

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON PRODUCTIVITY IN SRI LANKA'S CRUISE TOURISM SECTOR

D.A.C.R. De Silva¹

*¹Faculty of Business Management, University of Pacific
mail4resha.ds@gmail.com*

Abstract

Cruise Tourism is a very identical market in the global travel sector which is having a higher growth rate nevertheless a niche market in tourism industry in Sri Lanka with a significant economic impact. The purpose of this study was to investigate the employee engagement strategies and their impact on productivity in Sri Lanka's cruise tourism sector. This research was based upon the collection of data through online questionnaire survey with Sri Lankan employees in cruise sector. This case was conducted with quantitative research methods. Statistical information obtained from 220 respondents were analyzed was processed with MS Excel software, SPSS and data analyzed using demographic data analysis, correlation analysis and regression analysis. According to the study 6 sub-factors of key determinants of the employee engagement were identified through literature surveys. As per the results, there's a strong positive correlation among the engagement constructs and communication was found to be the most significant predictor of productivity. Effective employee engagement positively affects performance outcomes thus communication, leadership and development opportunities enhance productivity. There are six key determinants of employee engagement. They are: communication, recognition and rewards, leadership and management, career development and training and work life balance. These determinants are highly impact on the employee engagement and productivity in cruise tourism sector. Also, lack of these determinants affects employee turnover too. These determinants will ensure and safeguard the development of the cruise industry by being the foundation for it. Recommendations that were provided at the final part of the research concentrate on strengthening communication channels, enhancing leadership and management

practices, expanding career development opportunities, improving work life balance, refining recognition and rewards systems and by tailoring engagement strategies to demographic segments, the positive significant impact on employee engagement strategies on productivity can enhance to obtain significant economic impacts

Keywords: *Cruise Tourism, Employee Engagement Strategies, Productivity, Sri Lanka*

1.0 Introduction

Cruise tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments of global tourism, evolving from early luxury voyages in the 19th century to a modern industry dominated by Carnival Corporation, Royal Caribbean, and Norwegian Cruise Line, together controlling 75% of the market (CLIA, 2024). Passenger volumes rose from 17.8 million in 2009 to 35.7 million in 2024, with rapid recovery after COVID-19 disruptions (Statista, 2024; CLIA, 2023). The sector contributes significantly to socioeconomic development, generating \$168.6 billion in global economic impact and 1.6 million jobs in 2023, with 77% onshore employment (Zion Market Research, 2024; CLIA, 2023). The research aim to examine the impact of employee engagement strategies on productivity within Sri Lanka's cruise tourism sector. To analyze the key factors influencing employee engagement in Sri Lanka's cruise tourism sector, and to assess their impact on employee motivation, commitment, and overall performance and to analyze the key challenges and barriers faced by organizations in Sri Lanka's cruise tourism sector when implementing employee engagement strategies, and to explore the factors that impede the effective execution of these strategies.

This study critically examines employee engagement strategies and their impact on productivity within Sri Lanka's cruise tourism sector, using primary data to provide sector-specific insights and implications.

2.0 Literature Review

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is conceptualized by Kahn (1990) by integrating physical, cognitive, and emotional resources in work roles. Subsequent research (Guo & Hou, 2022; Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Sharma & Kumra, 2024) highlights its multifaceted nature, linking engagement to leadership, organizational culture, resilience, well-being, and performance outcomes.

Employee Engagement in Tourism Sector

Employee engagement in tourism is defined as emotional dedication and involvement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Macey & Schneider, 2008), enhances service quality, customer satisfaction, and retention (Ariani, 2013). Influenced by leadership, recognition, autonomy, and work environment (Karatepe & Olugbade, 2009; Saks, 2006), engagement reduces turnover yet faces challenges from seasonality, stress, and low pay.

Employee Engagement Strategies

Smith (2024) highlights the importance of employee engagement strategies in organizations to boost motivation, satisfaction, and performance. These strategies focus on fostering a positive workplace culture through improved communication, professional development opportunities, and recognition of employee contributions. Effective engagement leads to increased retention, productivity, and improved organizational outcomes that ensures competitive advantage.

I. Leadership and Communication

Effective leadership, clear guidance, supportive behaviors, and open communication are key to employee engagement. Genuine belief and ownership from top management foster an engaged organizational culture and promoting a positive work environment.

II. Recognition and Reward Systems

Employee engagement strategies involve recognition and reward systems which enhance engagement levels by aligning individual performance with organizational objectives and motivating employees to exceed expectations.

III. Work-Life Balance and Employee Well-being

Organizations are recognizing the importance of work-life balance in employee engagement strategies. A well-being-focused workplace culture, including flexible work arrangements, mental health support, and family-friendly policies, helps manage stress, enhances job satisfaction, and reduces burnout risk.

IV. Employee Development and Career Growth

Strategic career development initiatives, such as training programs, mentorship, and transparent pathways, significantly enhance employee engagement, commitment, innovation, and productivity within an organization.

V. Organizational Culture and Values

Positive organizational culture with defined values leads to increased employee engagement. Employees feel connected and engaged when their values align with the organization's mission, fostering trust, respect, and inclusiveness.

VI. Social Support and Team Dynamics

Research shows that team cohesion and social support are crucial for employee engagement. Employees with robust social support from peers and supervisors are more engaged with their work and organization. Implementing team-building activities, social events, and peer recognition programs can enhance overall engagement.

VII. Autonomy and Empowerment

Employee empowerment, granting autonomy and decision-making control, boosts workplace engagement. It fosters ownership, accountability, and increased initiative. Empowered employees contribute more to innovative problem-solving, resulting in a more engaged and productive workforce.

Employee Engagement Strategies in the Tourism Industry

Employee engagement strategies in the tourism sector rely on leadership, communication, training, and organizational culture. Transformational leadership, emphasizing motivation and inspiration, can boost engagement levels. Training and development initiatives are crucial for fostering confidence and navigating pressures in the industry. A supportive organizational culture, recognizing employee contributions and trust in leadership, encourages full investment in work. A holistic approach, including targeted training and a nurturing environment, is essential for a highly engaged and productive workforce in the tourism sector.

Cruise Tourism Sector

Cruise tourism, combining transport, accommodation, and leisure activities, generates significant global economic impact through jobs, port revenues, and passenger spending (CLIA, 2020; Cruz et al., 2014). Shaped by service quality and passenger experience (Gössling et al., 2017), it faces challenges from seasonality, crises, and sustainability demands, requiring adaptive, eco-friendly strategies (Lück, 2017).

Employee Engagement and Productivity

Employee engagement is crucial for productivity and performance with highly engaged individuals exceeding performance expectations. Engaged employees are motivated, dedicated, and committed to the organization's goals, resulting in better

output and reduced turnover. Vigor and dedication drive employees to go above and beyond, reducing absenteeism and reducing staff changes.

The Impact of Employee Engagement on Productivity Levels

Employee engagement is crucial for boosting productivity in competitive business environments, impacting financial performance and customer satisfaction. Customized engagement tactics, considering internal communication and employee well-being, are essential for developing a loyal workforce. High-performance work practices (HPWPs) and focused treatments improve workers' abilities, leading to increased engagement. Strategic engagement programs maintain talent and reduce turnover, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and increased productivity.

Challenges and Barriers to Employee Engagement

This section explains the challenges businesses face in increasing employee engagement, highlighting the importance of emotional investment, productivity, and innovation in achieving organizational outcomes and boosting productivity.

I. Lack of Leadership Support

Lack of strong leadership support hinders employee engagement, as it leads to inconsistent decision-making and disengagement. Poor leadership can result in a work atmosphere where staff feel appreciated and inspired. Gallup survey, which was conducted in 2017, found that disengaged workers are more likely to lack inspiring management.

II. Poor Organizational Culture

Employee engagement is significantly influenced by a company's culture, which can be hindered by an unsupportive, inflexible, or alienating environment. This can lead to feelings of alienation, decreased motivation, and a lack of empowerment, hindering employees' ability to take responsibility for their jobs.

III. Ineffective Communication

Effective communication is crucial for employee engagement, as it builds a bond between staff and the organization's objectives. Poor communication can lead to disengagement, confusion, stress, and burnout, affecting proactive behavior and reducing engagement levels.

IV. Limited Opportunities for Career Development

Research shows that lack of career advancement opportunities can deter employees from participating in the workplace. Long-term involvement and

purpose are enhanced by career development options like training, mentorship, and promotions. Employers who fail to invest in staff development often experience lower engagement and turnover rates.

V. Work-Life Imbalance

Work-life balance is crucial for employee engagement, as overwork and extended hours can lead to burnout and disengagement. This imbalance can cause emotional and psychological stress, impairing focus and job performance, and potentially reducing dedication and passion for work.

Key Concept	Theoretical Model	Possible Relationships to Investigate
Employee Engagement	Kahn's Theory, JD-R Model, SDT, Social Exchange	Impact of job resources, autonomy, and organizational support on engagement.
Job Demands and Resources	JD-R Model	The balance between stressors and support influencing engagement.
Leadership	Transformational Leadership Theory	Influence of transformational leadership on employee engagement.
Psychological Needs	Self-Determination Theory	Role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering engagement.
Organizational Support	Social Exchange Theory	Reciprocity between perceived support and employee engagement.
Productivity	All Theories	Relationship between employee engagement and productivity in the cruise tourism sector.

Table 01: Key Variables and Relationships in Theoretical Framework

Source: Literature Survey

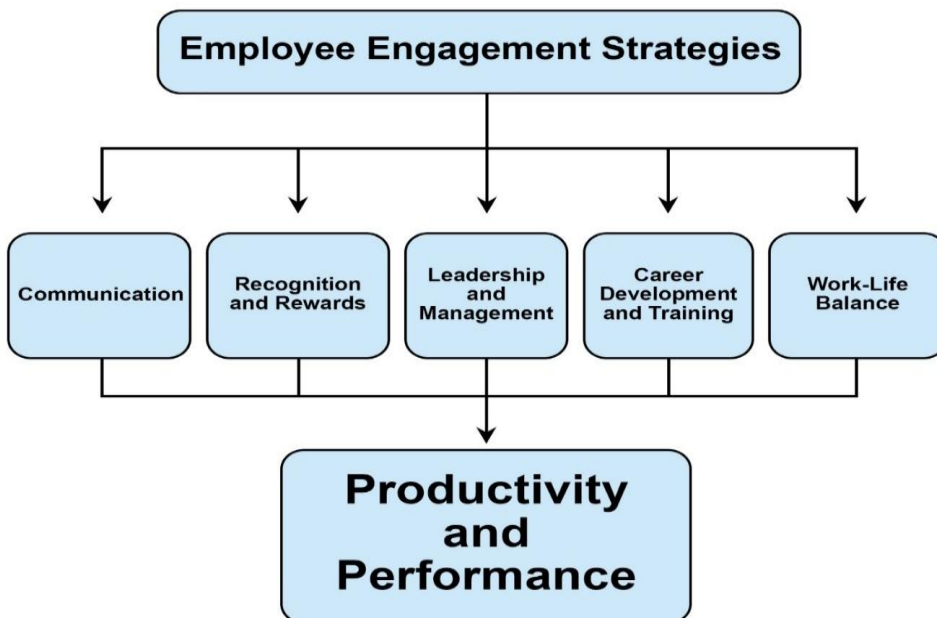
This theoretical framework provides a solid foundation for analyzing employee engagement strategies in Sri Lanka's cruise tourism sector, highlighting their impact on productivity.

3.0 Methodology

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework emphasizes that employee engagement strategies—such as communication, recognition, leadership, career development, and work–life balance—enhance productivity at both individual and organizational levels. Prior studies (Brown & Lee, 2023; Kumar et al., 2021) affirm the critical role of these dimensions in organizational success. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory, the model posits that employees reciprocate organizational support with improved performance, while Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs explains how fulfilling higher-order needs strengthens engagement and productivity.

Figure 01: Conceptual Framework



Research Population and Sample Size

Cruise tourism employee survey in Sri Lanka used purposive sampling; 220 respondents ensure statistical validity for SEM and regression (Kaur & Singh, 2023; Theresa & Donald, 2013).

Data Collection Method

Study used online structured questionnaires with mixed formats to collect primary data, ensuring validity and broader insights (Chen & Zhang, 2022).

4.0 Data Presentation

Demographic Profile of Respondents

A total of 220 respondents participated in the survey. The largest age group was 45–54 years (25%). Gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 34.1% male, 35% female, and 30.9% other. Education levels showed that the majority held diplomas or certificates (30.5%), while 23.6% were officers by occupation. Departmental distribution indicated higher representation in customer service (20.9%) and operations (18.2%). Work experience was mainly 4–6 years (20.9%), with full-time employees accounting for 35% of the sample.

Descriptive Statistics

All constructs recorded mean values above 4.0, indicating favorable responses. The highest means were for leadership and management ($M = 4.26$), career development and training ($M = 4.22$), and work-life balance ($M = 4.22$).

Reliability and Validity Analysis

Reliability analysis confirmed satisfactory internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.727 to 0.857. Validity was tested using KMO and Bartlett's tests, with results supporting factorability and construct validity.

Correlation Analysis

Significant positive correlations were observed among all constructs at the 0.01 level. The strongest relationship was between communication and productivity ($r = .960$).

Regression Analysis

The regression model reported $R^2 = .940$, indicating that independent variables explained 94% of the variance in productivity. Communication ($\beta = .722$, $p < .001$) emerged as the strongest predictor, followed by leadership, career development, and work-life balance.

Barriers Identified

Responses revealed barriers to engagement. A considerable proportion disagreed with statements regarding organizational commitment (44.1%) and clear engagement

strategies (47.7%), highlighting weak areas. Conversely, resource allocation (46.8% agreement) and supportive policies (41.3% agreement) were recognized as stronger enablers.

5.0 Data Analysis and Findings

The study analyzed 220 valid responses from employees in the Sri Lankan cruise tourism sector. The demographic analysis showed balanced representation across age, gender, education, job levels, departments, and employment types, with most respondents being mid-career employees.

Descriptive statistics indicated generally high agreement with employee engagement strategies (mean scores above 4.0), with leadership, career development, and work-life balance rated highest. Normality tests confirmed suitability for parametric analysis, while reliability tests (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.727\text{--}0.857$) demonstrated strong internal consistency. Validity tests (KMO = 0.628–0.676, Bartlett's $p < 0.001$) confirmed construct appropriateness.

Correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships among all constructs, with the strongest link between communication and productivity ($r = .960$). Regression results showed that engagement strategies explained 94% of the variance in productivity ($R^2 = 0.940$), with communication ($\beta = .722$, $p < 0.001$) as the strongest predictor, followed by career development, leadership, and work-life balance.

However, survey items on organizational commitment (44.1% disagreement), clarity of strategies (47.7% disagreement/neutrality), and resource allocation (39.1% disagreement/neutrality) highlighted notable barriers to effective engagement.

Discussion

Findings validate that employee engagement strategies significantly influence productivity in the cruise tourism sector, with communication emerging as the most critical driver, consistent with prior studies (Anderson et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2023). The strong intercorrelations among constructs suggest that engagement practices are synergistic rather than independent, supporting a holistic organizational approach.

Barriers such as unclear strategies, inadequate resources, and inconsistent policies reflect structural weaknesses, echoing similar challenges identified in service industries (Kaur & Singh, 2023). Demographic differences also suggest the need for

tailored engagement practices to address varied motivational needs across employee groups.

Practical Implications

The study emphasizes:

1. **Enhancing communication** through leadership training and transparent information systems.
2. **Strengthening recognition and rewards**, ensuring timeliness and relevance to diverse employee groups.
3. **Investing in continuous career development and training**, with structured career paths.
4. **Improving work-life balance policies** through flexible scheduling, wellness, and supportive leave systems.
5. **Periodic strategic reviews** of engagement policies, integrating employee feedback to align with evolving industry conditions.

Conclusions & Recommendations

The study demonstrates that employee engagement strongly influences productivity in Sri Lanka's cruise tourism sector, with 94% performance variation explained by engagement dimensions. Communication was the most significant predictor, while leadership, career development, and work-life balance also showed strong effects. Recognition and rewards had modest but meaningful influences. Organizational barriers such as unclear policies and limited resources were found to hinder implementation.

Recommendations include strengthening communication systems, developing transformational leadership, expanding career development pathways, promoting work-life balance, refining recognition programs, addressing organizational bottlenecks, and tailoring initiatives to diverse employee groups. Policy revisions, strategic investment, and managerial accountability are essential to sustain engagement.

Overall, the findings affirm that integrated engagement strategies are central to organizational success, highlighting the need for consistent policy support and long-term strategic planning.

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