



ISSN Print: 2664-8792
ISSN Online: 2664-8806
Impact Factor: RJIF 8
IJRM 2023; 5(1): 135-141
www.managementpaper.net
Received: 18-02-2023
Accepted: 20-03-2023

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International Journal of Research in Management

Job embeddedness and work engagement among employees of state-owned universities in north-central Nigeria

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648792.2023.v5.i1b.81>

Abstract

In this competitive environment, it is indispensable for organizations to develop strategies to improve the competency of employees and keep them aligned with organizational objectives. This study explores the effect of job embeddedness on work engagement among employees of state-owned universities in North-Central Nigeria. The study adopted a random sampling technique to collect data from a sample of 365 staff of state-owned universities in North-Central, Nigeria determined from a population of 4,076, including 1,825 (academic staff) and 2,251 (senior administrative staff). The researcher conducted a pilot study to ascertain the validity and reliability of the research instrument. Data collected through self-administered questionnaire were analyzed using Mean, Standard Deviation, Correlation, and Regression Analyses with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 23) software. Results of the hypotheses tested indicated that job embeddedness constructs (links, fit, and sacrifice) have a positive and significant effect on work engagement in public universities in North-Central Nigeria. The study concludes that job embeddedness helps academic institutions to retain talented and skilled employees. It recommended amongst others that the management of public universities should always facilitate meaningful contributions from young staff and provide opportunities for their social interactions and personal development to help reduce employee turnover.

Keywords: Job embeddedness, work engagement, public universities

1. Introduction

In today's contemporary work environment, developing and retaining core competencies is one of the significant strategies for increasing the performance of employees. Human resource practices in organizations in the competitive work environment must be transformed into a genuinely sustainable domain in which employee engagement, commitment, and loyalty can be addressed to sustain individual and organizational performance standards (Verona, Simonič & Vlasova, 2017) ^[51]. Organizations continuously search for new ways to retain best talents to circumvent employee turnover that often results in a wide array of substantial costs, such as recruitment costs to find a replacement, productivity costs due to the vacated position, and training costs needed to train new employees (Zhang, Lam, Dong & Zhu, 2021) ^[57]. Consequently, one of the top priorities of management of organizations today is to understand the appropriate measures that should be put in place to keep employees engaged (Khan, Aziz, Afsar & Latif, 2018) ^[24].

Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski, and Erez (2001) ^[32] developed a theory of job embeddedness to explain why people stay on the job. Job embeddedness (JE) focuses on retention or why people remain at their present position, suggesting that situational aspects of a person's life-space influence that person's decision to stay in a job. Job embeddedness is the combined driving motivators that keep employees from leaving (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001) ^[31]. Job embeddedness describes the factors that keep an individual from going, regardless of experiencing situations that might lead to thoughts of leaving (Takawira, Coetzee & Schreuder, 2014) ^[48].

Accordingly, instead of looking for reasons why employees leave, organizations have shifted their focus to why employees would stay rather than leave. Mitchell *et al.*, (2001) ^[31] assert

that an individual's decision to leave an organization is not made in isolation but is shaped by the environment (both work and non-work-related) in which the individual is 'embedded.' The theory of job embeddedness is considered a relatively new perspective, focusing on factors that encourage an employee to remain with an organization (Khan, Aziz, Afsar & Latif, 2018) [24]. The theory emphasizes on key factors that explain why employees are willing to stay (Allen, Peltokorpi & Rubenstein, 2016) [5]. These factors (link, fit, and sacrifice) affect employee retention and performance.

Khan, Aziz, Afsar, and Latif (2018) [24], and Mitchell *et al.*, (2001) [31] divided job embeddedness into three constructs (links sacrifice, and fit). Links are the formal or informal connections between a person and institutions or other people. Sacrifice entails the psychological and material gains that employees will lose at any given time if they choose to leave an organization, and fit refers to an employee's perceived compatibility or comfort with an organization and with their environment (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001) [31]. Job embeddedness is therefore measured in this study using three constructs; links, fit, and sacrifice.

Higher education plays a critical role in the creation of knowledge for the cultivation of future talent and the socio-economic development of both developed and developing countries. Recognizing the forces that keep employees in their current employment is critical in attracting and retaining qualified team in higher educational institutions (Lawler & Finegold, 2000; Michaels, Handfield-Jones & Axelrod, 2001) [27, 30]. Retention of qualified team promotes better decision-making capabilities, enhances the quality of curriculum programmes based on best practices, improves academic services, and reduced turnover costs (Kidwell, Vander Linde & Johnson, 2000) [25]. In Nigerian universities, retention of talented staff is vital to enhance their capacity in response to the changing dynamics of research (Coetzer, Inma, Poisat, Redmond & Standing, 2018) [9].

In Nigeria, however, higher educational institutions have become vulnerable to losing their highly qualified knowledge workers to well-paid offers from other organizations (Ngobeni & Bezuidenhout, 2011) [36]. Previous works conducted on job embeddedness in several industries including, healthcare, retail, banking, and sports in other countries such as China, Pakistan, India, and the United Kingdom, sought to determine whether job embeddedness can predict employee retention and work engagement (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001; Holtom & O'Neill, 2004; Ramesh & Gelfand, 2010) [31, 20, 39]. Limited studies have been conducted concerning the role of job embeddedness in academic institutions (Dechawatanapaisal, 2018) [10]. The present study seeks to contribute to literature by investigating the effect of job embeddedness constructs on work engagement among employees of state-owned universities in North-Central Nigeria.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of job embeddedness on work engagement among employees of state-owned universities in North-Central Nigeria. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Ascertain the effect of job embeddedness (Links) on work engagement among employees of state-owned universities in North-Central Nigeria.

2. Determine the effect of job embeddedness (Fit) on work engagement among employees of state-owned universities in North-Central Nigeria
3. Examine the effect of job embeddedness (Sacrifice) on work engagement among employees of state-owned universities in North-Central Nigeria

2. Literature Review

2.1 Job Embeddedness (JE)

Job embeddedness is a concept that expounds how well a person is socially enmeshed within their organization. It reveals the employees' decisions to participate broadly and directly in the functioning of the organization, hence it is regarded as a retention construct (Cho & Son, 2012) [8]. Job embeddedness consists of a collection of psychological, social, and financial factors that impact employee retention and engagement in organizations (Yao, Lee, Mitchell, Burton, & Sablinski, 2004) [54]. Job embeddedness is conceptualized as influencing the decision to remain through the level of links a person has to other people or activities, to the extent the person's job and community are congruent with the different aspects of their life, and the sacrifices a person would make in the process of leaving their employment. Job embeddedness thus, involves on-the-job and off-the-job factors associated with individual links, fit and sacrifice. Available literatures suggest that job embeddedness can be increased through a series of organizational measures, such as instituting a mentorship system or increasing the number of work teams an individual participates in (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001) [31]. Since embeddedness is directly related to actual turnover, implementing measures that increase embeddedness will reduce turnover.

2.2 Dimensions of Job Embeddedness

The three component dimensions of Job embeddedness include links, fit, and sacrifice (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001) [31]. Job embeddedness explains why employees remain in an organization based on several influences rather than solely on positive job attitudes. JE suggests that people stay in organizations based on three criteria which are influenced by elements both on the job and in the community: (1) the extent to which they are linked to other people and activities, (2) the extent to which they feel they fit in their organizations and communities, and (3) what would have to sacrifice if they left (Hussain & Deery, 2018; Reitz, 2014) [22, 40].

Links refer to the formal or informal connections between the organization and the individual (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001) [31]. Links become more critical when an employee is connected more to the organization, others, and the job (Hussain & Deery, 2018) [22], and employees with a more significant number and intensity of connections are less likely to make a turnover decision that may break or rearrange the links (Reitz, 2014) [40].

Fit entails an employee's perceived compatibility with the organization and surrounding environment (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001) [31]. The fit appears when an employee's values, goals, and plans match the firm's culture and the job, and increasing the possibility that the employee remains in the organization (Lee, Mitchell, Sablinski, Burton, & Holtom, 2004) [28]. Moreover, one may feel satisfied and committed to the job and exerts a positive impact on organizational development. Overall, the fit will likely develop into

organizational attachment (Nafei, 2014) [33]. Reasonable person–organization fit occurs when an employee's values, career aspirations, knowledge, skills, and ability are compatible with the organizational culture and with the requirements of their job. JE theory postulates that the better the fit with the organization and the surrounding community, the stronger the ties to the organization (Lee *et al.*, 2004; Mitchell *et al.*, 2001) [28, 31].

Sacrifice refers to an opportunity cost of material or psychological benefits that may be forfeited by leaving the organization (Lee *et al.*, 2004; Mitchell *et al.*, 2001) [28, 31]. Opportunity cost in sacrifice includes transparent costs that the employee must bear when changing jobs, such as loss of wages, promotion opportunities, relationships with colleagues, and job-related reputation. Sacrifice is the perceived cost of material or psychological benefits that may be forfeited by leaving one's job (Thakur & Bhatnagar, 2017) [49]. Leaving an organization likely promises personal losses (Smitha, Rohini, Kirupa & Sivakumar, 2017) [47].

2.3 Work Engagement

The concept of work engagement entails a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002) [44]. They explain it as a constant and affective cognitive state that does not focus on an object, occasion, or the behavior of an individual. Work engagement also refers to a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by three dimensions namely, vigor, dedication, and absorption (Alessandri, Borgogni, Schaufeli, Caprara & Consiglio, 2015) [4]. Vigor refers to a high level of work-related energy, psychological flexibility, and the will and ability to achieve the assigned work; dedication is characterized by the importance, enthusiasm, pride, purpose, and challenge of achieving an organization's goals (Harris, Wheeler & Kacmar, 2011) [17].

Higher work engagement in employees leads to an accurate recognition of their work by the employees, as well as proactive and passionate participation in their work. Also, they set ambitious goals aside from their current position and have forward-looking attitudes that propel them forward. Work engagement plays a crucial role in emphasizing the needs of the employees and providing a quality work environment; affinity and passion towards one's work can lead to contributions towards corporate performance. Similarly, work engagement has been increasingly used as an indicator of return on investment in human capital by the organizations (Alessandri *et al.*, 2015) [4].

2.4 Relationship between Job Embeddedness and Work Engagement

Organizational settings create conditions that foster and support engagement and resilience and protect individual resources (Hobfoll, 2011) [19]. Job embeddedness helps individuals to attain their values, aspirations, skills, knowledge, and personalities and organization's culture, values, and demands (Kooij, Tims & Akkermans, 2017) [26]. Employees high on job embeddedness feel that their values, skills, and career aspirations are compatible with the organization's culture and job demands. Hence, these employees are more likely to trust their supervisors to perform job tasks and decision-making (Harris, Wheeler & Kacmar, 2011) [17].

Saks (2006) suggests that work engagement is associated with an individual's attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. Therefore, engaged employees are likely to be more attached to their organization and have a lower propensity to leave it (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) [42]. This view is supported by several researchers who found that work engagement is negatively related to turnover intention (Du Plooy & Roodt, 2010; Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002) [11, 18]. Work engagement have positive results relating to job satisfaction, a motivated workforce, employee well-being and less likelihood of leaving an organisation (Barkhuizen & Rothmann, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Van den Berg, Bakker & Ten Cate, 2013; Yeh, 2013) [6, 42, 50, 55]. The above studies have demonstrated that there is a positive relationship between job embeddedness and the work engagement of employees.

Based on the above literature, the study hypothesized that:

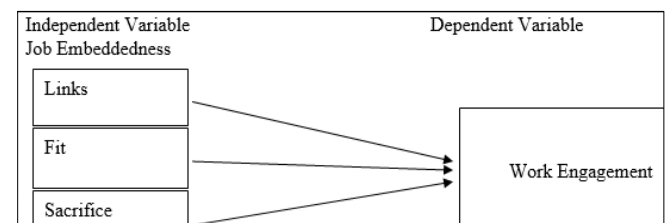
H01: Job embeddedness (Links) has no significant effect on work engagement among employees of state-owned universities in North-Central Nigeria

H02: Job embeddedness (Fit) has no significant effect on work engagement among employees of state-owned universities in North-Central Nigeria

H03: Job embeddedness (Sacrifice) has no significant effect on work engagement among employees of state-owned universities in North-Central Nigeria

Conceptual Model

The proposed conceptual model is presented in Figure 1. The diagram below shows that the independent variable (Job Embeddedness) has three constructs: fit, links, and sacrifice, and a dependent variable (Work Engagement). The model shows the connection between the variables; job embeddedness and work engagement.



Source: Researchers' Design (2022)

Fig 1: Proposed Conceptual Model

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a survey research design. The study used a survey design because it is best suited to ascertain the extent of the relationship that exists between the independent variable (job embeddedness) and dependent variable (work engagement).

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The study population includes 4,076 academic and senior administrative staff of six (6) public state universities in North-Central Nigeria. The population consists of 1,825 (academic staff) and 2,251 (senior administrative staff) from the six state universities. A sample of 365 respondents was drawn from the population using Taro Yamane's formula. The random sampling technique was used in selecting staff who participated in the survey. The staff distribution of the population is presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Staff Population of Public State Universities in North-Central Nigeria

S/N	Universities	Academic Staff	Senior Admin Staff	Total
1	Benue State University, Makurdi	620	832	1452
2	IBB University, Lapai	300	267	567
3	Kogi State University, Anyangba	320	417	737
4	Kwara State University, Molete	120	135	255
5	Nasarawa State University, Keffi	300	400	365
6	Plateau State University, Bokos	165	200	365
	Total	1,825	2,251	4,076

Source: Registry Department of the Universities (2021).

3.3 Reliability of the Instrument

Reliability of the instrument was conducted using test-retest method. A pilot study was conducted on 50 employees of two selected universities in North Central Nigeria. The questionnaire was administered to the participants on two separate occasions at an interval of 2 weeks. The Cronbach alpha coefficient was used to assess the internal consistency reliability of each of measuring instrument. The results show that the reliability of the factors, as measured by Cronbach’s alpha, are all above 0.70, which confirms the internal consistency of the items in a variable.

Table 2: Reliability Test Result

Variable	Cronbach’s Alpha	Number of Items
Links	0.926	6
Fit	0.904	6
Sacrifice	0.918	6
Work Engagement	0.910	17

Source: Authors’ Computation from SPSS Output, 2022.

3.4 Measurement Instruments

Job Embeddedness Scale (JES)

The JES is a self-report instrument that includes three scales, namely links, fit, and sacrifice. The job embeddedness instrument was composed of 18 items based on the adopted aspects from the research (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001) [31]. The response scale was scored on a five-point Likert scale varying between degrees of intensity, for example, from 1 ‘strongly disagree’ to 5 ‘strongly agree.’ A higher response aggregate indicates higher levels of job embeddedness.

Work Engagement Scale (WES)

The WES measures three integral aspects of work engagement. The WES is a self-report instrument that includes three scales, namely vigor, dedication, and absorption. The response scale was scored on a seven-point Likert scale varying between poles of intensity, for example, from 0 ‘never’ to 6 ‘always’ The instrument of job engagement contained 17 items of statement items based on the adopted aspects from the research (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003) [43].

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

The statistical analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 23. Descriptive, correlational, and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. Pearson’s product-moment correlations were performed to test the relationship between the variables. The relationship between the variables was further analyzed by performing multiple regression analyses to explore the proportion of variance in the dependent variable (work engagement) explained by the independent

variables (job embeddedness dimensions). Formulated hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

4. Results

The data collected from the participants were presented and analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics Analysis

Variable	Mean	Standard Dev.	Skewness	Kurtosis
Links	4.29	.781	1.697	2.879
Fit	4.30	.726	1.935	3.117
Sacrifice	4.27	.831	1.842	3.648
Work Engagement	4.64	.904	1.726	4.129

Source: Authors’ Computation from SPSS Output, 2022

Table 4 provides the means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis for the job embeddedness and work engagement variables. Table 4 shows that JES Fit to the organization obtained the highest mean score (M = 4.30; SD = 0.726), followed by links to the organization (M = 4.29; SD = 0.781), while the lowest mean score was obtained on the sacrifice to the organization sub-scale (M = 4.27; SD = 0.831). The skewness and kurtosis values for the JES ranged between 1.697 and 1.935 for skewness and 2.879 and 3.648 for kurtosis, thereby not falling within the -1 and +1 normality range recommended for these coefficients. The mean and standard deviation scores for work engagement were high (M = 4.64; SD = 0.904). The skewness and kurtosis values for work engagement were 1.726 and 4.129, respectively.

Table 5: Correlations Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4
Links (1)	1			
Fit (2)	.724**	1		
Sacrifice (3)	.791**	.669**	1	
Work Engagement (4)	.649**	.782**	.685**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source: Authors’ Computation from SPSS Output, 2022.

As illustrated in Table 5, links, fit, and sacrifice to organization correlated significantly and positively with work engagement. Links was significantly correlated with work engagement (r = 0.649; p < 0.000). Fit had a significant and robust correlation with work engagement (r = 0.782; p < 0.000). Finally, sacrifice had a substantial association with work engagement (r = 0.685; p < 0.000).

Table 6: Regression Model

Variable	Standardized Coefficients		Collinearity		Statistics
	Beta	T	Sig.	Tolerance	
Links	.419	5.281	.000	.727	1.375
Fit	.536	7.755	.006	.913	1.095
Sacrifice	.544	9.635	.000	.783	1.278
R		.979			
R Square		.958			
Adjusted R Square		.930			
Durbin-Watson		1.648			
ANOVA F Statistic		270.322			
Sig.		.000			

Predictors: (Constant), Sacrifice, fit, links

Dependent Variable: Work engagement

Source: Authors’ Computation from SPSS Output, 2022.

The regression model was tested using multicollinearity; variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and Tolerance (TOL). The VIF for all the parameters was found to be less than 4, suggesting that there was multicollinearity problem, and thus, the difference contributed by each independent variable was significant. All the variables explained a 95.8% variation in work engagement. It illustrates that the independent variables significantly predicted the dependent variable ($R^2 = 0.958$). Also, the coefficient of determination was significant as evidenced by an F ratio of 270.322 with a p-value of $0.000 < 0.05$. It was supported by a change of R of 97.9% ($R = .979$), indicating that there is a significant relationship between job embeddedness dimensions (links, fit, and sacrifice) and work engagement.

4.1 Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis one states that job embeddedness (Links) has no significant effect on work engagement among employees of state-owned Universities in North-Central Nigeria. The result presented in Table 6 revealed that links have a positive and significant effect on the work engagement of employees with a beta value of (β) = 0.419; $T = 5.281$; p -value = 0.000, which is less than $p = 0.05$. Therefore, the study rejects the null hypothesis (H_{01}).

The second hypothesis states that job embeddedness (Fit) has no significant effect on work engagement among employees of state-owned Universities in North-Central Nigeria. The result indicated that the fit has a positive and significant effect on the work engagement of employees with a beta value of (β) = 0.536; $T = 7.775$; p -value = 0.006, which is less than $p = 0.05$. The null hypothesis (H_{02}) was therefore rejected.

The test of hypothesis three (H_{03}) is indicated that sacrifice has a positive and significant effect on work engagement with a beta value of (β) = 0.544; $T = 9.635$; p -value = 0.000, which is less than $p = 0.05$. The null hypothesis which states that job embeddedness (Sacrifice) has no significant effect on work engagement among employees of state-owned Universities in North-Central Nigeria was thus rejected.

4.2 Findings

Results of the study demonstrated the extent to which job embeddedness dimensions have positively and significantly affected the work engagement of employees in state-owned universities in North-Central Nigeria. The study indicated a positive and significant effect of job embeddedness links on work engagement. The result is in agreement with the works of Lee *et al.*, (2004) ^[28] and Mitchell *et al.*, (2001) ^[31], who established a significant relationship between links and work engagement and the performance of employees. Reitz (2014) ^[26] also reported that employees with a more significant and intensity of connections are less likely to make a turnover decision that may break or rearrange the links. The findings of the study further revealed that job embeddedness fit has a positive and significant effect on work engagement. The work of Lee *et al.*, (2004) ^[28] found a substantial relationship between the fit of employees in the job and their work engagement. In line with the result, Lee *et al.*, (2004) ^[28] emphasized the importance of employee sacrifice in enhancing job performance and work engagement. This is supported by Smitha, Rohini, Kirupa, and Sivakumar (2017) ^[47], who averred that sacrifice discourages employees from leaving the organization.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study explored the effect of job embeddedness on the work engagement of employees in public universities. The findings of the study provide evidence of the relationship between job embeddedness and work engagement, and demonstrate the predictive value of the job embeddedness constructs (links, fit and sacrifice). The study concludes that job embeddedness is essential for public universities; it enhances work engagement thereby discouraging employee turnover. The study recommends that public universities need to facilitate meaningful contributions from young staff and provide opportunities for social interactions and personal development. Management of public universities should ensure opportunity enhancement of employees by providing them with resources and enabling them to cooperate as a team. The findings of this study demonstrate different practical implications for contemporary organizations and managers that wish to develop effective retention strategies. The study mainly, indicates that organizations should embrace organizational links, fit and sacrifice constructs in their nurturing plans to embed young staff in their academic institutions.

6. Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study have shown limitations in the research design, methodology, and model development of the study. This study used the sample from comparatively large and particularly public sector universities, however, future research might include the selection from different organizations in the services sector to check the generalizability of the findings of this study. Future research could investigate on job embeddedness and work engagement through qualitative research to draw more rich and varied information and opinion. Also, future studies should be carried out to identify other aspects and moderating factors that affect the relationship between the variables.

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