The Impact of Socio–Demographic Factors on Employee Engagement at Multinational Companies in Thailand

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Received February 16, 2021; **Revised** March 23, 2021; **Accepted** May 10, 2021

Abstract

Thailand is an increasingly high–profile global market, with growing employment by multinational corporations (MNCs), which participate in many economic areas. For these firms, employee engagement is a key success factor in the firm's performance. Employee, engagement contributes to individual performance outcomes and firm outcomes such a profitability, productivity and efficiency. However, there are some gaps in the literature on the factors that contribute to employee engagement in Thai MNCs. For example, it is poorly understood how employee demographics influence employee engagement. It is also unclear how employees of domestic subsidiaries of MNCs respond to the MNC organizational environment and culture. This Article aimed to study (1) the impact of socio–demographic factors on the part company, and (2) to investigate socio–demographic factors part individual on employee engagement at the Thailand–based divisions of multinational corporations (MNCs). The sample was MNC employees in Thailand. There were 400 MNC employees completed an anonymous survey which asked about their socio– demographic categories and engagement levels. Quantitative method was conducted to determine whether engagement varies with age, education level, marital status, years of working with the company, job position, industry, and the countries where their companies are headquartered. They were selected by convenience sampling technique. The instrument for collecting data was a questionnaire. Analysis data by Descriptive statistics and Chi–square Analysis.

The research results were found as follows: (1) Employee engagement levels varied based on the company's country of origin but not by industry; and (2) Of the five hypotheses that predicted

personal socio–demographic effects on engagement, three were confirmed and two were rejected. These three factors are age, education level and years of working for the company.

The results can be implied that socio– demographic factors may be used to identify the employees who are most likely to become disengaged from their work and develop strategies to reduce this trend. Second, employee retention programs should be prioritized, given the positive relationship between years of service and engagement.

Keywords: Employee Engagement; socio–demographic; multinational companies

Introduction

This research is concerned with the problem of employee engagement in MNCs in Thailand. Evidence has been accumulating for employee engagement as an important contributor to the performance of multinational corporations (MNCs). Two large–scale studies have found that various performance outcomes, including profitability, productivity, and customer satisfaction, rise in conjunction with employee engagement (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002; Sorenson, 2013) . Employee engagement also contributes to better employee productivity, reduced turnover and absenteeism, and increased employee loyalty, as well as positive word of mouth and referrals to new employees and customers (Antony, 2018).

Although engagement is critical to the success of MNCs, only one in four employees worldwide describe themselves as engaged, and a substantial minority say they are actively disengaged (Oehler & Adair, 2018). In another, more recent study, one global survey of 80 million people in 160 countries found that only 41% of employees are engaged, with the remainder either disengaged (38%) or actively disengaged (21%) (Peakon, 2020). Although rates vary by industry, there is also some demographic variance in gender and generation, with men and older employees reporting higher engagement. Thus, there is a significant gap in employee engagement for MNCs, which could result from the working conditions within MNCs. This may be particularly true for MNC employees in developing countries, given that many MNCs may use ethnocentric staffing practices, limit operations in developing countries, and impose other limits on the work and career prospects of employees in these countries (Maiorescu & Wrigley, 2016).

The problem of this research is how employee engagement forms in the context of domestic subsidiaries of MNCs. Employee engagement is challenging to manage in MNCs compared to domestic firms because as a concept, it is not consistent between cultures (Kelliher et al., 2014).

These differences between the work and long– term career prospects of employees in countries like Thailand compared to MNC home countries could exacerbate gaps in employee engagement. Thus, MNCs need to be aware that their international employees may show different engagement motivations and behaviours than those in their home offices.

The problem of limited research into employee engagement in Thailand is not just a problem of demographic studies – instead, there have been few studies overall that have addressed it, especially from the MNC perspective. Studies have addressed, for example, the effect of talent management practices in domestic firms (Piansoongnern, Anurit & Kuiyawatttananonta, 2011) and the effect of individual leadership practices (Valentine, 2020). To date, however, there has not been much investigation of how the organizational climate and individual characteristics interact to create Thailand's particularly low level of employee engagement.

Given that there has been limited research into employee engagement in Thailand, despite the low levels of employee engagement observed (Oehler & Adair, 2018), this is a significant research gap. This research considers the problem from both an organizational perspective and from an individual perspective, following both threads of the research above. In addition to addressing this research gap, the study provides practical insights that may be useful for identifying the employees at the highest risk for disengagement and developing strategies to increase their engagement.

There were two objectives of this research which were established in response to this research gap. The first objective was to identify company factors in employee engagement for employees of Thai MNCs. The second objective was to investigate how individual demographic factors influenced employee engagement for employees of Thai MNCs.

The research questions of the study include: 1) How does the characteristics of the MNC influence employee engagement in the Thai offices of MNCs? And 2) How do employee sociodemographic characteristics influence employee engagement in the Thai offices of MNCs?

Literature Review

The literature review focused on employee engagement and the sociodemographic factors that influence it. These are the key questions of the research, and the main areas where research gaps are identified for Thai employees.

Employee Engagement

Various definitions of engagement that have been proposed over the years share some common features, such as employees' intellectual and emotional commitment to their workplaces, the degree to which they become involved with their work, and the effort and passion they put into it as a result (Kular et al., 2008). Some definitions also include additional factors, such as satisfaction and enthusiasm (Harter and Schmidt, 2006). This lack of definitional clarity makes it difficult to identify a single construct which employee engagement represents, creating a lot of ambiguity and uncertainty in using the construct of engagement (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Despite this lack of definitional clarity, authors have proceeded to define the concept as a single construct, emphasizing primarily organizational engagement and work involvement (Kular, et al., 2008). While this research is not designed to define or refine the concept of employee engagement, it should be recalled that the construct is only weakly defined.

Many variables may contribute to engagement, including perceptions of work as meaningful, career development opportunities, employee empowerment, corporate image (Kular et al, 2008), inspiring visionary leadership (Holcombe and Buehler, 2018), and organisational communication (Jaupi & Llaci, 2015). These variables mainly result from organizational policies and practices, including talent management practices such as hiring, performance evaluation, reward and promotion (Piansoongnern et al., 2008), leadership practices (Valentine, 2020) and the extent to which employees are included in the organisation's structure, policies and practices (Maiorescu & Wrigley, 2016). Simply, employees are typically engaged in their work when the organisation's structure and practices enable and encourage engagement, motivating employees to perform and allowing them to have control, autonomy and enjoyment in their work.

Although employee engagement is influenced by organizational culture, there is also evidence that socio–demographic factors also play a role in the likelihood of being engaged at work. Thus, these factors are also considered.

Socio–demographic Factors

Socio–demographic factors are characteristics that identify people as belonging to particular subpopulations, such as age, gender, race or ethnicity, religious affiliation, marital status, education level, income, and employment variables (position, duration of service, industry, etc.). Socio–demographic data are often collected to provide descriptive statistics for samples and to determine whether sampling error has occurred based on the relative representation of each group (Gesis Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, 2019). However, many researchers also collect socio–demographic data to determine whether there are differences among subpopulations for a particular outcome variable, such as engagement.

Impact of Socio–demographic Variables on Employee Engagement

Although no studies were identified that examined company country of origin effects on engagement, research has shown that employee engagement and its antecedents differ from one country to the next (BlessingWhite, 2011; Kular et al., 2008; Oehler & Adair, 2018), so cultural differences may play a role. Research has also shown that corporate image can contribute to engagement (Kular et al., 2008; Piyachat, Chanongkorn & Panisa, 2014), and that image may arise at least in part from the nation where a company was established (Dowling, 2000). Another concern for sociodemographic factors like country of origin that is specific to the MNC is that MNCs are often managed using ethnocentric policies, which offer advantages to home country nationals at the expense of others (Majorescu & Wrigley, 2016). For example, home country nationals may have preference for promotion, international postings, or other career advancement prospects, or may have better work–life balance and benefit programs compared to host–country workers. Thus, despite the overall lack of evidence on country of origin effects, it is possible that the dual structure of MNCs, especially those that pursue ethnocentric rather than geocentric staffing strategies, could significantly reduce employee engagement in host countries like Thailand.

There is also evidence for industry effects, as engagement is typically higher in nonprofit industries than their for–profit counterparts (Kular et al., 2008). Moreover, according to the findings of a recent global survey, it tends to be highest in the professional services, healthcare, finance, and hospitality industries and lower in the education–related industries (Holcombe and Buehler, 2018). However, these studies have investigated only a limited number of countries, which means that they cannot necessarily be applied to other countries like Thailand.

Studies have also been conducted to examine the effects of personal socio-demographic variables such as age on engagement. Jaupi & Llaci (2015) found that engagement ratings among bank workers rose steadily with age and were highest among older workers (aged 50-59). This finding accords with other studies that have found age effects on engagement (BlessingWhite, 2011; Richman et al., 2008; Simpson, 2009), though one study found decreasing engagement after age 41 (Zeng et al., 2009), and another found that engagement was highest among employees within the 18-25 and 42-and-over age groups (Rigg et al., 2014). On the other hand, a recent survey found that engagement levels remained relatively stable over time (Holcombe and Buehler, 2018). Therefore, it is not clear that demographic factors influence workers from different generations differently, or if employee engagement changes over the course of the workers' employment lifecycle. These varying results may be attributable to different measures used to assess engagement and the focus on varying industries and cultural environments. Given the lack of clear definition for employee engagement (Macey & Schneider, 2008), it is likely that differences in measurement and conceptualization of employee engagement are actually highly relevant to these variances in findings.

There is also evidence that education level contributes to engagement, with researchers typically finding an inverse relationship (Jaupi & Llaci, 2015; Simpson, 2009; Zeng et al., 2009). For example, Jaupi & Llaci (2015) found that for bank workers, engagement ratings peaked at the bachelor's degree level and declined with higher levels of education, and a similar trend was found in the hotel industry, with engagement levels decreasing among those with postgraduate degrees (Zeng et al., 2009). It is not clear why higher educational levels lead to lower employee engagement, although it may relate to relative intellectual engagement with the work itself, the higher likelihood of highly educated people being underemployed, or differences in individual disposition.

There is much less evidence for marital status or other demographic factors. Some research has also shown that married employees tend to be more engaged than their single counterparts (Kular et al., 2008; Richman et al., 2008), though other studies have found no effects for marital status (Rigg et al., 2014; Zeng et al., 2009). Thus, this is one of the areas with little consistency.

There is evidence that position within the organisation can contribute to engagement as well. Jaupi & Llaci (2015) found that low and middle-level bank managers and senior leaders were slightly more engaged than specialists, and Zeng et al. (2009) found that engagement varied in

conjunction with work position. Further evidence comes from additional studies showing that senior executives are typically more engaged than those at the bottom of the hierarchy (BlessingWhite; Kular et al., 2008). It is not entirely surprising that managers, with more authority and autonomy as well as better compensation and more varied work, would be more engaged than frontline workers who do not enjoy these advantages.

The evidence is also not very clear regarding years of experience. Kular et al. (2008), who conducted a comprehensive review of the literature, found evidence for declining engagement over time, which suggests that employees may lose their enthusiasm for their work. On the other hand, Jaupi & Llaci (2015), who examined the factors that contribute to employee engagement in the banking industry, found that engagement increased with years of experience, and that both general experience in the field and years of experience with a particular organisation influenced engagement levels. A similar trend was seen in a global workforce study (BlessingWhite, 2011), whereas a hospitality industry study found that engagement levels rose, fell, and then rose again over the duration of service (Zeng et al., 2009) and another study found no effect for years of service (Rigg et al., 2014). However, yet another multi–industry study found that engagement was highest among those who had been employed for less than a year, declined to its lowest point among those with 3–5 years of experience, and rose again to the point where those with more than 10 years of experience had engagement ratings nearly as high as the newest employees (Holcombe & Buehler, 2018).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual model for this research (see Figure 4) proposes two sets of socio–demographic factors as independent variables that affect employee engagement. The first set, company factors, include the nation where a company is headquartered and the industry in which it operates. The places where companies originate shape their images (Dowling, 2000) and corporate image has been shown to influence engagement in Thailand (Piyachat et al., 2014) and elsewhere (Kular et al., 2008). Moreover, researchers have found national differences in employee engagement (Oehler & Adair, 2018; BlessingWhite, 2011; Kular et al., 2008) as well as variations in engagement by industry (Holcombe & Buehler, 2018; Kular et al., 2008). Therefore, it was expected that both factors would correlate with engagement.

H1: Employee engagement is influenced by company factors.

H1a: Employee engagement is influenced by the head country.

H1b: Employee engagement is influenced by industry.

The second hypothesis predicted relationships among individual socio–demographic factors and employee engagement, given the evidence for socio–demographic effects on engagement provided by other studies (BlessingWhite, 2011; Holcombe & Buehler, 2018; Jaupi & Llaci, 2015; Kular et al., 2008; Richman et al., 2008; Rigg et al., 2014; Simpson, 2009; Zeng et al., 2009). Gender was not included as a variable because many prior studies have shown no gender differences in employee engagement (Holcombe & Buehler, 2018; Jaupi & Llaci, 2015; Rigg et al., 2014; Zeng et al., 2009).

H2: Employee engagement varies based on individual demographic factors.

H2a: Employee engagement varies based on age.

H2b: Employee engagement varies based on education level.

H2c: Employee engagement varies based on marital status.

H2d: Employee engagement varies based on position within the organisation.

H2e: Employee engagement varies based on years working at the company.

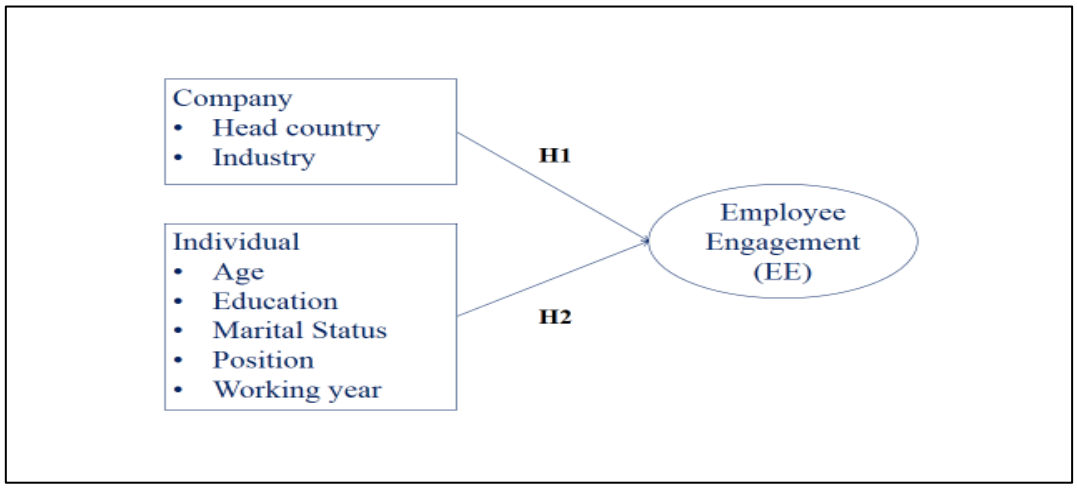

Figure 1. Conceptual model

Methodology

Quantitative methods were used to enable hypothesis testing. Data were collected with a self–administered survey that was developed for this study and completed by a population of MNC employees based in Thailand (n = 400).

The population of the study was Thai employees working at MNCs in Thailand. MNCs were considered as companies that had significant operations in two or more countries. Employees of Thai–domiciled MNCs were included as well.

Many employees are working at Thailand– based MNC divisions and the total population of Thai MNC employees has been rising rapidly as more MNCs are established or expand their Thailand divisions. Given these trends, the total size of this population was impossible to determine, so a representative sample was calculated using the formula for working with large, indeterminate populations provided by Lind, Marchal & Wathen (2012), which yielded a sample calculation of 384. This was rounded up to 400 to ensure that there were some extra surveys in case some respondents returned their questionnaires with incorrect or incomplete responses. The final sample size included 23 questionnaires that were discarded due to non– completion, achieving the final sample of 400 members.

The questionnaire was distributed offline, using a convenience sampling approach. The researcher distributed paper questionnaires in central business districts of Bangkok, where MNC offices are concentrated. A screening question was used to identify MNC employees, who were then recruited for the survey. Participants were not pre– screened based on industry or home country, but were asked to provide this information. In both cases, the sample was broadly distributed. The most common industries represented were Automotive (21.5%), Food and Beverage (17.7%), and Pharmaceutical (13). Overall, 18 industries were represented. The most common MNC home country was Japan (28.1%), followed by the United States (21.7%) and United Kingdom (5.7%). About 4% of the sample worked for Thai– domiciled MNCs. A total of 13 different home countries were represented.

Data were analyzed using chi– square tests to determine whether there were statistically significant relationships between each of the socio– demographic variables and employee engagement scores. The analysis also included descriptive statistics for the socio– demographic categories and employee engagement levels to determine whether all the subpopulations and engagement types were sufficiently represented in the sample.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The personal socio- demographics of the sample are summarised in Table 1 (some percentage totals are slightly higher or lower than 100% due to rounding). Women made up nearly two-thirds of the sample (64.8%), and most of the participants were between 21 and 50 years of age (89.4%), with only 8.0% under 20 and 2.8% over 50. The majority had some postsecondary education, with just over half holding bachelor's degrees (52.5%), 16.3% with master's degrees, and 12.8% with diplomas or vocational degrees. Only 1.3% had doctoral degrees and 17.3% reported no postsecondary qualifications. Nearly two- thirds of the participants were single, widowed, divorced, or separated (65.3%) while married workers made up the remaining third (34.8%).

Table 1 Personal socio-demographic variables

Gender	**Frequency (N = 400)**	**Percentage**
Male	141	35.3
Female	259	64.8
Age	Frequency (N = 400)	Percentage
20 years or less	32	8.0
21 to 30 years	133	33.3
31 to 40 years	129	32.3
41 to 50 years	95	23.8
Older than 50 years	11	2.8
Education	Frequency (N = 400)	Percentage
Lower than diploma degree	69	17.3
Diploma/vocational degree	51	12.8
Bachelor's degree	210	52.5
Master's degree	65	16.3
Doctoral degree	5	1.3
Marital status	Frequency (N = 400)	Percentage
Single	249	62.3
Married	139	34.8
Widow/divorce/separated	12	3.0

Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5 summarise participants' workplace-related socio-demographics. The majority worked as operational staff (63.5%).

Table 2 Staff position

Position	Frequency (N = 400)	Percentage
Operation staff	254	63.5
Team leader	117	29.3
Management team	29	7.2

Most of the respondents had been with their companies for less than 10 years (81.0%). Just over half (50.5%) had worked at their organisations for 3 years or fewer while 20.5% had 4-6 years of experience.

Table 3 Years of working with the company

Year of working	Frequency (N = 400)	Percentage
3 years or less	202	50.5
4 to 6 years	82	20.5
7 to 9 years	40	10.0
10 years or more	76	19.0

The participating companies were headquartered in a wide range of countries. However, the largest proportion originated in Japan (29.8%), followed by the US (23.0%). Other countries, which included Canada, the European nations of Switzerland and Germany, and various Asian nations such as China, Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and India, were minimally represented (< 10.0%).

Table 4 Countries where companies are headquartered

Company head countries	Frequency (N = 400)	Percentage
Thailand	17	4.3
US	92	23.0
UK	24	6.0
Switzerland	30	7.5
Germany	27	6.8

Company head countries	Frequency (N = 400)	Percentage
Canada	5	1.3
Hong Kong	17	4.3
Japan	119	29.8
China	12	3.0
Taiwan	22	5.5
South Korea	9	2.3
Singapore	18	4.5
India	8	2.0

The employees worked at companies representing a wide range of industries, though the highest concentration was found for automotive (22.8%), followed by food and beverage (18.8%) and pharmaceuticals (13.8%).

Table 5 Industries

Industries	Frequency (N = 400)	Percentage
Pharmaceutical	55	13.8
Medical equipment	10	2.5
Food and beverage	75	18.8
Automotive	91	22.8
Insurance	11	2.8
Pet industry	16	4.0
Household equipment	6	1.5
Hospital and health care	3	.8
Logistic	11	2.8
It and computer	19	4.8
Securities industry	13	3.3
Bank and financial institute	5	1.3
Retail	18	4.5
Market research/ consultant/business	20	5.0
Projector and printer	8	2.0
Services	6	1.5
Machine and equipment	10	2.5
Mobile	6	1.5

Industries	Frequency (N = 400)	Percentage
Export	8	2.0
Other	9	2.3

Table 6 provides a summary of engagement rates. Most of the participating employees said they were engaged with their work (61.3%), while just over one-third described themselves as neither engaged nor disengaged (36.8%).

Table 6 Engagement

Engagement	Frequency (N = 400)	Percentage
Highly Disengaged	8	2.0
Disengaged	147	36.8
Engaged	245	61.3

Hypothesis Results

Table 7 summarises the results of the hypotheses tests that were carried out to determine whether particular socio-demographic variables increase or decrease the likelihood that employees will be engaged. Chi-square tests were conducted, and the results were considered significant at $p < 0.050$. H1a, which predicted a relationship between the nation in which a company is headquartered and employee engagement, was confirmed ($p = 0.000$). The largest proportions of engaged employees were found in firms with home offices in the US, Germany, and Canada. In comparison, employees in Chinese and Indian firms were mainly disengaged or neither engaged nor disengaged. However, the other company variable, industry, was found to have no significant effect on engagement. Thus, employee engagement levels varied based on the company's country of origin but not by industry.

Of the five hypotheses that predicted personal socio-demographic effects on engagement, three were confirmed and two were rejected. Age ($p = 0.000$), education level ($p = 0.000$), and years of working for the company ($p = 0.001$) all affected engagement, whereas marital status ($p = 0.899$) and position within the company ($p = 0.175$) had no significant effects. Engagement increased with age and years of service, but the pattern was not clearly progressive for educational levels. Of the youngest age group, 56.3% were either disengaged or neither engaged nor disengaged; among the oldest age group (50+ years), 81.8% were engaged. In terms of education,

among those with lower than a diploma degree and a diploma degree, 60.8% were engaged. Among Bachelor's degree holders, 67.1% were engaged. However, engagement dropped among Master's and PhD holders. For years of service, among those with three years or less, 54% were engaged. Among those with 10 years or more service, 72.4% were engaged. It should be considered that age and experience are co-occurring to some extent, so these may not be separate.

Table 7 Hypothesis results

Hypotheses	Chi-square value	Results
H1a – Head country	.000	Accepted
H1b – Industry	.166	Rejected
H2a – Age	.000	Accepted
H2b – Education	.000	Accepted
H2c – Marital Status	.899	Rejected
H2d – Position	.175	Rejected
H2e – Year of Working	.001	Accepted

Discussion

Engaged employees put more effort into their work (Kular et al., 2008; Piyachat et al., 2014) and they are more likely to be satisfied with and enthusiastic about their jobs (Harter & Schmidt, 2006). Engagement varies by nation (BlessingWhite, 2011; Kular et al., 2008; Oehler & Adair, 2018) and based on the corporate image (Kular et al., 2008; Piyachat et al., 2014), and national image contributes to employee perceptions of corporate image (Dowling, 2000). Therefore, it was expected that the countries where companies were headquartered would influence employee engagement levels, and this supposition was confirmed. However, despite prior survey evidence that employee engagement also varies by industry (Holcombe & Buehler, 2018), this research found no industry-based differences.

Engagement effects were found for worker age, following the findings of Jaupi & Llaci (2015); BlessingWhite (2011); Richman et al. (2008); Simpson (2009); Zeng et al. (2009); Rigg et al. (2014). There was also a negative relationship between the highest qualifications earned and employee engagement ratings, in keeping with the findings of Jaupi & Llaci (2015); Zeng et al. (2009). Engagement rose in conjunction with years of experience with the company as well, which is in line with the finding of Jaupi & Llaci (2015) but contradicts the findings of other studies that

have shown a declining trend for engagement with duration of service (Kular et al., 2008). Marital status did not influence engagement, which provides further evidence for the lack of effect noted by Rigg et al. (2014); Zeng et al. (2009). There was also no effect for organisational position, in opposition to the findings of other researchers (Jaupi & Llaci, 2015; Kular et al., 2008; Zeng et al., 2009). However, employee engagement can be influenced by other factors not included in this research, such as leadership (Holcombe & Buehler, 2018), meaningful work, and career development opportunities (Kular et al., 2008). Therefore, it is possible that additional factors moderated the effects of socio–demographic variables on engagement.

This research did generate some new knowledge surrounding employee engagement in MNCs. One of the most important findings is that MNCs from different countries do have different levels of employee engagement. This could be because of cultural differences between the head office country and Thailand, which lead to different cultural expectations for employee engagement and participation. It could also be because of different working conditions in subsidiaries of MNCs from different head offices, as this can contribute to the formation of employee engagement. Another area of new knowledge was the sociodemographic differences in employee engagement that were observed. While factors like marital status and work position were not relevant, the significance of age, education and number of years working suggests that employees in Thai subsidiaries of MNCs have different experiences and working conditions that could change their level of employee engagement. This is an interesting question for additional organisational research.

Conclusion

This research was conducted to investigate whether socio–demographic factors influence employee engagement. Engagement levels varied based on the nations where companies were headquartered, employee age and education level, and years of service with a particular organization, whereas industry and job position had no effect. Several conclusions can be drawn from the findings. First, because the head country contributes to employee engagement, cultural factors or country image effects may play a role in engagement. Second, the fact that employee engagement levels increase with age and years of experience has implications for the development of targeted programs to increase engagement among the employees at the greatest risk for disengagement. Third, the decrease in engagement that occurs with higher education indicates that

the most qualified and skilled employees may be the least satisfied with and enthusiastic about their work.

Recommendations

This research found that age (p = 0.000), education level (p = 0.000), and years of working for the company (p = 0.001) all affected engagement, whereas marital status (p = 0.899) and position within the company (p = 0.175) had no significant effects. Some recommendations can be made based on the findings. First, socio-demographic factors may be used to identify the employees who are most likely to become disengaged from their work and develop strategies to reduce this trend. Second, employee retention programs should be prioritized, given the positive relationship between years of service and engagement.

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