

## PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE INFLUENCE OF WORK ENGAGEMENT ON SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICES IN SOUTH AFRICA

*Roger MULLER* <sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Nelson Mandela University, South Africa*

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### ABSTRACT

*The automotive industry and its dealerships in South Africa have the potential to contribute to economic growth, create jobs and stimulate competitiveness. However, the industry faces several challenges that affect its long-term viability, organisational outcomes, and sustainability. This study examined the influence of employee work engagement on the sustainability of car dealerships in South Africa. A significant positive relationship between work engagement and sustainability was identified from a sample of sales and service employees (n = 375). Several recommendations are made to increase the level of work engagement of employees and the sustainability of the dealerships to support the achievement of the organisational goals.*

**KEYWORDS:** *automotive, retail, sustainability, work engagement.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

It is often claimed that engaged employees can achieve business goals more effectively, perform better on the job, display higher levels of work commitment and be less absent from their jobs (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017, p. 274; Osborne & Hammoud, 2017, p. 53). Job demands (for example, mental or emotional) and job resources (for example, social support or autonomy) have a significant influence on the formation of engagement (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018, p. 5). Bakker and Demerouti (2017, p. 274) describe work engagement based on the dimensions of vigour, dedication and absorption. Engaged employees feel energised, are enthusiastic about the job and are immersed in their work (Willmer et al., 2019, p. 2).

The primary objective of this study was to determine if car dealerships with engaged sales and service employees can achieve better community engagement, environmental awareness and profitability. In order to consider a holistic organisational sustainability outcome, this study uses the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach, which is part of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and includes the three core aspects of social, ecological and economic performance (Kealy, 2019). The following two research questions were pursued in the study:

- What is the impact of work engagement on the sustainability of car dealerships in South Africa?
- What is the level of work engagement of the dealership employees?

### 2. PROBLEM INVESTIGATED

To best support corporate sustainability through the TBL, companies need employees who put a high level of mental effort and passion into their work (Meintjes & Hofmeyr, 2018, p. 3). However,

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\* Corresponding author. E-mail address: [roger.muller@mandela.ac.za](mailto:roger.muller@mandela.ac.za)

disengaged employees often exhibit counter-productive behaviours and are detrimental to organisational sustainability (Maslach, 2018, p. 11). Sales and service employees are best at creating customer loyalty, in which high engagement is essential (Scherpen et al., 2018, p. 374). This study, therefore, focuses on sales and service employees of car dealerships in South Africa. On average, car dealers with low employee engagement achieve a \$275 lower gross profit per new car than dealers with higher engagement levels (Gallup, 2017, p. 24). In addition, poor sustainability outcomes can negatively impact companies' costs and competitiveness (Magrizos et al., 2020, p. 1; Chen & Huang, 2019, p. 61).

Research reveals that disengaged employees do not meaningfully contribute toward the full potential of a company's outcomes (Gallup, 2017, p. 22; Osborne & Hammoud, 2017, p. 50). Disengagement results in lower morale, more staff lateness and higher absenteeism, which leads to reduced productivity, quality of work and a decline in overall job satisfaction (Bellet et al., 2020, p. 1). According to Gallup's study "State of the Global Workplace" (2017, p. 24), 85% of employees worldwide were disengaged and unhappy at work. In Sub-Sahara Africa, this rate was 83%, and in South Africa, the rate was 85% at the time of the study (Gallup, 2017, p. 24).

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The following sections provide a brief literature review of work engagement and sustainability.

#### 3.1. Work Engagement

The literature uses a variety of definitions of work engagement (WE) in terms of productive work, each with a different character. It has not yet produced a uniform definition (Kavya & Padmavathy, 2017, p. 871). For this study, WE is defined as the extent to which employees exhibit desirable workplace behaviour and sustained discretionary effort towards achieving personal and organisational goals. WE consist of three underlying dimensions: vigour, dedication and absorption (Bakker and Demerouti 2017, p. 274). The concept encapsulates the level of energy employees have, the strength of commitment toward the company and employee involvement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017, p. 274). Osborne and Hammoud (2017, p. 52) describe engagement as a multidimensional learning process for employees and the company to enhance productivity and profitability.

WE is further described as a positive and fulfilling state of professional well-being associated with meaning and security (Rastogi et al., 2018, p. 72). This state can be achieved by providing employees with the necessary job resources (such as autonomy and professional development) to generate enthusiasm, psychological attachment to work, and strength and energy to handle job demands (Radic *et al.*, 2020, p. 2). Job demands are the organisational, social, psychological or physical elements of work that require sustained cognitive or physical effort and are therefore associated with certain psychological and physiological costs. In previous studies, job demands included mental and emotional demands, pace, and amount of work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017, p. 313).

WE is operationalised as consisting of the dimensions of vigour, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al. 2002, p. 144). Individuals with vigour have abundant energy, enthusiasm and stamina while working. Dedication refers to being strongly involved in one's work and experiencing a sense of meaning, significance, inspiration, pride, and challenge in performing work (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004, p. 5). Absorption is characterised by individuals having total concentration and being happily engrossed in work tasks. Absorbed employees perceive time to pass quickly, get carried away while working, and find it difficult to detach themselves from their work.

### 3.2 Sustainability

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) offers companies an orientation for long-term and value-based management, focusing on human needs (Jorberg, 2018, p. 217). A central component of CSR is the idea of sustainability to achieve sustainable business objectives and improve the long-term economic performance of organisations (Kreipl, 2020, p. 237). Approaches toward a sustainable organisational outcome include, for example, the balanced scorecard approach, the Quadruple Bottom Line approach and the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach (Kealy, 2019, p. 108; Pizzirani et al., 2018, p. 668; Lotter, 2017, p. 22; Fonseca, 2015, p. 136; Elkington, 1998, p. 3). Since this study is based less on tangible results and the concrete querying of critical financial ratios but rather on employee perceptions of organisational outcomes, the TBL approach is suitable for this study as a measure of sustainability and to gain a holistic view (Lotter, 2017, p. 23).

Wolfe (1988, p. 140) was the first to describe the bottom line associated with financial outcomes, such as the profit achieved by companies. The TBL approach is a holistic and sustainable approach, divided into three areas of people, planet and profit and considers the social, ecological and economic performance of companies (Kealy, 2019, p. 108; Jorberg, 2018, p. 218; Sukhdeo & Arnolds, 2016, p. 84). These three areas together form the TBL approach, which represents the orientation towards long-term corporate goals (Jorberg, 2018, p. 218; Fonseca, 2015, p. 136). Previous investigations have shown that an exclusive focus on financial performance is negative for both the company and the employees and can lead to lower revenues (Babalola *et al.*, 2020, p. 1). The use of the TBL approach is also oriented toward the sustainability goals of the United Nations (Chetty, 2018, p. 54). This sustainability approach helps companies to expand performance targets and is accepted and relevant in research (Miemczyk & Luzzini, 2019, p. 243). Based on Figure 1, the relevant parts of the TBL as a measure of sustainability are examined in more detail below.

- **Social performance**

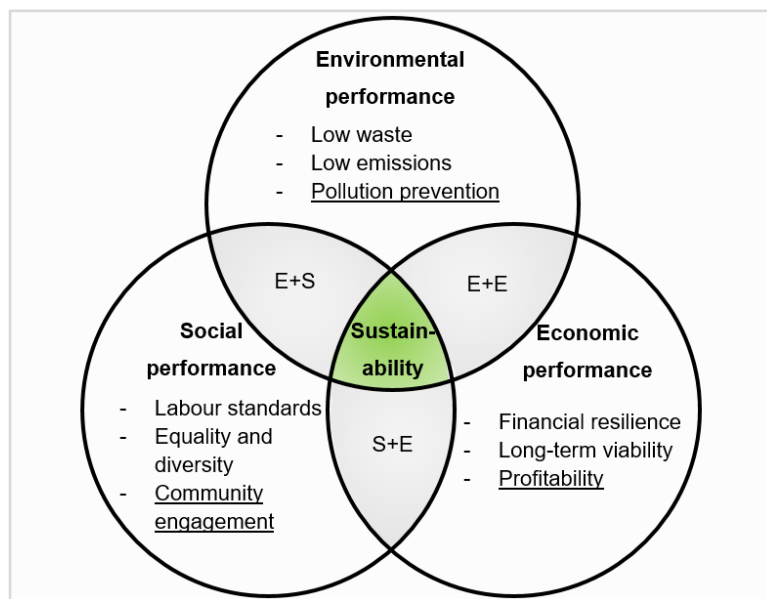
As shown in Figure 1, the social performance dimension includes the aspects of community engagement, labour standards, equality and diversity (Braccini & Margherita, 2018, p. 2; Sukhdeo & Arnolds, 2016, p. 87). Community engagement can be defined as working with groups of people sharing common interests or geographical proximity to reduce problems of social well-being (Ajide, Strachan, Russell & Jones, 2017, p. 61; Cyril et al., 2015, p. 1). Labour standards are described as safe and healthy working conditions and are associated with the involvement of union organisations (Pike, 2020, p. 920). Equality and diversity are defined as healthy employee relations, equal opportunities and fairness regarding ethnicity, nationality, gender or sexual orientation (Sukhdeo & Arnolds, 2016, p. 102; Lourens & Phaho, 2015, p. 635). Avoidance of discrimination, modern workplaces, health management and work-family balance are just a few examples of equality and workforce diversity that are important for employee retention and satisfaction (Günther & Steinke, 2016, p. 208).

- **Environmental performance**

The environmental performance dimension in Figure 1 shows the integration of different standards of organisations regarding low waste, low emissions and pollution prevention to reduce the ecological footprint of companies (Sukhdeo & Arnolds, 2016, p. 87). Low waste is the reduction of unwanted or useless materials, by-products or substances (Bugge et al., 2019, p. 51; Amasuomo & Baird, 2016). Low emissions are associated with measures to improve energy efficiency, renewable energy sources and lower use of carbon fuels (Klitkou et al., 2020, p. 65). Pollution prevention can be described as eliminating pollution at the source and modifying existing processes to reduce hazardous materials, thus preventing discharge into the environment (Basu et al., 2019, p. 1605). Pollution prevention is selected for the environmental performance investigation as it already includes low waste and emissions and aims to prevent pollution in advance for a better environment.

- **Economic performance**

The economic performance dimension in Figure 1 includes financial variables such as financial resilience, long-term viability and profitability (Braccini & Margherita, 2018, p. 2). Financial resilience is the ability to recover from sudden unwanted economic impacts and experiences, cope with external stress and adapt to changing circumstances to achieve financial stability (Salignac et al., 2019, p. 18). Long-term viability can be described as survival, adaptability, innovation, growth and achieving long-term goals and profits (Abuzeinab et al., 2017, p. 30). Profitability can be defined as the generation of profits due to the difference between costs and revenues when an organisation offers products or services (Krause & Dayanand, 2020, p. 11). Profitability is used to measure corporate performance and is considered the most critical parameter for business decisions (Krause & Dayanand, 2020, p. 11).



**Figure 1. Triple Bottom Line (TBL)**

*Source: Kealy (2019, p. 108)*

#### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This empirical study followed the positivistic research paradigm with a quantitative research methodology. The exploratory and descriptive research approaches were used to evaluate the hypothesised relationships between work engagement and sustainability.

##### 4.1 Data collection

Primary data was collected using the survey method and structured online questionnaires. Non-probability convenience sampling was used to invite sales and service personnel with publicly available e-mail addresses to participate in the survey. E-mails were sent requesting potential respondents to voluntarily opt-in by following the embedded link to the questionnaire hosted on the web-based *QuestionPro* platform. Furthermore, snowball sampling was used to achieve a wider questionnaire distribution (Struwig & Stead, 2013, p. 118), resulting in a final sample of 375 completed questionnaires.

## 4.2 Questionnaire design

The questionnaire of the study consisted of three sections:

- Section A consisted of statements measuring employees' perceived work engagement using an ordinal scale. A one-dimensional factor was tested with three items measuring vigour, dedication and absorption, respectively, based on the UWES-3 scale (Schaufeli, 2019, p. 2).
- Section B consisted of statements measuring employees' perceptions regarding the sustainability outcomes of the car dealership. The statements were derived from the literature review.
- Section C elicited demographic information with a nominal scale using categorical variables, namely, gender, age, qualification, department, length of employment, level of income, and dealer ownership.

The ordinal scales of sections A and B anchored items on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). A pilot study was conducted before the full-scale field research, allowing the researchers to pre-assess the questionnaire's validity and reliability. Feedback from pilot respondents was further used to evaluate the understanding of operational definitions, clarity of statements, and potential misunderstandings.

## 4.3 Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the SPSS (version 25.0) software. The first phase assessed the quality of the research instrument through measures of internal reliability. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to measure the internal consistency of each scale (Quinlan *et al.*, 2019, p. 114; Hair *et al.*, 2014, p. 123). The second phase determined the construct validity of the variables. The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) method was used to assess each item's ability to be a valid measure of the construct it intended to measure. In the third phase of the data analysis process, descriptive statistics were calculated using central tendency and dispersion measures. In the fourth phase, Pearson's product-moment correlation was tested to determine if an association between the variables existed. In addition, it was investigated whether there was collinearity between the independent variables. Next, the relationships between the independent variable, work engagement and the dependent variable, sustainability, were calculated using simple and multiple regression analyses.

## 5. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The following sections present the empirical results of the study.

### 5.1 Demographic data

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents.

**Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
Female	99	26.4
Male	276	73.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Age</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
21-30	50	13.3
31-40	110	29.3
41-50	103	27.5
51-60	91	24.3
60 +	21	5.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>100.0</b>

<b>Qualification</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
Grade 11 and lower	14	3.7
Grade 12	166	44.3
Diploma	119	31.7
Bachelor's degree	43	11.5
Postgraduate degree/ diploma (e.g. Honours/ Masters etc.)	25	6.7
Other (Please specify)	8	2.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Department</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
Sales department	260	69.3
Service department	115	30.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Length of employment</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
0-5 years	170	45.3
6-10 years	74	19.7
11-15 years	39	10.4
16-20 years	41	10.9
21 years +	51	13.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Level of monthly income</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
< R5001	4	1.1
R5001 – R10 000	67	17.9
R10 001 – R15 000	55	14.7
R15 001 – R20 000	49	13.1
R20 001 +	200	53.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Dealer ownership</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
Yes	109	29.1
No	238	63.5
Don't know	28	7.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source: Own compilation*

From Table 1, it is evident that the gender distribution of the respondents is 73.60 per cent male versus 26.40 per cent female. Most respondents were between 31 - 40 years old (29.30%), followed by those aged 41 – 50 (27.50%). Most respondents indicated that grade 12 (44.30%) and a diploma (31.70%) were the highest educational qualifications. Most employees were employed in the sales department (69.30%). In addition, most respondents indicated that the length of employment was no more than five years (45.30%). Most respondents (53.30%) indicated that their monthly income was more than R20 001. Furthermore, most respondents indicated that the OEM manufacturer/importer did not own the dealership (63.50%) and thus were independent.

### **Validity and reliability**

In the following section, the results of the reliability of the dependent and independent variables are presented and explained.



**Table 2. Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis and Internal Consistency**

Variable	No. of retained items	Minimum loadings	Maximum loadings	Cronbach's alpha
Work engagement	3	0.721	0.775	0.819
Sustainability	13	0.501	0.865	0.958

Source: Own compilation

Table 2 provides sufficient evidence of convergent validity for the variables, as all the loadings were greater than 0.40. The factor loadings for work engagement and sustainability also conform to the criterion of being practically significant since it is greater than 0.50 (Hair *et al.*, 2014, p.115). The maximum likelihood extraction method and varimax rotation were used for this analysis. Factor loadings between 0.501 and 0.865 were calculated for work engagement as an independent variable and sustainability as a dependent variable. No cross-loadings above the cut-off level of 0.4 were identified. The Cronbach's alpha values are all above the cut-off level of 0.70, showing sufficient proof of reliability (Quinlan *et al.*, 2019, p. 114; Hair *et al.*, 2014, p. 123).

## 5.2 Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the central tendency of the data by measuring the mean and dispersion of the data around the mean by calculating the standard variation. The results are presented in Table 3. The questionnaire items were anchored on a seven-point Likert-type scale: 1-strongly disagree; 2-disagree; 3-disagree somewhat; 4-neutral; 5-agree somewhat, 6-agree and 7-strongly agree.

**Table 3: Summary of descriptive statistics**

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation
Work engagement	6.01	1.23
Sustainability	5.05	1.64

Source: Own compilation

From Table 3, the independent variable of work engagement had a mean value of  $\bar{x} = 6.01$ , indicating that most respondents agreed about feeling energised and excited about work and that they perceive time to pass quickly during the workday. Sustainability had a mean score of  $\bar{x} = 5.05$  and revealed that most respondents agree that the dealerships take responsibility for the community in which it operates. It also demonstrates that the dealerships provide employment opportunities for local people, support social campaigns, give donations to charities, and perform well relative to competitors in the industry. The results further mean that the dealerships use the companies' capital efficiently and pursue sustainable strategies for long-term economic growth. In addition, the majority agreed that the dealerships implement programmes to minimise the negative environmental impact, participate in environmental awareness programmes and make investments to create a better life for future generations.

## 5.3 Regression Analysis

Table 4 shows that the work engagement explained 18.90% of the variance in sustainability, indicating the acceptable quality of the regression (Schuster & Liesen, 2017, p. 227).

**Table 4. Influence of work engagement on sustainability**

<b>Dependent variable: Sustainability R-Square = 0.189</b>			
<b>Independent variable</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>Sig. (p)</b>
Work engagement	0.435	9.336	0.000*
(*p<0.001)			

*Source:* Own compilation

Table 4 shows a significant positive linear relationship (beta = 0.435; p<0.01) between work engagement and sustainability. The data demonstrates that the employees' work engagement strongly predicts a positive impact on the company's sustainability. Based on this, the hypothesised relationship between the independent variable of work engagement and the dependent variable of sustainability was confirmed.

## **6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study's primary objective was to assess work engagement's influence on the sustainability of car dealerships in South Africa. The primary objective was achieved by empirically assessing the perceptions of 375 employees of car dealerships in South Africa. The findings revealed a significant positive linear relationship between work engagement and sustainability. Therefore, when the employees' work engagement is high, it positively impacts the company's sustainability efforts.

### **6.1 Community engagement**

Engaged employees experience work with feelings of being full of energy, enthusiastic about work and feeling that time passes quickly. Employees are more likely to perceive the dealership as a company that is aware of its responsibility to contribute to the community in which it operates, creates employment opportunities for the local community, works to build a better community through social campaigns and donates to charities. In addition, they are more likely to perceive that the dealership encourages its employees to participate in voluntary community activities. As this is exploratory research, the literature review did not identify any studies that found a significant positive correlation between work engagement and community engagement to support this study. It is recommended that car dealerships remain aware of the responsibility to contribute to the community in which it operates. This awareness, for example, could be a fundraising event or public sports event to support a local social project. When recruiting new employees, care should be taken to recruit people from the local community to enhance the welfare and living standards of the local society. The work engagement of its employees should be used to encourage them to get involved in voluntary projects, for example, supporting children and those in need, which can positively impact the reputation and value of a company by demonstrating social responsibility.

### **6.2 Pollution prevention**

Engaged employees were more likely to perceive that the organisation strives to minimise its negative impact on the environment, participates in environmental awareness programmes and creates a better life for future generations. This perception includes that the company has a clear environmental protection policy and reduces the negative impact of its business activities on the environment. For the relationship between work engagement and pollution prevention, the literature review did not yield any prior studies that support the significant positive relationship identified in this study. Recommendations are therefore given for employers on how to strengthen pollution prevention and thus the overall sustainability outcome.



If not already in place, organisations should develop a code of conduct with the dealership's environmental, social and economic values and long-term goals and communicate it openly and transparently with its employees. Organisations should voluntarily strive for energy-saving measures and use the engagement of their employees to integrate and implement those in the daily work routine (for example, switching off the power if not needed and installing water-saving devices). Care should also be taken, for example, to dispose of used oils in an environmentally friendly way and to avoid pollution. The company should encourage its employees to contribute to a healthy environment by sensitising employees to environmental issues such as energy and water consumption, transport routes or generation of packaging waste.

### **6.3 Profitability**

The positive relationship between work engagement and sustainability means that engaged employees were more likely to perceive the dealership as a company in an excellent financial position compared to other car dealerships in the industry. Employees perceive the organisation to use its capital efficiently to generate sales/revenue and set sustainable strategies for long-term economic growth. The following support for the relationship between work engagement and profitability was found in the literature but was not explicitly related to sustainability. For example, Harter *et al.* (2002, p. 275) found significant positive correlations between work engagement and profitability. When comparing this with profitability, it should be noted that only the outcomes of individual employees were considered (Harter *et al.*, 2002, p. 275). However, the present study followed an explorative approach in which profitability was considered an outcome for the entire company. Xanthopoulou *et al.* (2009, p. 198) also investigated this relationship and found a significant positive correlation between work engagement and organisational profitability, which supports the results of this study.

For sustainability, it is recommended that long-term goals such as long-term profit growth and development should be more important than a focus on short-term profits. Organisations should always use capital efficiently to generate sufficient turnover/sales of vehicles and service/workshop services to generate continuous profits effectively and secure the company's long-term existence. Organisations should work together with their motivated employees on competitor analysis concepts and let the employees communicate the dealership's strengths to the customers. By analysing the direct competition, the people responsible should quickly eliminate identified weaknesses such as a poor image and low customer satisfaction.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Happy and engaged employees do better work, live healthier lives, and contribute significantly to organisational outcomes and the overall economic situation of a country. Work engagement plays a vital role in the global economy, especially in South Africa, and is therefore of great importance to the future of the national economy, companies and stakeholders. Due to challenges such as complex economic transformation processes from technological changes and the COVID-19 pandemic, work engagement is becoming increasingly crucial for the long-term sustainability of companies (Wu & Wu, 2019, p. 3210). The significant findings of this study add value to the field of engagement research and provide practical recommendations to employees, managers and owners of dealerships on how to increase the work engagement of employees and, ultimately, the dealership's sustainability. It is intended to support achieving car dealerships' goals and visions.

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