



Factors influencing employee engagement: Evidence from Thai SMEs

Sirisuhk Rakthin, Prattana Punnakitikashem*, Nattawat Pisitsupakarn, Karuna Aksaravut

College of Management, Mahidol University, Phaya Thai, Bangkok 10400, Thailand

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Abstract

Employee engagement is an approach that can increase the chances of business success, contributing to organizational and individual performance, productivity, and well-being. Successful organizations, of any size or type, must have engaged employees who commit to their organisation's goals and values, are motivated to contribute to organisational success, and have work devotion. However, since SMEs possess much fewer financial and non-financial resources than large organizations, understanding factors that promote engagement for employees becomes more essential. This research study aimed to explore what promotes employee engagement and provide insights to SMEs managers on how to implement human resource management practice and policy that could reinforce employee's job satisfaction and engagement in order to drive business performance. The model was tested using web-based survey from 475 employees working in Thai SMEs. PLS-SEM results revealed that remuneration satisfaction, self-leadership, and interpersonal leadership positively influenced employee engagement. Moreover, the partial mediation effect of job satisfaction contributes to the understanding of the full-range model of engagement for SMEs through job satisfaction.

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Introduction

Employee engagement is fundamental for the success of any organization. An engaged workforce provides tremendous benefits to organizations including increased productivity, lower absenteeism, and reduced staff turnover rates (Hayward, 2010). Starting from the 2000s, employee engagement has become popular and gained interest from academics and practitioners (Saks, 2006). Similar to many countries globally, Thailand's economy has been driven by

the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). SMEs constitute a large proportion of total business in Thailand. There are currently over 3 million SMEs accounting for 99.79 percent of all Thai businesses. In 2018, Thai SMEs generated revenues of THB7.014 trillion, representing 43.0 percent of GDP, and employed 13.95 million people, which was 85.47 percent of the total Thai workforce (Office of Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion, 2019). Interest in SMEs in Thailand has grown significantly in the past years as a result of a policy direction shift by the government. SMEs have been put on the national agenda. In the country's 13th national social and economic development plan (2021–2025), the Thai government has set a goal to raise SMEs' contribution to 50 percent of Thai GDP, aiming to develop new competitive growth (Theparat

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: prattana.pun@mahidol.ac.th (P. Punnakitikashem).

& Chantanusornsiri, 2018). With an increasing number of SMEs in Thailand, engaged workforces in Thai SMEs could be a proxy for the vitality of the country's competitive advantage. Despite the national policy and direction that have been put in place, most Thai SMEs have faced challenging disengagement among employees. With limited financial and non-financial resources compared to large organizations, it is vital for Thai SMEs to understand factors that promote engagement for employees. The adoption of meaningful human resource management tools which promote fully engaged employees would help drive business performance.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between the following factors: self-leadership, interpersonal leadership, career adaptability, remuneration satisfaction, job satisfaction, and employee engagement, which could eventually lead to business sustainability for Thai SMEs. This study provides useful insights for managers on how SMEs can implement human resource management practices and introduce leadership skills and behaviors in their enterprises. To our knowledge, this study is the first to reveal that self-leadership practice is crucial and needed for SMEs in Thailand.

Literature Review

Employee Engagement

Employee Engagement is the degree to which an individual is attentive and absorbed in the performance of his/her role (Saks, 2006). Personal engagement has been referred to as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” while disengagement was defined as “the uncoupling of selves from work roles; in disengagement, people withdraw and defend themselves physically, cognitively, or emotionally during role performances” (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). In addition, Kahn (1990) proposed that the development of three psychological conditions—meaningfulness, availability, and safety—cultivated engagement of employees.

Self-leadership, Interpersonal Leadership, Career Adaptability, and Remuneration Satisfaction

The posited hypotheses in this study were developed based upon the basis of three streams of literature: social exchange theory, leadership, and career construction theory. Adopting social exchange theory and leadership perspectives in the context of Thai SMEs, we postulate that

the emergence of employee engagement in SMEs can be influenced by employee's self-leadership, interpersonal leadership, and remuneration satisfaction. Additionally, drawing from career construction theory as a theoretical basis to support the hypothesized relationship, the effect of career adaptability on employee engagement in the SMEs context was explored. Extant research studies support that the employees who can handle career challenges more effectively tend to be more energized and motivated to perform well at their job, thereby resulting in higher level of engagement and satisfaction at work (Merino-Tejedor, Hontangas, & Boada-Grau, 2016; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Accordingly, this section summarizes the four key factors influencing employee engagement from the literature as follows. First, self-leadership is defined as “a process through which individuals control their own behavior, influencing and leading themselves through the use of specific sets of behavioral and cognitive strategies” (Neck & Houghton, 2006, p. 270). In SMEs, where there are limited resources, e.g., knowledge, information, and executives' vision, self-leading employees who often develop a sense of ownership over their tasks and work processes may demonstrate higher levels of commitment, contribution, and engagement to their tasks, goals, teams or organizations than those who are not engaging in self-leadership (Bligh, Pearce, & Kohles, 2006; Houghton & Yoho, 2005; Manz & Sims, 2001). Second, employees with high levels of interpersonal leadership could create positive work environments through their relational behaviors with peers and superordinates, especially among a small network of employees within SMEs. This will inherently reduce perceived negative influences, i.e., relational conflicts, thereby making the presence of positive psychological resources, i.e., organizational identification, more salient and increasing employee engagement (Hansen, Byrne, & Kiersch, 2014). Previous research study found that interpersonal leadership positively influenced employee engagement (Hansen et al., 2014). Third, employees with high levels of career adaptability can manage existing and impending career challenges by preparing for future career tasks and challenges (concern), having self-discipline and taking responsibility for their career development (control), exploring future career opportunities (curiosity), and believing in their ability to achieve goals, solve career-related problems, and overcome obstacles (confidence) (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; Rudolph, Lavigne, & Zacher, 2017). Employees who are better able to handle career challenges, or in other words, show higher career adaptability, should be more satisfied and committed to their jobs. Extant literature demonstrated that career adaptability was associated with higher levels of engagement and satisfaction of employees (Merino-

Tejedor et al., 2016). Fourth, remuneration or compensation refers to both financial and non-financial rewards. Attractive remuneration consists of adequate salary and a combination of such things as bonuses, other financial rewards together with non-financial rewards, i.e., holiday and voucher schemes (Anitha, 2014). When individuals receive economic and socioemotional resources from their organization, they feel obliged to respond in kind and repay the organization (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). A social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) explained a theoretical link between employee's remuneration satisfaction and engagement that employees were motivated to act by anticipated beneficial rewards. That is, positive perceptions of remuneration level that the employees received from the organizations were believed to motivate the exhibition of positive workplace behaviors, i.e., high level of engagement and low intention to quit (Memon, Salleh, & Baharom, 2017).

Mediating Role of Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction can be affected by opportunities for employees to experience achievement, recognition, interesting work, increased responsibility, advancement, and/or learning. Meanwhile, job dissatisfaction can be caused by unfair company policies, incompetent or unfair supervisors, bad interpersonal relations, unpleasant working conditions, unfair salary, threats to status, and job insecurity. Previous research claimed that job satisfaction indirectly influences employee engagement by increasing employees' willingness to change and their organizational commitment (Riordan, Gatewood, & Bill, 1997; Yilmaz, Ali, & Flouris, 2015).

From the review of the literature, we derived our hypotheses and proposed conceptual framework as follows:

H1a-H1d: Employee's (1) self-leadership (SL), (2) interpersonal leadership (IL), (3) career adaptability (AD), and (4) remuneration satisfaction (RS) are positively associated with employee engagement (EE).

H2a-H2d: Employee's (1) self-leadership (SL), (2) interpersonal leadership (IL), (3) career adaptability (AD), and (4) remuneration satisfaction (RS) are positively associated with job satisfaction (JS).

H3: Employee's job satisfaction (JS) is positively associated with employee engagement (EE).

H4a-4d: Employee's job satisfaction (JS) mediates the relationship between (1) self-leadership (SL), (2) interpersonal leadership (IL), (3) career adaptability (AD), and (4) remuneration satisfaction (RS), and employee engagement (EE).

Methodology

Sample, Data Collection, and Instrument Development

In order to test the hypotheses simultaneously, our study used Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) approach. SmartPLS 3 software was adopted to assess the proposed model (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015). Data were collected from 475 employees in Thai SMEs. The sample size of 475 was adequate in relation to the maximum number of indicators associated with a construct and the minimum sample size suggested by Hair, Hult, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2013). The questionnaire was conducted randomly over a web-based survey. The participants were Thai employees who worked in SMEs. The majority of the final sample were female (53.7%), aged between 25–30 years (50.9%), held bachelor degrees or higher (82.5%), identified themselves as SMEs employees in operations level (59.6%), and had working experiences in SMEs business between 1–3 years (44.2%).

We developed a survey instrument to assess the focal constructs based upon the extant literature (Hansen et al., 2014; Houghton & Neck, 2002; Riordan et al., 1997; Roch & Shanock, 2006; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Rom, & Bakker, 2002; Schutte et al., 2001). Validated items were adapted from prior studies and revalidated for this study. Then, a pilot study was conducted with a group of employees in SMEs ($N = 30$). Eventually, the web-based survey was fully conducted. The key constructs were based on the existing literature in which the items and responses appear on a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "Strongly Disagree" to (5) "Strongly Agree." Employee's self-leadership was measured using items adapted from Houghton and Neck's scale (2002). Additionally, the scales for assessing interpersonal leadership were adapted from Hansen, Byrne, and Kiersch (2014) and Schutte et al.'s (2001) measures. The scales for measuring employee's career adaptability were adapted from Savickas and Porfeli (2012). We assessed employee's satisfaction with remuneration by adapting from existing scales reported in previous literature (Roch & Shanock, 2006). Consistent with previous literature, the operationalisations of the two constructs—job satisfaction and employee engagement—were adapted from Riordan, Gatewood, and Bill (1997) for job satisfaction, and Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Rom, and Bakker (2002) for employee engagement. In order to control for the threat of the common methods bias since our study used self-report survey, we performed Harman's single factor test (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003) to analyse the extent to which our results might be

contaminated by common method bias. The test showed that common method bias did not appear to be a pervasive problem in this study.

Results

Assessing the Reliability and Validity of Measures

To assess the reliability of the measures using composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE), CR were all over .8, which meets Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) guideline, and AVE scores exceeded the recommended value of .5 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988), which is indicative of acceptable levels of reliability. In addition, all factor loadings were above .5 as recommended by Bagozzi and Yi (2012), confirming that the constructs had appropriate convergent validity. Details of CR and AVE are shown in Table 1. To examine discriminant validity, we tested whether interconstruct correlations significantly departed from 1.0 (Bagozzi, Yi, & Phillips, 1991), and found that all correlations were significantly smaller than 1.0. As recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981), we tested whether the square root of AVE were larger than the correlations among constructs. As shown in Table 2, the square root of AVE or diagonal values are significantly higher than the construct correlations or off-diagonal values, thereby adequately confirming discriminant validity. In sum, as can be concluded from the data, all constructs in this study had appropriate reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

Testing the Hypothesized Structural Model

We used R^2 Value in the dependent variable to measure the explanatory power of the structural model. Overall, the results showed that the predictors provided good explanation for the focal constructs in the model: R^2 for job satisfaction = .600; and R^2 for employee engagement = .470. The model R^2 statistic in PLS-SEM demonstrates the extent to which hypothesized pathways combine to predict the dependent variable. According to the results mentioned earlier, both R^2 (.600 for job satisfaction and .470 for employee engagement) can be interpreted as indicating good model fit (Chin, 1998). To estimate the significance of the path coefficients, we used the bootstrapping method with subsamples of 500 (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2013). The results for the antecedents and consequences of job satisfaction and employee engagement are shown in Figure 1. The positive and significant effects of self-leadership ($\beta = .137, p < .01$), interpersonal leadership ($\beta = .136, p < .05$) and remuneration satisfaction ($\beta = .156, p < .01$) on employee engagement supported H1a, H1b, and H1d, respectively. However, the effect of career adaptability on employee engagement was not significant; therefore, H1c was not supported. Furthermore, the results showed that interpersonal leadership ($\beta = .319, p < .001$) and remuneration satisfaction ($\beta = .515, p < .001$) significantly influenced job satisfaction, whereas employee's self-leadership and career adaptability had no significant effects on job satisfaction, indicating that only H2b and H2d were supported while H2a and H2c were not supported. Finally, we found that job satisfaction had a positive and significant effect on employee engagement, thus H3 was also supported ($\beta = .344, p < .001$).

Table 1 Correlation Matrix

	AD	EE	IL	JS	RS	SL
AD	.808					
EE	.468	.753				
IL	.619	.524	.778			
JS	.482	.628	.587	.845		
RS	.338	.504	.347	.672	.897	
SL	.519	.437	.532	.393	.277	.803
CR	.882	.929	.884	.926	.954	.845
AVE	.653	.567	.605	.715	.805	.645

Note: Diagonal elements (in bold and italic fonts) are the square root of AVE. Off-diagonal elements are the correlations among constructs. The CR and AVE are also shown at the bottom of the table.

Table 2 Significance levels of the direct and indirect effects

	Indirect effect	Direct effect	Type of mediation
IL->JS->EE (H7b)	.110***	.136*	Partial mediation
RS->JS->EE (H7e)	.175***	.156**	Partial mediation

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Test for mediation effects. For mediation analysis of job satisfaction on the relationship between four constructs—self-leadership, interpersonal leadership, career adaptability, and remuneration satisfaction—and employee engagement, we followed the procedure and methods used in the previous studies by estimating the significance of the indirect effects in the model and bootstrapped the sampling distributions of the indirect effects (Nitzl, Roldan, & Cepeda, 2016; Preacher & Hayes, 2004). As shown in Table 2, both the indirect effects from interpersonal leadership and remuneration satisfaction to employee engagement through job satisfaction were significant ($\beta = .110, p < .001$ and $\beta = .175, p < .001$, respectively), whereas the direct effects from interpersonal leadership and remuneration satisfaction to employee engagement were also significant ($\beta = .136, p < .05$ and $\beta = .156, p < .01$, respectively). These results support H4b and H4d that job satisfaction partially mediated both relationships between (1) interpersonal leadership and (2) remuneration satisfaction and employee engagement. Furthermore, although there was a significant effect of self-leadership on employee engagement ($\beta = .137, p < .01$) as mentioned previously, there was no significant relationship between self-leadership and job satisfaction. The result suggested that job satisfaction did not mediate

a relationship between self-leadership and employee engagement. Therefore, H4a was not supported. Also, since the effect of career adaptability on job satisfaction was not significant, the result demonstrated that a relationship between career adaptability and employee engagement was not mediated by job satisfaction and that H4c was not supported.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings revealed that only remuneration satisfaction, self-leadership, and interpersonal leadership were significantly and positively related to employee engagement in Thai SMEs. A relationship between career adaptability and employee engagement was not statistically significant. The results highlight the managerial implications in the context of Thai SMEs as follows. First, our study is consistent with past studies (Anitha, 2014) in that remuneration satisfaction significantly influenced employee engagement. Remuneration satisfaction is the most important factor among all factors because having sufficient compensation means having security for life and family in Thailand. Unlike western countries with strong social security support, Thailand is a developing country with limited social security support (Punnakitikashem,

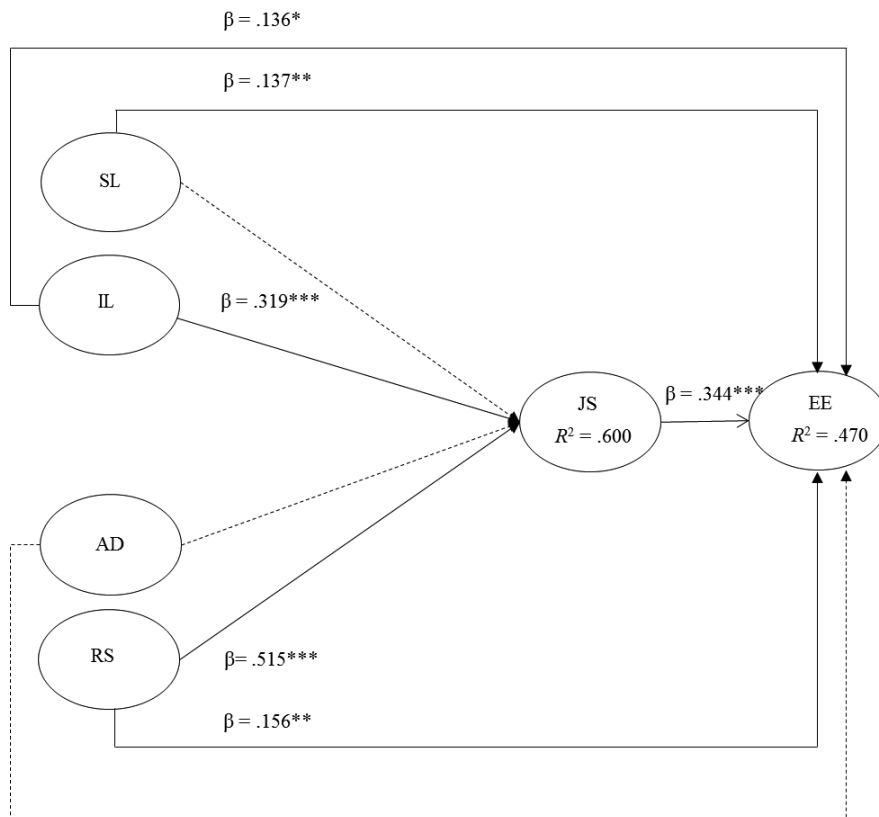


Figure 1 Results of the PLS Analysis

Maimun, & Rakthin, 2019). Sufficient remuneration is a direct source of security guaranteeing good quality of life for employees and their families. Thus, in order to gain employee engagement, the SMEs management team should provide attractive remuneration packages with both financial and non-financial benefits that are competitive in the market. It is necessary to survey compensation and incentive packages in the industry. Once employees are satisfied with their compensation and perceived benefits, they will feel obliged to return the favor to the organization with higher levels of engagement.

Second, both self-leadership and interpersonal leadership have a direct impact on employee engagement. The results support the conclusion that employees practicing self-leadership experience greater feelings of control and autonomy, leading to heightened levels of engagement with confidence. Not only does self-leadership have an impact on employee engagement, but interpersonal leadership also makes other employees in the workplace feel safe because they sense openness and supportiveness.

Third, unlike previous research in the past (Merino-Tejedor et al., 2016), our study found that career adaptability was not significantly related to employee engagement. This result was surprising. From the finding, it appeared that career adaptability was not valued by Thai employees in SMEs for engagement, or in other words, Thai respondents seemed not to be concerned with career adaptability. This may be because more than 50 percent of the sample in this study were between 25–30 years old and working at the operations level. The younger generation of the workforce may be used to having multi-tasking skills. They might feel that it is unnecessary to adapt themselves too much. If they cannot overcome obstacles or handle pressure at work, they might consider other alternatives (e.g., resigning from the job). Thus, it seems that career adaptability may not influence employee engagement in Thai SMEs.

Forth, there were two factors including interpersonal leadership and remuneration satisfaction which significantly and positively influenced job satisfaction. Employees with high level of interpersonal leadership, especially among a small network in SMEs, tend to have a higher level of job satisfaction; while their satisfaction towards remuneration package is also positively related to job satisfaction. The finding was in line with the results from previous research studies (e.g., Singh & Loncar, 2010). Moreover, the result showed that job satisfaction had a positive effect on employee engagement which was consistent with the results of previous research studies (e.g., Yilmaz et al., 2015).

For theoretical merit, our study contributes to the employee engagement for SMEs literature by providing clarity that self-leadership relates to engagement in SMEs.

Additionally, the mediation effect of job satisfaction contributes to the understanding of the full-range model of engagement for SMEs through job satisfaction, by showing how interpersonal leadership and remuneration can be combined with job satisfaction. For managerial implications, SMEs should pay attention to the factors: self-leadership, interpersonal leadership, and remuneration satisfaction since these elements influence employee engagement regardless of levels of job satisfaction.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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