique in a way that it incorporates interpretive methods that pay serious attention to the subjective ways in which employees experience organizations. Employees’ interpretation of engagement experience at work has given rich forms of data that is not only relevant for the study of employee engagement but also focused on the unique experiences of employees of SMEs. Analysis of the interviews detailed the antecedents as the person, the culture, the management and the HR practices; the consequences as intention to quit, commitment and health; and the manifestation in the form of job orientation. The analysis enabled a rich understanding of the phenomenon of employee engagement at SMEs.

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