

# Role of Social Support in Enhancing Employee Engagement

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose** –Improving engagement among workers can have imperative implications for organizational effectiveness. The purpose of this paper is to identify the role of social support in enhancing employee engagement.

**Methodology**- The survey questionnaire was validated using a pilot data ( $\alpha=0.891$ ). Simple random sampling method was used to select the program analysts. 400 questionnaires were distributed in which 305 were returned. Descriptive statistics and structural equation modelling were used to predict and estimate the relationships.

**Findings** – It was found that the social support construct emerged as a prominent indicator for employee engagement, in which the supervisor support emerged as the strongest out of the three variables. However, all the identified factors were enablers of employee engagement ( $R^2=0.613$ ).

**Practical implications** – The results of this study, provides insight on the importance of social support- with special reference to supervisor support, competence development practices, job characteristics and communication in the workplace as they have shown significantly higher impact on employee engagement. Hence, a work environment that fosters interpersonal harmony between the workers, provides scope for autonomy, skill and variety in the job and enhances communication are vital for effective performances that will eventually lead to organizational effectiveness.

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## Introduction

For a country like India, Information technology is playing an imperative role today and has transformed its image from a slow moving bureaucratic economy to a land of innovation. India's IT Services industry was born in Mumbai in 1967 with the establishment of Tata Group in partnership with Burroughs .The IT sector in India is generating 2.5 million direct employments and is one of the biggest IT capitals of the modern world (Kamdar, 2006). According to NASSCOM 2015(National Association of Software and Services Companies, 2015) ,Indian IT-BPM sector continues to be one of the largest employers in the country directly employing nearly 3.5 million professionals. The future

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of Indian IT-BPO industry depends on availability of quality manpower, capability of Indian industry to move up the value chain from technology services to innovation. One of the most critical contributors to the genesis and development of this industry is human capital. To develop, recruit and retain the best talents employee engagement is an effective tool.

Employee engagement in general is the degree to which an employee is physically, emotionally and cognitively (Kahn, 1990) attached to the job they perform and the level of commitment and discretionary efforts they exert towards the organization. Engaged individuals are described as being psychologically present, fully there, attentive, feeling, connected, integrated, and focused in their role performances (Rich, Lepine and Crawford 2010). The potential success of a business lies in its people and having engaged employees are most sought after because of the monumental impact they have on the bottom line outcomes (Harter, Schmidt and Keyes, 2002). Kahn (1990 p.692) is the pioneer of the term “engagement” who first conceptualised that employee use varying degrees of self in their role performances and it is a rational decision taken by the employee to be engaged in their work. In addition, he articulated that “people employ and express or withdraw and defend their preferred selves on the basis of their psychological experiences of self-in-role” and thus described the three psychological conditions namely meaningfulness, safety and availability

Based on the three psychological conditions, Rich et al. (2010) posit that perceptions of organizational and work factors related to tasks and roles are the main influences on psychological meaningfulness; perceptions of social systems related to support and relationships are the main influences on psychological safety; and self-perceptions of confidence and self-consciousness are the main influences on psychological availability. Social support plays a vital role in enhancing engagement mainly because it fosters interpersonal harmony among the workers and is essential for maintaining cordial relations which eventually results in better engagement levels and ultimately leads to organizational effectiveness. Based on the extant literature, holding Kahn’s framework as the base, this study has identified some of the significant drivers as enablers of employee engagement.

## **Literature Review**

### **Employee Engagement**

The last 2.6 decades has seen a prolific growth in the engagement literature. Employee engagement is most sought after amidst academicians and practitioners alike because of its monumental impact and expected outcome on the individuals and at the organization level (Saks, 2006; Wagner and Harter, 2006; Fleming and Asplund, 2007). The first mention of the term “engagement” was by Kahn and Katz (1966) “they engage in occasional innovative and cooperative behavior beyond the requirements of role but in the service of organizational objectives” in their work to achieve organizational effectiveness. In 1990, Kahn’s ethnographic study where he articulates the concept of self-in role performances as personal engagement and personal disengagement and went on to define engagement as “personal engagement 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". The 1990s witnessed early ripples of scientific work on engagement and the decade closes with a flood of interest from practitioners (Welch, 2011). Wide arrays of frameworks and different conceptualizations of engagement have emerged in the past 2.5 decades. Kahn (1992) posited engagement is observed through the *behavioural investment* of personal physical, cognitive, and emotional energy into work (Rich et al., 2010). Gallup researchers (Harter et al., 2002; Harter and Schmidt, 2008) view engagement as a combination of cognitive and emotional antecedent variables in the workplace (Welch, 2011). More significant engagement literature emerged from the burnout coined as the antithesis of engagement (Maslach, Jackson and Leiter 1997). They propound that burnout consists of mental exhaustion, cynicism, and restricted professional efficiency.

There was a swell of interest from the practitioners domain; Hewitt Associates LLC (2004) who defined employee engagement as "the state in which individuals are emotionally and intellectually committed to the organisation or group, as measured by three primary behaviours: Say, stay and strive (p. 2) and also linked high engagement to high business performance. Gallup researchers came up with the Gallup Workplace Audit (GWA) (Harter et al., 2002) and the Q12 employee engagement questionnaire (Harter et al., 2003; Harter and Schmidt, 2008) and propounded that an employee can be called engaged if he could say 'yes' to all the questions in GWA/Q12.

Employee engagement is a crucial aspect of business and engaged employees are the need of the hour because people are the most important asset of the company. Recruiting the best talents is imperative but even more significant task is to retain them in the long. It has been understood that employees decision to engage is a very rational and a personal choice (Kahn, 1990). Hence, it is important for organizations to create environments where employees can find themselves fully engaged in their job role performances. Kahn (1990; 1992) in his study has attributed three psychological conditions namely meaningfulness, safety and availability for an employee to engage in the work place. Meaningfulness (task and role characteristics, work interactions), safety (social elements, including management style, interpersonal relationships and organisational norms) and availability (individual distractions influences being physical, emotional energies etc.).

This study has adapted Kahn's three psychological conditions and other significant studies (May et al. 2004; Saks, 2006; Rich et al., 2010) that propose some of the prominent drivers as the rationale for identifying the major drivers that aid engagement in the workplace.

### **Enablers of employee engagement**

Currently, Kahn (1990) study has been widely attributed psychological conditions, such as safety, availability and meaningfulness, to employee engagement levels. May et al., (2004) empirical work revealed that job enrichment and work role were strong predictors of meaningfulness; rewarding co-workers and supportive supervisors relations were positively associated to psychological safety and consequently resources available are positively related to availability. Indicative publications (Robinson, 2004; Saks, 2006; Hicks, O'Reilly and Bahr, 2014) have developed different influencers for employee engagement such as job characteristics (Saks, 2006), perceived organizational support (POS)

(Saks,2006), leadership (Kular et al., 2008), rewards (Biswas and Bhatnagar,2013), working environment and team and co-worker relationship(Anita,2014). Taking the viewpoints from the above literature, various enablers of engagement were selected and empirically tested to be strong enablers of engagement.

### **Job characteristics and employee engagement**

Job characteristics is the extent to which jobs involves a variety of skills, autonomy and provide feedback enables the organization members to experience meaningfulness, responsibility fosters engagement (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Hackman and Oldham(1980) have identified skill variety,task identity and task significance as contributing towards the psychological state of meaningfulness(Kahn 1990;1992) whereas autonomy is associated towards the experienced responsibility for outcomes of work. Being enriched in the role provides gratification, greater self-esteem and a positive emotional response to the role(Rothbard,2001). Jobs designed in this aspect let people to bring more of their selves in the roles to be performed (Kahn,1992;May et al., 2004). Pandey and David(2013)identified work environment-motivating and fulfilling work environment, pride in working with organisation, respect employees opinion and ideas count as key determinants of engagement. SHRM(2016) has identified the meaningfulness of the job opportunities to use skills and abilities and work itself as a top condition for engagement.Further Saks(2006) posit that employees who are provided with enriched and challenging jobs will feel obliged to respond with higher levels of engagement.Hence, H1 follows

H1: Job characteristics will be positively related to employee engagement.

### **Social Support and employee engagement**

**Social Support.** Social support has been considered as a multidimensional concept encompassing variables such as supervisor support, support from co-workers, and support from customers.(Choi,Geong,Geinberg,2012) This is in line with Eisenberg ,Huntington, Hutchison, and Sowa, (1986) that employees differ greatly in their acceptance of the reciprocity norm in terms of perceived organization and supervisor support in regard to work. Saks(2006) posit that the two main components of social support comes from perceived organizational and supervisor support in congruence with Kahn(1990,1992) safety dimension-the amount of care and support provided by the organization and supervisor. Social exchange theory is based on a central foundation which states that when two parties in a state of reciprocal interdependence interact with each other, obligations are generated (Saks, 2006). Thus, this study encompasses supervisor ,peer, team and co-worker support under the construct of social support.

**Supervisor Support.** Supervisors act as agents of the organization, who have responsibility for directing and evaluating subordinates' performance, employees would view their supervisor's favorable or unfavorable orientation toward them as indicative of the organization's support (Eisenberger et al., 1986).The relationship a worker has with the supervisor plays a crucial role in determining his engagement level (Kahn, 1990; May et al.2004) and has been found to have the greatest impact on psychological safety (May et al., 2004). The manager plays a crucial role in engagement

(Lockwood,2007). Supportive supervisors are sought after because they encourage a supportive work environment, display concern for employees needs and encourage them to develop new skills(Pandey and David,2013). Payne & Huffman (2005) strongly indicate that immediate managers play a major role in employee turnover decisions. Therefore,H2 follows:

**Team And Co-Worker Support.** Team work is an integral part of organization effectiveness and refers to the formation of a group of employees who cooperate with each other toward a mutual goal(Mehrzi and Singh,2016). It is an important aspect that emphasises explicitly the interpersonal harmony aspect of employee engagement(Anita 2014;SHRM 2016). It is important to have good relationship with co-workers(Anita 2014) and supervisors because only when the organization members perceive the situation positive in terms of behavioural consequences he/she engages his self in the work role that should be done.May et al.,(2004) and Anita (2014) identified that co-worker support that emanates rewarding interpersonal support orient greater meaning towards the work they do and also reflects safety in terms of behavioural consequences

Therefore H2 follows:

H2: Social support will be positively related to employee engagement.

## **Human Resource Management Practices and employee engagement**

**Competence Development Practices.** HRD practices cover a wide variety of issues, including employee training and development, learning opportunities (HR Focus 2016), career development, meaning full personal growth(May et al.,2004) knowledge management and organizational change. If necessary initiatives are taken for talent and skill development, India can carve a niche in innovative technologies in emerging areas like climate change adaptation and mitigation, healthcare services(Sharma, 2014). It could also become a hub of services of a different kind such as those targeting geriatric populations in the developed world (given the fact it will have a relatively younger population while China and Western countries will be grappling with an ageing population). Training and career development is another important dimension which is to be considered in the process of engaging employees since it helps the employees to concentrate on a focused work dimension and thereby builds his/her confidence and helps to enhance the career path(Pandey and David.,2103; Anita ,2014).Bhatnagar(2007) posit that factors like growth opportunities and career development (SHRM 2016) if not tended to might lead to attrition

Hence H3 follows

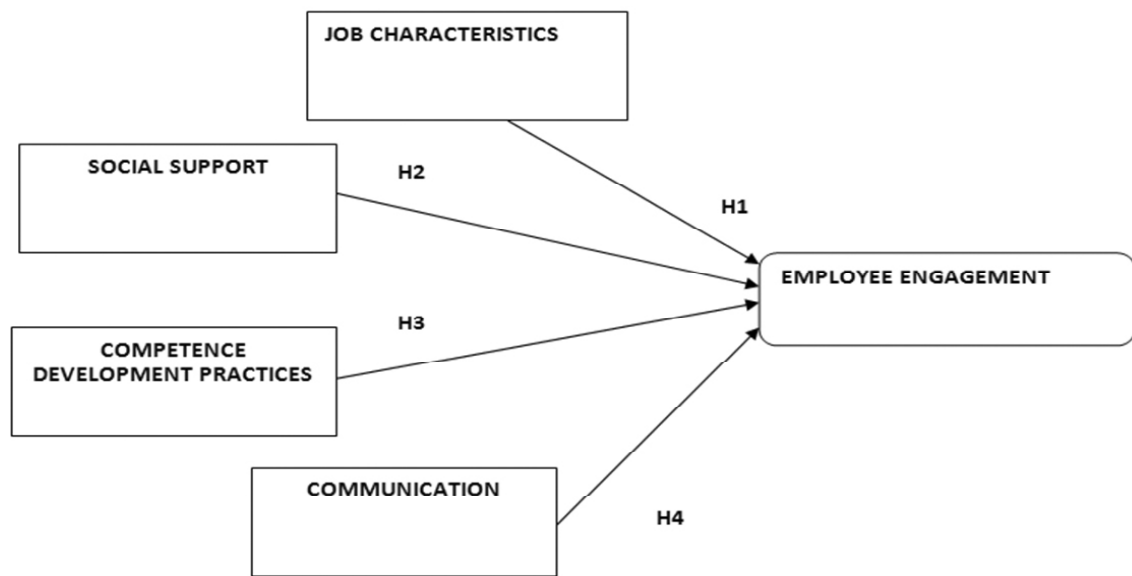
H3: Competence development practices will be positively related to employee engagement.

## **Communication and Employee engagement**

**Communication.** Communication has been identified as an underlying factor associated with employee engagement (Kahn, 1992;Welch, 2011).It is one form of employee psychological need(Kahn 1990,1992)

which organisations have to meet to maintain and develop employee engagement(Welch,2011). Robinson et al.,(2004),Pandey and David(2013) have identified communication as a strong driver of engagement for encouraging employees to voice their opinion in decision making. Managers can create an environment through communication where employees feel happier and more passionate about their jobs and exhibit attitudes for improved organisational performance (Dasgupta ,Suar and Singh2011).

H4: Communication will be positively related to employee engagement. Based on the four hypothesis mentioned above the theoretical framework is shown below in Figure 1.



**Figure1: Theoretical Framework**

## Research Objectives

1. To identify the engagement level among the employees.
2. To identify the prominent enablers of EE.
3. To identify the impact of social support on EE.
4. Research Methodology

## Measures

All the responses were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale with anchors (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. The instrument was validated using pilot data from 60 respondents. Reliability of the various factors through the instrument was found to be statistically significant which can be seen below.

### **a) Employee Engagement**

This study adapted Kahn's (1990) multidimensional framework, and hence employee engagement was measured using the 18-item Job Engagement Scale (JES; Rich et al., 2010). The JES is a three-factor scale (cognitive, emotional, and physical engagement) with separate scales for each factor. Internal consistency reliability estimates for each subscale was as follows: cognitive engagement,  $\alpha = .89$  (6 items); emotional engagement,  $\alpha = .91$  (6 items); physical engagement,  $\alpha = .853$  (6 items). Reliability estimates for the combined scale was  $\alpha = .91$  (18 items).

### **b) Job Characteristics'**

Job characteristics were measured by six items from Hackman and Oldham (1980). Internal consistency reliability estimate for job characteristic,  $\alpha = .76$  (6 items).

### **c) Social Support**

Co-worker, peer and supervisor support were measured using the scale developed by Iverson, Olekalns, and Erwin (1998). The consistency reliability estimates for each subscale

in the current study was as follows: co-worker support  $\alpha = .842$  (3 items), peer  $\alpha = .92$  (3 items), supervisor  $\alpha = .89$  (3 items). The overall reliability is  $\alpha = .930$  (9 items).

### **d) Human Resource Management Practices**

HRM practices which cover competence development practices (CDP), recognition and reward practices, were measured using a scale developed by Tremblay, Rondeau, and Lemelin (1998). Internal consistency reliability estimates for each subscale in the current study was as follows: CDP  $\alpha = .85$  (6 items), rewards  $\alpha = .78$  (5 items), recognition  $\alpha = .91$  (6 items). The overall reliability is  $\alpha = .92$  (17 items).

### **e) Communication**

Communication was measured using a 4 item questionnaire developed by Robinson (2004). The overall reliability is  $\alpha = .68$  (4 items).

## **Sample selection and data collection**

Data for the study was collected from 305 Program Analysts (PA) in a medium sized IT company in Coimbatore District. PA are the new entrants to the organization who come under the category for a span of three years. They are the potential prospects of the future IT scenario who will occupy the head positions. Hence, retaining such crucial talents play a strategic role. Data was collected via questionnaire, online mode and telephonic method. Regression technique was used to identify the level of prediction made by the various factors on employee engagement. Then the above mentioned models were represented in a path diagram separately and estimated using the structural equation modelling (SEM) technique.

## Results

### To identify the engagement levels

The overall engagement level of employees showed a mean value of 3.9, which shows that the employees are engaged in physical, emotional and cognitive dimensions.

### Prediction of the enablers of employee engagement

Regression analysis was carried out to find out the impact of predictors on engagement, it was found that all the factors were statistically significant with an adjusted r2 value of 62%, as displayed in table 2. This explains that the enablers identified can predict employee engagement up to 58%.

The ANOVA, Table III, generated in this test for the model fit also shows a significant probability value (  $p=0.000$  ) and signifies that all the enablers identified in the study namely job characteristics, social support, competence development practices and communication significantly explain employee engagement.

Therefore 58% of variance in employee engagement is influenced by factors – namely job characteristics, social support, competence development practices and communication.

The following regression equation is derived from Table III.

Employee engagement is  $0.320 \times \text{job characteristics} + 0.122 \times \text{competence development practices} + 0.209 \times \text{communication} + .199 \times \text{social support}$ . This equation vindicates the influence antecedents have on employee engagement and that these antecedents can be used to predict engagement.

### Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.766 <sup>a</sup>	.587	.582	.33962

a. Predictors: Social Support, Job characteristics, Competence Development Practices and Communication

**Table 1: Regression model summary-EE**

### ANOVA<sup>a</sup>

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	49.275	4	12.319	106.799	.000 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	34.603	300	.115		
Total	83.878	304			

a. Dependent Variable: Employee Engagement

b. Predictors: Social Support, Job characteristics, Competence Development Practices and Communication

**Table 2: ANOVA results for EE model**



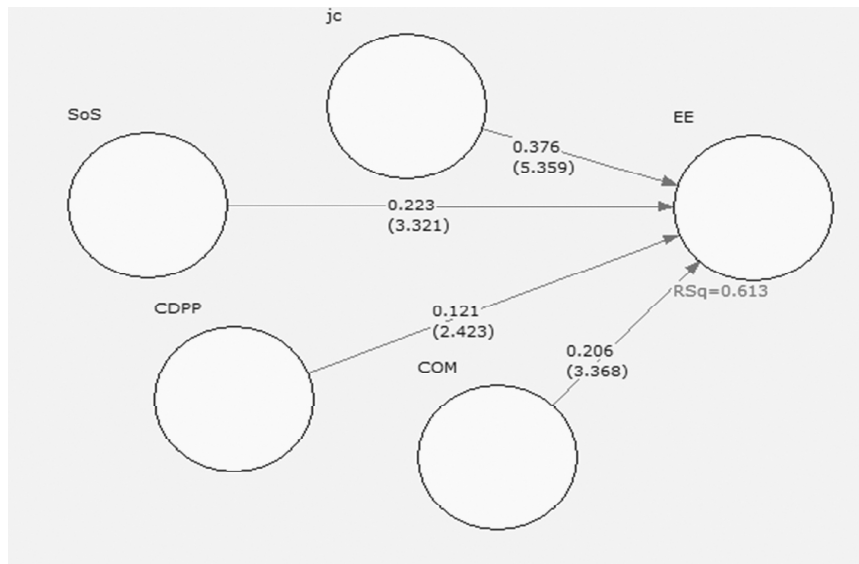
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.770	160		4.812	.000
	JC	.320	051	.355	6.274	.000
	CDP	.122	056	.126	2.202	.028
	COMM	.209	050	.219	4.161	.000
	SOCSUP	.199	055	.218	3.637	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Employee Engagement

**Table 3: Regression Co-efficients for employee engagement**

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). Is used to find the causal relationship between the variables as both measurement and structural model are tested simultaneously. Partial Least squares (PLS) one of the structural modelling technique to examine the significance of the relationships between the drivers of engagement and employee engagement and critically views if the model is fit or not.

**Estimated model using PLS**

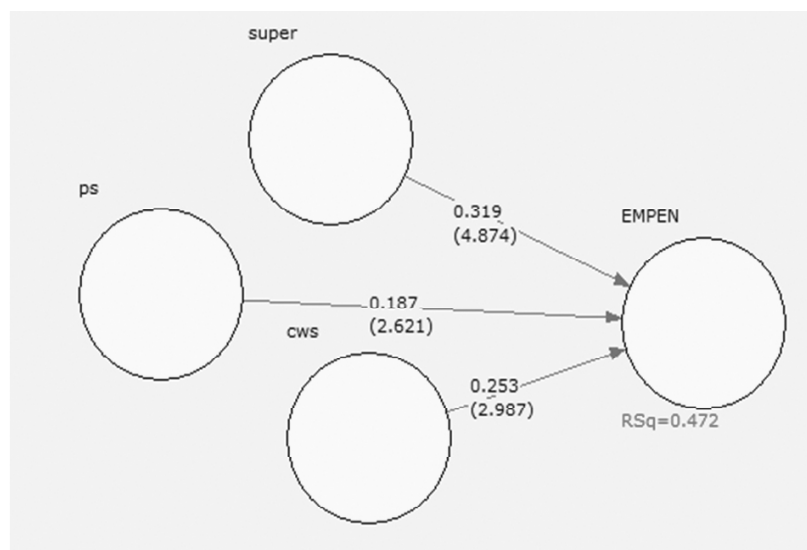


**Figure 2 : Validated model of drivers on employee engagement**

PLS is the technique used in the initial stages of model development. All relationships in the path diagram can be estimated to quantify the effects between dependent and independent variables even if interrelated (Hair et al., 2003).

Analysis through partial least squares regression shows that the factors social support ( $t=3.321$ ,  $\hat{\alpha}=0.223$ ), job characteristics ( $t=5.359$ ,  $\hat{\alpha}=0.376$ ), communication ( $t=3.368$ ,  $\hat{\alpha}=0.206$ ) and competence development ( $t=2.423$ ,  $\hat{\alpha}=0.121$ ) are the factors that impact employee engagement significantly. Hence, this study shows that job characteristics, social support, competence development and communication are the most significant factors in predicting employee engagement in the IT sector.

### Impact of SS on enhancing EE



**Figure 3: Impact of Social Support on Employee Engagement**

From the figure 3, it can be understood that all the three variables of the social support construct are significant in predicting the levels of engagement. Hence, the reigning prominence of social support for employee engagement can be understood. Studies vindicate that the role of immediate supervisor/manager is pivotal for the employees to be engaged in the workforce. This is congruent with the present study which entail that out of the three variables in the present study, supervisor support is the most prominent indicator predicting 31 percent of EE. This further suggests that employees find themselves more engaged only when they perceive support, trust and help from the supervisors.

### Discussion

The results of the regression analysis indicate that the independent variables identified to influence employee engagement do have a significant impact in determining the engagement level of the employees. The t-values in Table III implies that social support job characteristics, competence

development practices communication are the most influential factors on employee engagement as they are statistically significant at 0.01 level of significance. The beta values also suggest that social support explains 36 per cent as an enabler of EE, whereas communication explains 28 per cent, job characteristics explains 22 percent and competence development practices explain 15 percent as an enabler of EE. This propounds the importance of a healthy social support, good communication, job characteristics and competence development practices as vital for employees to be engaged in the workplace. From figure 3, the importance of social support to determine the levels of engagement can be understood. Hence, organizations have to invest in their manpower skills and see to that managers have good interpersonal skills and foster good teamwork and communication skills as those will be the deciding points for engagement levels. The findings of the study propound that employees incline towards the social support in particular the supervisor support for being engaged in the workplace. Hence the organizations must ensure that the supervisors are approachable and updated to carry out their job skills better.

The findings of the study which posit that a good social support, competence development practices, job characteristics (Harter et al., 2002; May et al., 2004; Saks, 2006; Anitha, 2014) and communication (Welch, 2011) is vital for engaged employee is congruent with Kahn's (1990; 1992) psychological condition attributes namely safety and meaningfulness. Hence, a work environment that promotes good interpersonal harmony in terms of good supervisor support, co-worker and peer support and has an excellent communication mode to deliver the right kind of information to the right people at the right times, would be a quintessential employee engagement strategy. A work environment that is robust and caters to the needs of the employees in terms of good supervisor support, availability of right information to carry out their role performances can foster harmony in the workplace that will lead to employee engagement and that will eventually lead to organizational effectiveness. This study posits that job characteristics, competence development practices, communication and social support are significant for program analysts to be engaged in the work force. Considering that the program analysts play a pivotal role in deciding the success of an IT firm, it is not only important to identify the factors for having them engaged but also leverage the talents by creating, sustaining and enhancing the engagement levels. They are the potential prospects of the future IT scenario who will occupy the head positions. Hence, retaining such crucial talents play a strategic role. Likewise, engagement is individual-driven (Kahn, 1990); examining enablers at the individual level broadens the scope of employee engagement. Not only does it broadens the scope of engagement, but majorly explicates on the needs and expectations of the PA and keeps them engaged in their jobs. Nurturing and addressing the needs of the workforce from the basic stages will indefinitely lead to effective and efficient workforce planning

## **Conclusion**

The above study emphasises the magnitude of employee engagement and the various enablers that have to be prevalent for enabling engagement in the workplace. It has been predicted that social support, competence development practices and job characteristics as significant predictors for EE. Hence, this signifies that a healthy environment that fosters good inter personal harmony among

peer, supervisor and co-workers as vital for engagement. Out of which, the supervisor support component plays a major role in influencing the engagement levels. Second, the employees feel a sense of obligation towards the organization when they understand that the firm invests in them and considers them as valuable assets. Thirdly, job characteristics which imply that the more meaning, autonomy, variety an employee is given in his task, the more he finds himself engaged in the task he is performing. Fourth, communication is an innate tool for employee to identify himself with the task to understand the expectations of him and to voice out his opinion. The implications involve significant impact for organizations in terms of developing an engaged workforce and for retaining and recruiting the best talents. Hence, this paper has identified some key enablers for developing and sustaining engagement. This comprehensive model can be used by the academicians and practitioners alike for employee engagement.

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