Do Employees' Perceptions on Interpersonal Trust and Work Engagement differ across Employee Groups?

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ABSTRACT

Employees who are emotionally connected to their work have a high level of interpersonal trust and are engaged in what they do. However, interpersonal trust and work engagement tend to vary with the employees' years of work experience. This study seeks evidence on whether there is a significant difference in the level of interpersonal trust and work engagement basing on the years of experience an employee spends with an organization in developing countries like Uganda. To achieve this objective, the study uses two groups of employees; one with less than 6 years of work experience, and the other with more than 6 years of work experience to test whether there is a significant difference in the interpersonal trust and work engagement scores. Data was collected from 410 employees working in health based NGOs in Uganda using a structured questionnaire. Results from a Mann Whitney U test revealed a significant difference in the work engagement scores between the two groups. Conversely, there was no significant difference in the interpersonal trust scores. The results imply that highly engaged employees are the most experienced ones, and cultivating a climate of trust is essential for all employees despite their tenure.

***Key words**: Interpersonal Trust, Work Experience, Work Engagement, NGOs, Uganda*

INTRODUCTION

Work experience develops human capital in terms of skills and competencies that enhance service delivery in a specific organization (De Sivatte, Gordon, Olmos & Simón, 2019). The skills and abilities emerge after a period of interaction between coworkers (Schoorman, Mayer & Davis, 2007). The continuous interactions breed interpersonal trust among colleagues and spearhead knowledge transfer (De Sivatte et al., 2019). It is valuable to understand if work experience accumulated by employees in the past has an impact on firm performance even though inconsistent results may be explained (Ng & Feldman, 2013; Sturman, 2003).

Employee work experience has been explored at an individual level and organizational level to determine performance (Ali & Davies, 2003; Quińones, Ford & Teachout, 1995; Schmidt, Hunter & Outerbridge, 1986; Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998). This study has focused at the organizational level to establish whether employees' work experience in an organization makes a significant difference in the level of interpersonal trust and work engagement among employees of health based NGOs in Uganda. Ng and Feldman (2013) suggest that, employees accrue skills and competencies as a result of the number of years taken working on a specific work task. When experienced employees in an organization interact with the newcomers, knowledge is shared between the two groups of individuals. The newcomers are empowered as a result of acquisition of skills and get engaged to

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involve in the delivery of quality services. They learn how to relate with the supervisors and strive to attain the firm targets (Ng & Feldman, 2010).

Organizations are concerned about the level of experience of employees during the recruitment process (Avolio, Waldman & McDaniel, 1990; Saks & Waldman 1998) and newcomers are integrated into the organization together with their prior work experiences. The integration brings about trust between the two sets of employees and stimulates work engagement to the work activities of an organization since all employees are sure about the skills and competences fellow workers possess.

The interactions of employees with varying levels of work experience in a firm can either be face to face during a tea break or lunch break, organizational workshops or can be electronic where such workers of an organization meet on a virtual platform like video conferencing or WhatsApp groups to relate and share information about a given work activity (Cantu & Mondragon, 2016). Employees with more work experience would give views about a work task basing on their exposure with such tasks and the juniors would borrow a reference which may make them to feel motivated and energized to tackle a work task. Such an atmosphere takes place in organizations due to the fact that firms primarily manage the psychological elements of socialization among employees, values and share knowledge in different ways which determines when the knowledge sharing process is to begin, mature and sustain itself in an organizational setting (Hume & Hume, 2016). This study intended to answer the following research questions: (i) To what extent do employees perceive the climate of interpersonal trust and work engagement? (ii) How do interpersonal trust and work engagement differ by years of experience?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Exchange Theory

This paper adopts the social exchange theory Blau (1964) as a framework for possible explanation of whether there is a significant difference in the level of interpersonal trust and work engagement among employees of NGOs as a result of work experience. The SET assumes that, employees in an organization are motivated to achieve certain kind of rewards since they forfeit something of value (Redmond, 2015). It further asserts that employees with a given work experience are enticed to change their feelings towards an organization if they trust the organization as honest by becoming more engaged to their work (Ugwu, Onyishi & Rodriguez-Sanchez, 2014). The SET is governed by the rules and norms of exchange that prevail in an organization (Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels & Hall, 2017). The rules and norms of exchange rotate around the reciprocity principles; the principle states that, if someone gives out something, he/she has to be reciprocated in kind. This means, the actions of one party lead to a response by another. In this perspective, a number of scholars such as (Cropanzano et al., 2017) have focused on the social relationship between employees and organizations. Firms develop relationships with employees when they continuously take care of their needs (Eisenberger, Rhoades & Cameron, 1999). This makes employees of a certain work experience to believe that, they are valued and trusted by organizations and reciprocates by changing their attitudes (Aryee, Budhwar & Chen, 2002). Reciprocity motivates employees to stay with an organization since it allows individuals to trust, be committed and engaged to their work (Redmond, 2015).

Work Experience

Work experience is related to either the number of months spent on a particular job or the number of times a given task has been performed (Quińones et al., 1995). The concept can be conceptualized in terms of skills and competencies accumulated for a period of time. This experience may be amassed as a result of continuous interaction between different individuals in an organization (Dokko, Wilk & Rothbard, 2009). Organizations prefer to hire employees with a given level of experience to deliver quality services to customers (Thoresen, Bradley, Bliese & Thoresen, 2004). Junior employees interact with experienced workers to acquire job skills and actively get engaged in the attainment of firm goals (Beyer & Hannah, 2002; Carr, Pearson, Vest & Boyar, 2006). Bipp (2010) argued that work experience is positively and significantly related to service delivery in organizations. Therefore, the more employees interact and trust each other, the more they get engaged in their work tasks. Besides, Thoresen et al. (2004) asserted that work experience predicts performance differences and performance trends in an organization. This occurs among workers depending on the number of years they have spent with the firm and the level of skills and competencies accumulated.

Interpersonal Trust

Interpersonal trust involves a level of confidence that an individual has in another person to act in a fair, predictable and competent manner (Camgöz & Karapinar, 2016). The actions of another person have to drive an organization from one level to another through spearheading the attainment of set targets. Schoorman et al. (2007) argued that interpersonal trust improves cohesiveness among employees and supervisors, cements the working relationship between the two parties but creates an environment where one person becomes vulnerable to the actions of another. Workers who are more committed and dedicated to the organization perform better, are loyal and contribute to the competitiveness of the firm through quality service delivery to customers (McEvily & Tortoriello, 2011).

Knoll and Gill (2011) argued that organizations enhance skills and competencies among employees through long-term relationships that exist as a result of continuous interactions. These competencies can be technical skills and are shared among employees to drive service delivery. Supervisors foster interpersonal trust through the willingness to be obliged to the promises they put forward and stick to them. Trust in an organization exists between individuals on a personal basis even though it is built after a long period complemented with incessant interaction (Krot & Lewicka, 2012). Trust can be horizontal or vertical but its motive is the achievement of quality service delivery (Hoe, 2007; Lewicka & Krot, 2013). In a study carried out by Ali and Miralam (2019) among the IT professionals in Saudi Arabia on 320 individuals established that work experience is positively related to interpersonal trust. Lazányi (2016) further exemplified that employees with a high level of work experience command a higher degree of interpersonal trust among organizational employees.

Work Engagement

Kahn (1990) was among the first scholars to theorize the term work engagement and described employees who are engaged in their work activities as being cognitively, emotionally and physically connected to what they do. This original conceptualization of the term emphasizes that engaged employees put a lot of effort to work and always associate themselves with it. Employees

that burst with energy are devoted to their work tasks and are immersed in their work activities (Bakker, 2011). Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) argued that work engagement is a work-related positive state that is characterized by dedication, absorption and vigor. Absorption is depicted by being fully immersed in work and concentrating on an activity whereas vigor is the level of energy and mental resilience while working and dedication is when an employee is fully involved in a work activity despite its challenges (Jena & Pradhan, 2017). Thus, employees who are engaged in their work are physically and emotionally energized, immersed, and strive to attain client satisfaction; good financial returns, creativity and innovation and reduce absenteeism at work (Bakker, 2011; Bakker & Demerouti, 2018). Douglas and Roberts (2020) collected data from 181 employees of private organizations that provide support to the aviation and aerospace industry in the United States of America. The study results revealed that older employees who command a higher level of work experience are more engaged in their work as compared to their junior counter parts. Bayl-Smith and Griffin (2014) further expounded that; work experience that comes as a result of age an employee has spent with an organization is positively associated with work engagement.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this study were collected between November 2019 and March 2020 as part of a survey conducted on the level of interpersonal trust and work engagement as a function of work experience among health based NGO employees in Uganda. The population comprised of 85,000 employees of NGOs dealing in clinical health located in the central region of Uganda. The selection of employees followed a random sampling technique from a list of NGOs. The employees included executive directors, project managers and other employees who were knowledgeable in the services offered by NGOs.

Since the population was known to be 85,000 workers of NGOs, using the Yamane (1973) formula where, $n=N/1+N(e)^2$, the required sample size of this study is 398 employees. However, to hedge for non-response risk, 460 questionnaires were given out Sax, Gilmartin and Bryant (2003) and of which 410 questionnaires were returned and used for data analysis. This accounted for a response rate of 89%. The sample comprised of 226 employees who had worked in organizations for less than 6 years and 184 employees who had worked in organizations for more than 6 years. The researcher and research assistants administered the questionnaires in order to guide the respondents during the process of filling them. It contained background information in the first section, while in the second section were measures for interpersonal trust and the third section had measures for work engagement.

Data Analysis Technique

With the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 24, the data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The perception of employees in regard to interpersonal trust and work engagement was analyzed to answer the research question: to what extent do employees perceive the climate of interpersonal trust and work engagement? We conducted further analysis to proceed with the second research question. At this stage, Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to answer the question: how do interpersonal trust and work engagement differs by years of experience? In each test, one continuous variable was used as a dependent variable (i.e interpersonal trust in the first test and work engagement in the second); and one categorical independent variable (work experience).

FINDINGS

Table 1 indicates that 55.6 percent of the employees of Health based NGOs who participated in this study were male and the majority were aged between 36 and 45 years (49.5%). The findings also showed that 55.1 percent of the respondents had less than six years of experience at work. The majority of the respondents included in the sample were married (82.7%).

Table 1. Respondents' Characteristics

Gender	**Frequency**	**Percentage (%)**
Female	182	44.4
Male	228	55.6
Age		
18-25	8	2.0
26-35	110	27.8
36-45	203	49.5
46-55	74	18.0
56-65	15	3.7
Marital status		
Married	339	82.7
Not Married	71	17.3
Years of experience		
≤ 6 years of experience	226	55.1
> 6 years of experience	184	44.9

N=410 (100%)

The perception about interpersonal trust was assessed to estimate a level of confidence that employees had towards their supervisors to act in a fair, predictable and competent manner. Table 2 indicates the summary of responses from a Likert scale, whereby the 5-point scale was summarized to a 3-point scale i.e. *agree*, *average* and *disagree.* The Table shows that the majority of the respondents agreed that their supervisors could be trusted to make sensible decisions (78.8%), always do the required job (75.4%), and can be relied upon to do as they say (61.8%). However, majority of the respondents think that supervisors take advantage of their problems (64.3%), also they take advantage of those who are vulnerable (62.9%), and the employees cannot rely on other workmates to perform their job (55.4%). The total score for the variable was calculated in order to generate the mean score. Results show that there are mixed perceptions about the issue of trust because the overall mean score for the level of interpersonal trust (IT) is 3.105 (n=410, s=0.411) which is close to the average value of 3.

Table 2. Employees' Perception on Interpersonal Trust

Items	Disagree	Average	Agree	Mean $\bar{x}$	Std. Dev. (s)
My fellow workers do their jobs even if supervisors are not around	38.5	9.8	51.7	3.03	1.51
I can trust people I work with to lend me a hand if I need it	41.7	22.7	35.6	2.84	1.25
When I get into challenging situations, my workmates always help me out	51.7	23.7	24.6	2.66	1.32
I can rely on other workmates not to make my job more difficult by careless work	55.4	20.7	23.9	2.61	1.27

I have full confidence in the skills of my workmates	45.2	24.4	30.4	2.75	1.37
Most of my workmates can be relied upon to do as they say	18.7	19.5	61.8	3.71	1.29
Supervisors at my firm are sincere in meeting the workers' point of view	7.3	20.5	72.2	3.92	0.99
Supervisors can be trusted to make sensible decisions to the firm's future	6.3	14.9	78.8	4.00	0.94
Supervisors at my work place always do the required job	6.3	18.3	75.4	4.04	1.01
I think managers do not try to get an upper hand in the organization	48.8	23.7	27.5	2.70	1.35
I think supervisors do not take advantage of our problems	64.3	6.6	29.1	2.50	1.43
Managers do not take advantage of people who are vulnerable	62.9	4.9	32.2	2.50	1.56

Overall Interpersonal Trust mean score = 3.105 (5-point Likert Scale), Std. Dev. (s) = 0.411, n=410

The perception of work engagement was also assessed on a Likert scale. Table 3 indicates that employees are proud of their work (79.1%), they think that their work is challenging hence they think about the next step (69.8%), they find their jobs inspiring (61.9%). However, the respondents disagreed on other aspects of work engagement; majority of the respondents cannot stay focused (58.8%), cannot persevere difficulties (53.4%), and can easily detach themselves from their job (52.9%). Thereafter, a total score was calculated and the resulting overall mean score was 3.16 (s =0.397, n=410), which means that there are mixed perceptions about the level of work engagement.

Table 3. Employees' Perception on Work Engagement

Items	Disagree	Average	Agree	Mean $\bar{x}$	Std. Dev. (s)
I feel good and energetic while fulfilling my duties	28.3	14.9	56.8	3.28	1.36
I feel strong and vigorous to do my work	38.8	22.7	38.5	2.94	1.29
I feel like going to work as soon as I wake up in the morning	50.4	23.2	26.4	2.61	1.36
I can continue working beyond required working hours	48.7	19.0	32.3	2.74	1.37
At my work, I always persevere, even when things do not go well	53.4	14.4	32.2	2.64	1.40
I am enthusiastic/ passionate about my job	7.5	42.0	50.5	3.62	0.97
My job inspires me	7.6	30.5	61.9	3.75	0.91
I am proud of the work I do	6.3	14.6	79.1	4.02	0.91
My job position has a meaningful purpose	25.4	13.9	60.7	3.54	1.37
My job is challenging and keeps me thinking about the next step	21.2	9.0	69.8	3.83	1.41

I feel happy when I am working intensely	15.9	60.0	24.1	3.09	0.94
I am immersed in my work	13.9	54.4	31.7	3.22	0.93
Time flies when I am working	52.1	9.8	38.1	2.77	1.56
When I am working, I forget everything else around me	58.8	11.5	29.7	2.63	1.40
It is difficult to detach myself from my job	52.9	8.5	38.6	2.77	1.59

Overall work engagement mean score = 3.16 (5-point Likert Scale), Std. Dev. (s) = 0.397, n=410

Figure 1 shows differences in the perceptions of the level of interpersonal trust for separate groups of employees based on years of experience (2 groups). Employees who have spent less than 6 years with the organization had the lowest level of interpersonal trust, compared to those who have been with the organization for more than 6 years.

In order to assess whether the differences in the level of interpersonal trust among health-based NGO employees as indicated in Figure 1 is statistically significant, we run a non – parametric test i.e. Mann-Whitney U test analysis after our data failing to meet the stringent assumption of the parametric technique such as normality distribution of data and homogeneity of variance as indicated in Appendix 1. The study adopted the Mann-Whitney U test analysis to explore the differences between the two groups of employees.

Table 4: Mann Whitney U Test (Years of Experience Vs Interpersonal Trust)

Years of experience	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Less than 6 years	226	199.12	45001.50
More than 6 years	184	213.33	39253.50
Total	410		

Test Statistics[a]	**Interpersonal trust total score**
Mann-Whitney U	19350.50
Wilcoxon W	45001.50
Z	-1.21
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.23

a. Grouping Variable: years of experience (2 groups)
b. r = z / square root of N where N = total number of cases.
c. Cohen (1988) criteria of .1=small effect, .3=medium effect, .5=large effect.

The results in Table 4 revealed no significant difference in the level of interpersonal trust of employees with less than 6 years of experience (Md=34, n=226) and those with more than 6 years of experience (Md=35, n=184), U=19350.50, z=-1.21, p=0.23, r=0.06. This implies that as an employee accumulates more experience through the number of years spent in an organization; the level of interpersonal trust does not necessarily increase. The issue of trust does not significantly increase as the employee stays in the organization for many years. Trust is regarded almost equal among all types of employees.

It is revealed that, employees who have worked in an organization for less than 6 years are less engaged with their work compared to those who have been in the organization for more than 6 years. This could be attributed to the knowledge employees accumulate while delivering services to clients and also the need to maintain their jobs so as to retain a steady flow of income. However, in order to examine whether the differences in the level of work engagement indicated in Figure 2 is statistically significant, we run a Mann-Whitney U test to compare between the two groups of employees.

Table 5: Mann Whitney U Test (Years of Experience Vs Work Engagement)

Years of experience	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Less than 6 years	226	170.35	38499.50
More than 6 years	184	248.67	45755.50
Total	410		

Test Statistics[a]	**Work engagement total score**
Mann-Whitney U	12848.500
Wilcoxon W	38499.500
Z	-6.663
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

a. Grouping Variable: years of experience (2 groups)
b. r = z / square root of N where N = total number of cases.
c. Cohen (1988) criteria of .1=small effect, .3=medium effect, .5=large effect.

The results in Table 5 and Appendix 2 reveal that there is a significant difference between the two groups of employees; i.e. the median score on the work engagement scale increased from employees with less than 6 years of experience (Md=42, n=226) to employees with more than 6 years of experience (Md=56.5, n=184), U=12848.50, z=-6.663, p=0.00, with a large effect size (r=0.33). The results imply that the more years an employee stays with an organization; the more an individual gets engaged with the organization's work.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Employees in NGOs have varying perceptions of the climate of interpersonal trust and work engagement. The different scores in Tables 2 and 3 stipulate this change. Research on the variation of interpersonal trust as a function of work experience has revealed mixed results (Lazányi, 2016). Bidarian and Jafari's (2012) study revealed that the more work experience an employee possesses, the more trusted is an individual in the organization. This concurs with the findings of Ali and Miralam (2019) who established that work experience influences the level of interpersonal trust supervisors have in their subordinates. This is partly attributed to the skills and competencies employees accumulate during their stay with an organization (De Sivatte et al., 2019).

Our findings concur with Allam's (2017b) where there was no significant variation in interpersonal trust depending on the professional work experience of employees. This is because, even though employees accumulate work experience over the time of stay with the organization, this does not guarantee supervisors' trust to such individuals. This is because there are instances where supervisors tend to trust employees but end up costing organizations with their new innovative ways of executing work tasks that do not materialize.

Furthermore, research on the discrepancy in work engagement as a function of work experience has established varied results (Petrovic, Cizmic & Vukelic, 2017). Sharma and Nambudiri's (2020) study suggested that an employee's work experience makes an individual more engaged to the work tasks. This is in line with the findings of Macdonald and Levy (2016) who observed that experienced employees that take their jobs as an important aspect of their lives seem likely to be more engaged in their work. This is partially due to the time employees spend with an organization and marshal all their energies to the achievement of organizational objectives. The findings of our study were supported by Saks and Gruman (2011) where variation in work engagement occurs depending on the experience of employees. This implies that, the longer the period an employee works for an organization, the more skills and competencies workers gain. Such competencies motivate employees to get engaged in their work tasks.

The study findings further demonstrate a variation in work engagement basing on work experience, which is statistically significant at 0.001 ($p<0.05$), and a change in interpersonal trust as a function of work experience, which is statistically insignificant at 0.23 ($p>0.05$). This implies that, there is a difference between work engagement and interpersonal trust among employees of NGOs in Uganda based on work experience. This could have contributed to the mixed results as shown in the literature.

Practically, there is a need for NGOs always to strive to retain experienced employees for a long time. Such employees possess commendable skills and competencies required in the execution of organizational goals and objectives. Furthermore, experienced workers get engaged in their work tasks and pass over such skills and competencies to the junior entrants in the organizations. This informs NGOs whether health based or otherwise that, experience of employees matters in the delivery of quality services to the clients. However, these organizations should be aware that interpersonal trust in a firm not necessarily depends on work experience.

Employees in NGOs should always be encouraged to welcome new juniors in organizations and interact with them regularly when working on their job tasks. This will help share and transfer knowledge between the two sets of individuals and lead to work engagement as a result of confidence attained based on the acquired new skills and competencies. Supervisors should also be encouraged to develop a good working relationship with their subordinates and create an environment of trust as supported by the findings of our study.

CONCLUSION

The study explored employees' perceptions at work and whether there is a difference in interpersonal trust and work engagement among employees working in health based NGOs based on work experience and whether the difference is significant. The findings of the study show that there is a difference in interpersonal trust and work engagement of employees in NGOs based on work experience. The difference for the case of work engagement is significant and for interpersonal trust, the difference is insignificant. This is attributed to the interactions established in organizations between supervisors and subordinates.

The findings do not suggest that all employees should have the same level of work experience to develop a good working relationship with fellow employees and also be highly engaged in their work activities. This study has highlighted the various ways of encouraging interpersonal trust and also improving work engagement in organizations and therefore, the management of NGOs should always look out for such approaches. Our study is limited by the direction we took to evaluate

interpersonal trust and work engagement as a function of work experience. Therefore, with more resources, interpersonal trust and work engagement could be evaluated basing on other attributes such as employees' gender, education level, and location as they move from one organization to another over an extended period of time.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Test for Normality

	Years of experience	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	Df	Sig.
Interpersonal Trust (IT) score	Less than 6 years	0.168	226	0.000	0.925	226	0.000
	More than 6 years	0.167	184	0.000	0.933	184	0.000
Work engagement (WE) score	Less than 6 years	0.129	226	0.000	0.928	226	0.000
	More than 6 years	0.190	184	0.000	0.887	184	0.000

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

This assesses the normality of the distribution of scores. A non-significant result (**Sig.** value of more than 0.05) indicates normality. In this case, the Sig. value is 0.000, suggests violation of the assumption of normality (it was expected for this large sample). Therefore, a non-parametric test is chosen

Appendix 2: Descriptive Statistics for the Variables

Years of Experience		Interpersonal trust (IT)	Work Engagement (WE)
Less than 6 years	Minimum	18.00	22.00
	Maximum	20.00	64.00
	Median	34.00	42.00
	Range	41.00	42.00
	Mean	36.82	43.63
	N	226	226
	Std. Deviation	9.87	12.22
More than 6 years	Minimum	20.00	25.00
	Maximum	55.00	75.00
	Median	35.00	56.50
	Range	35.00	50.00
	Mean	37.82	53.47
	N	184	184
	Std. Deviation	9.27	13.26
	N	410	410
	Std. Deviation	9.60618	13.59412