# THE INFLUENCE OF EMPLOYEES' COMMUNICATION ON EMPLOYEES' ENGAGEMENT IN TANZANIA: A CASE STUDY OF SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES

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**Abstract**

*The SME sector is one of the most employment creations in Tanzania and it strives to get people work and realize its objectives through proper communication. The study examines the influence of employees' communication on employees' engagement in Tanzania SMEs. The study is built on the Social Exchange Theory. It examines the importance of social interaction between individuals at the work place. As the study argues, people tend to respond positively if they perceive communication exchange which is beneficial to them. The study used a cross-sectional design with a sample of 483 SMEs from Dar es Salaam, Morogoro and Manyara regions picked through a stratified sampling method. Data was collected using questionnaire and analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling. The findings revealed that employees' communication has a significant influence on employees' engagement. The study suggests that SME owners and managers should make sure that employees have first-hand information on matters related to their employment and that they should be able to give feedback on employees' performance.*

## INTRODUCTION

Winning the efforts of an individual to the organization is very important. Different organizations have been striving to get better employees who are willing to devote their time for the betterment of the organization by increasing customer satisfaction and producing better products and services (Bao *et al.,* 2020; Ngugi *et al.,* 2021 & Pongton *et al.,* 2019). Employees play a pivotal role in a business' competitiveness and sustainable growth. Organizations are striving to achieve their objectives. This can only be fulfilled by ensuring that organizations are having the right people for the right job (Turner, 2020; Ababneh *et al.,* 2019; Kang *et al.,* 2017; Smithikrai, 2019 & Verĉi *et al.,* 2017).

Making people work for an organization to realize its objectives depends on how the organization is maintaining its employees. This can be done through proper communication between employer (Supervisors) and employees, and between employee and employee (Altehrebah *et al.,* 2019; Gherardi, 2019; Idowu *et al.,* 2018). Employees' communication is considered more important in bringing about employees engagement (job and organizational). Employees' engagement is a very crucial aspect in an organization in bringing about innovation and new ideas as employees are ready to go beyond their call of duty (Gupta *et al.,* 2018; Kwon *et al.,* 2020; Mazzei *et al.,* 2018). This makes employees free to share different ideas for the betterment of the organization and hence its performance which in turn increases its competitive edge. However, for the sake of this study, employees are engaged in both organization and job, that is, organizational engagement and job engagement respectively. Job engagement is when an employee performs his/her roles and organization engagement refers to the role played by an employee as a member of an organization (Saks, 2006).

***Keywords****: SME, Employees' communication, Employees' engagement*

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Employees feel more valued when their ideas and opinions are taken by the organization which brings about commitment and engagement to the organization including small and medium enterprises (Mazzei *et al.,* 2018; Mansoor, & Hassan, 2016). Engagement is all about making people have a sense of ownership to what they are doing in the organization, as they are the most crucial resource (Komodromos *et al.,* 2020; Men & Bowen 2017; Othman *et al.,* 2019). Employees' engagement includes involvement of employees in executing their roles and responsibilities in the organization (Komodromos *et al.,* 2020). Bringing people together at work, winning their attitude and making them productive is very important and this can be done if the organization is having a well-structured communication channel which will make them more effective and hence engaged. If employees receive timely, adequate and the right kind of information relating to their work, they feel more engaged to perform their work unlike when they are assumed to know what they are supposed to do (Chiwawa & Wissink, 2021).

It is very important to align employee communication with employee relations to enhance employee voice (Mazzei *et al.,* 2018; Cooren, & Seidl, 2019). Employee communication includes formal and informal communication at all levels of an organization. Communication helps employees share information, meanings and emotions. It creates interactions, construct the culture of the organization, participate in decision making, and it facilitates organizational undertakings. The interaction created is the tool for strategic management of communication in managing inter-relations and building a stable relationship between organization and its stakeholders (Men, Bowen, 2017; Arimie, 2019). Interaction between individuals is very important at the work place. People tend to respond positively if they perceive that the exchange is beneficial to them. Thus social exchange is based on the basis of interdependence between two parties. For communication to be more effective, it depends on the Occurrence, Method, Content, and Path (Johlke & Duhan 2000).

According to Komodromos (2020), there is limited research on the role of employees' communication on employee engagement in small and medium-sized enterprises. Majority of the existing studies have been conducted focusing on large organizations, leaving small and medium organizations less known in scholarly engagements. Employees' engagement is categorized into two groups, namely organization and job engagement (Welch, 2011 & Saks, 2006). There is a possibility that employees' communication can influence either job or organization engagement and this possibility has not been considered by the reviewed studies. With this knowledge gap, it was important to conduct a study on the influence of employees' communication on employees' job and organization engagement. This study was conducted to identify how supervisor-employee communication impacts employee engagement (job and organization) with the aim of increasing the number of studies that focus on employees' communication and employees' engagement in small and medium-sized enterprises.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee's communication is one of the important factors that determine employee's engagement. For instance, Chiwawa, Wissink, 2021; Kulachai *et al.* 2018 and Mishra *et al.* (2014) state that if the company (organization) shares information widely, employees feel a sense of belonging and a shared mission with their employer. This develops a bond of trust between the organization and the employee, which leads to employees' engagement. From this study, it can be seen that employees' communication enhances employees' engagement. However, the extent to which employees' communication determines employee's engagement can be influenced by several factors. Vora, Patra, 2017; Krishnan, Wesley, 2013, and Alzyoud (2018) argue that the methods of communication the company employs as well as the manner in which those methods are carried

out can have a large effect on both the process and results of the company's efforts to get the workforce engaged.

In addition, Nelli, 2018; Shafi *et al.,* 2013 and Biswakarma (2017) declare that concise and honest communication is an important tool for enhancing employees' engagement. This shows that there is a positive relationship between employees' communication and employees' engagement. This is also supported by Clampitt (2009) who maintains that good communication will help employees to understand their roles and hence contribute to the organization success. Therefore, it is argued that engagement begins with the clear understanding of employees on what is happening and what is required to be done by the organization (Estell *et al.,* 2019 & Clampitt, 2009).

Muthuveloo *et al.* (2013) conducted a study on the antecedents of employees' engagement in the manufacturing sector. The objective of the study was to find out the antecedents that influence employees' engagement. The study applied structured questionnaire in data collection while multiple regression analysis was used in data analysis. The reviewed study considered the manufacturing sector as the unit of analysis. The study found out that there is a significant relationship between employee communication and employee engagement. In addition, the reviewed study revealed that, among the antecedents, employee communication is the most significant contributor.

The reviewed study provided a significant contribution to this study by enabling the researcher to understand the influence of employee communication on employee engagement. Therefore, employees' communication is considered to be the most important factor in engaging employees as they need information that will clearly help them to perform their duties well. This is supported by Balakrishnan and Masthan (2013) who argue that consistent and honest communication is an important management tool for employees' engagement. From this argument, the following hypotheses were developed:

*$H_{1a:}$ The employees' communication positively influences job engagement.*
*$H_{1b:}$ The employees' communication positively influences organization engagement.*

## THEORETICAL REVIEW

This paper is guided by Social Exchange Theory (SET) that explains the relationship between employer and employees at the workplace. The theory is important as it shows the behavior of an individual in the social exchange phenomena (Owor, 2016). It also explains the importance of social interaction between individuals at the work place. People tend to respond positively if they perceive the exchange which is beneficial to them. People search for maximizing their benefits and minimizing their costs when exchanging resources with others (Aktar & Pangil, 2017).

Therefore, SET provides the theoretical foundation as to why employees may be more or less engaged at the work place. It recognizes that there are responsibilities or obligations that arise in the course of interactions between the two parties. With this fact, when employees receive proper and timely information through proper channel, they tend to be engaged as they will understand what they are supposed to do on time. This will reduce misunderstanding of roles which may cause disengagement.

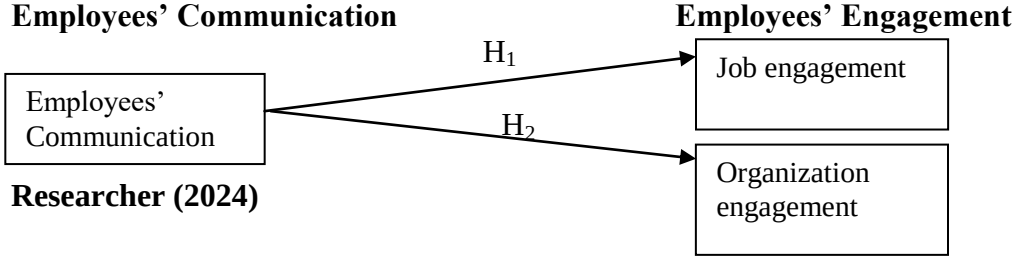
SET argues that communication contributes to positive exchange relationships between employee and employer – especially when the needs of individual workers are considered – to which employees reciprocate with favorable attitudes and behavior (Aktar, Pangil, 2017; Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005). Therefore, the theory addresses the interaction (communication) that

maximizes the possibility of meeting their individual expectations in the social group and hence engagement.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This framework indicates the relationship between employees' communication and employees' engagement. Proper and concise communication enhances employees' commitment and hence engagement. The relationship between employees' communication and employees' engagement is shown below.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**




**Researcher (2024)**

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the positivism paradigm. The paradigm tends to pre-define the research variables with the help of the theories and context of the study. The study applied cross-sectional design to investigate the relationship between employees' communication and employees' engagement in SMEs. It involved employees in the small and medium enterprises and it was conducted in three (3) regions, namely Dar es Salaam, Manyara and Morogoro. Dar es Salaam has a relative SMEs density which is one of the highest SMEs densities in Tanzania. In addition, Dar es Salaam was also selected because of its importance in the Tanzania economy as a commercial city. Morogoro has an average SMEs density and it has the geographical advantage of being the link between the central zone, Southern Zone (Upper) and Coastal Zone of Tanzania. Manyara has the lowest SMEs density (FSDT, 2012) thus it enabled the researcher to make a comparative analysis across different capacities of SMEs densities. The study used the Pearson's sampling formula to obtain the sample size of 483 SMEs used in data analysis. The study used both primary and secondary data. Furthermore, the validity and reliability test was also carried out. The study used Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to explain the relationship between employees' communication and employee's engagement. SEM was relevant in this study since there were two dependent variables, namely job engagement and organizational engagement.

## STUDY FINDINGS

### The Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The study involved respondents with different age categories. The majority of the respondents, that is 22.5%, were in the age between 26 and 45. Respondents with the age of at least 56 years were relatively few (3.3%). Furthermore, 28.4% of the respondents were single, 62.9% were married, 35% were divorced and 5.2% were widows. As for education level, 0.8% had not attended the formal schooling, 13.9% had primary education, and 37.1% had O-Level education. The respondents with 'O' Level education formed the largest part of the contacted respondents. Relatively, a small number of respondents (2.7%) had postgraduate qualification followed by respondents with degree/advanced diploma, who were 4.6%. In terms of service experience, the majority of the respondents, 44.5%, had an experience of 2 to 4 years followed by the respondents

with 5 – 9 years' experience, who were 37.9%. Furthermore 57.8% of the respondents were males while 42.2% were females. Table 1 presents more details on the demographic information of respondents.

**Table 1: The Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

| S/No. | Details | Category | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Sex | Male | 279 | 57.8 |
| | | Female | 204 | 42.2 |
| | | **Total** | **483** | **100** |
| 2 | Age | 20-25 | 90 | 18.6 |
| | | 26-45 | 267 | 55.3 |
| | | 46-55 | 110 | 22.8 |
| | | 56-60 | 13 | 2.7 |
| | | Above 60 | 3 | 0.6 |
| | | **Total** | **483** | **100** |
| 3 | Marital Status | Single | 137 | 28.4 |
| | | Married | 304 | 62.9 |
| | | Divorced | 17 | 3.5 |
| | | Widow/ widower | 25 | 5.2 |
| | | **Total** | **483** | **100** |
| 4 | Educational Level | Postgraduate qualification | 13 | 2.7 |
| | | Degree/Advanced Diploma | 22 | 4.6 |
| | | Ordinary Diploma | 31 | 6.4 |
| | | Certificate | 72 | 14.9 |
| | | Vocational/Technical Training | 60 | 12.4 |
| | | "A" Level Education | 35 | 7.2 |
| | | "O" Level Education | 179 | 37.1 |
| | | Primary School | 67 | 13.9 |
| | | No formal schooling | 4 | 0.8 |
| | | **Total** | **483** | **100** |
| 5 | Business Experience (in years) | Less than a year | 19 | 3.9 |
| | | 2-4 | 215 | 44.5 |
| | | 5-8 | 183 | 37.9 |
| | | 9 years and above | 66 | 13.7 |
| | | **Total** | **483** | **100** |

**Source: Field Data (2024)**

## ENTERPRISES' CHARACTERISTICS

Enterprises characteristics were based on the ownership structure, establishment, business location, types of activities, and number of employees. As for ownership, 73.1% were sole proprietorship business followed by enterprises with partnership structure 13.5%. Relatively few enterprises, 4.3%, were cooperatives. In terms of establishment, the majority of enterprises, 36%, were established between 5 to 7 years ago followed by enterprises that were established between 2 – 4 years ago at 31.9%. In terms of business location, the majority of enterprises were from Dar es Salaam (46.8%) and Morogoro (38.9%).

Enterprises were categorized in terms of trade, services and manufacturing. The majority of enterprises, 67.9%, dealt with trade, services 24.6% and manufacturing 7.5%. Moreover, the findings reveal that the majority of enterprises, 307 (63.6%), had employed between 5 and 49 people while 36.4% employed between 50 and 99 people.

**RELIABILITY**

The study assessed the internal consistency of the instrument using Cronbach Alpha from employees' communication. The Cronbach Apha coefficient of all items were at least 0.7, which indicates that the internal consistency is assured as suggested by Nunnaly (1967). In the case of employees' engagement, the internal consistency coefficients basing on job engagement and organization engagement were calculated and all of them were above 0.7. It is generally argued that the Cronbach Alpha Coefficient must be at least 0.7 in order to indicate that there is an internal consistency among the items and constructs assessed (Nunnaly, 1967).

**Confirmatory Factor Analysis**

The structural equation model was developed. The model focused on the key research variables namely employees' communication and employees' engagement. The model was assessed to check if it fit the data well. The assessment of the model was based on the following indices: Root Mean Square Error Approximation (RMSEA, CMIN/df, Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Adjusted GFI, and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI). It is recommended that RMSEA must be less than 0.08 to indicate that the model fits well the data (Sarmento & Costa, 2019).

Furthermore, it is argued that CMIN/df$\leq$5 (Bollen, 1989); GFI $\geq$0.90 (Harerimana and Mtshali), CFI $\geq$0.90 (Hair *et al.,* 2013) and adjusted GFI (AGFI) $\geq$0.80 (Chau & Hu 2001). Those Coefficients are considered to be the standards used to conclude whether the model fits the data well.

**Employees' Communication**

Employees' communication has seven (7) items that were used to develop the initial model. The items included access to information; the linkage between communication and organization needs; understanding of work strategies and plans; receipt of comments; communication with co-workers; and awareness on where to get information. The model fit the data well after examining the goodness of fit indices, where standardized regression weight was above 0.5 and squared multiple regressions was above 0.4.

The ability of the model to fit the data well was also assessed through an examination of the goodness of fit indices. The results show that CMIN/df = 2.118 (<5); GFI = 0.941 (>0.90); AGFI = 0.923 (>0.80); CFI = 0.969 (>0.90) and RMSEA = 0.048 (<0.08). The indices were therefore adequate to conclude that the model fits well the data.

**Job Engagement**

The model had six (6) items coded from JE 1 to JE 6. JE 1 = Suitability of the workload; JE 2 = Feeling of choice and control of the work; JE 3 = Appropriate recognition; JE 4 = Supportive work community JE 5 = Fairness and Justice and JE 6 = Meaningfulness and Value of the work. The model produced model fit indices which indicated that the model fits the data well. CMIN/df = 3.530; GFI = 0.979; AGFI = 0.950; CFI = 0.987; and RMSEA = 0.072.

**Organization Engagement**

The model initially had six (6) items coded from OE 1 to OE 6. OE 1 = Commitment to

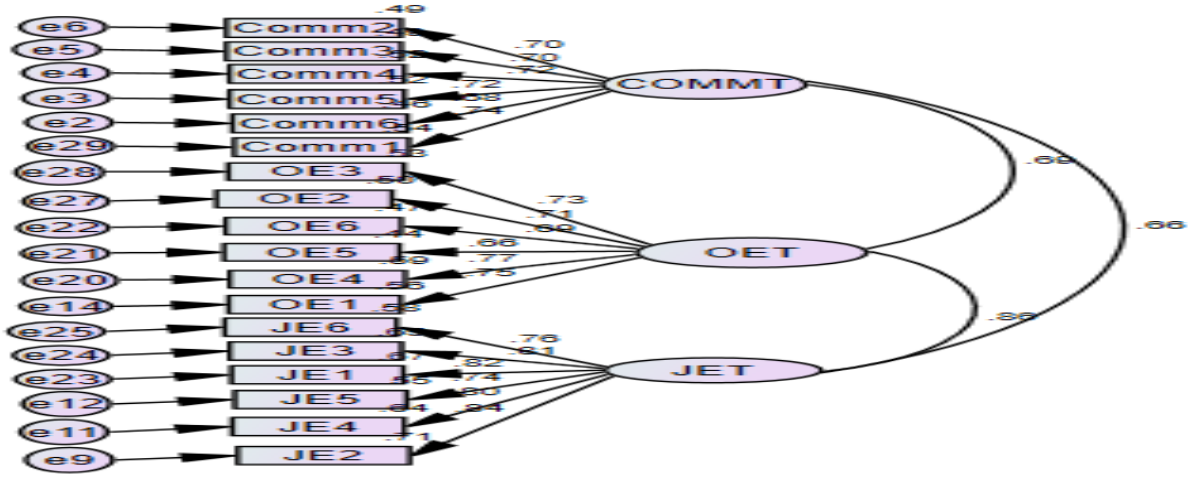
organization goals and plans, OE 2 = Identify oneself with the organization; OE 3 = Performance of extra role behavior, OE 4 = Being proud and advocacy in organization; OE 5 = Being alive in the organization and OE 6 = Being exhilarating in the organization. The model produced model fit indices that indicated that the model fits the data well. Then, the model produced model fit indices which showed that the model fitted the data well. CMIN/df = 3.590, P = 0.003; GFI = 0.985; AGFI = 0.956; CFI = 0.986; and RMSEA = 0.073.

**Employees' Communication and Employees' Engagement**

In this case, the study had two hypotheses coded as $H_{1a}$ and $H_{1b}$. $H_1$a stated that employees' communication positively influences job engagement and $H_{1b}$ stated that employees' communication positively influences organizational engagement.

The results reveal that employees' communication had a significant positive influence on job engagement. The standardized regression weight was 0.692 and it was significant at 0.001. This indicates that employees' communication enhanced employees' job engagement. This means that employees' communication enabled them to value and find their jobs more meaningful and concentrate on their jobs. It also enabled employees to be more committed towards performing their jobs. Employees' communication significantly improves employees' job engagement and therefore $H_{1a}$ was supported. Furthermore, the results also showed that employees' communication had a significant positive influence on organizational engagement. The standardized regression weight was 0.664 and significant at 0.001. This means that the more the organization communicates properly with its employees, the more it promotes employees' organizational engagement. Furthermore, employees' communication enabled employees to have a sense of ownership with the organization; being exited when involved in accomplishing organizational issues; and feel 'alive' being a member the organization. In this case, $H_{1b}$ was supported. With this fact, it can be generally said that $H_1$ was fully supported because employees' communication had a significant positive influence on both job and organizational engagement.

**Model for Employees' Communication and employees' engagement**




**Source: Field Data, (2024)**

## DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

### *Employees' Communication and Employees' engagement*

The study examined the influence of employees' communication on employees' engagement focusing on job engagement and organizational engagement. The hypotheses in this objective stated that employees' communication positively influences employees' engagement in both job engagement and organizational engagement.

The results showed that majority of the respondents agreed that they had access to organization information and this was done in accordance with the organizational needs. The respondents also agreed that the business objectives were clearly understood by the employees and that the communication channels were friendly. More importantly, it was revealed that employees received feedback on their progress. This implies that employees in SMEs had business information that prompted their engagement in the organization. They knew what is to be done and received feedback on what they performed, which played an important role in enhancing employees' engagement.

This study hypothesized that employees' communication positively influenced employees' engagement. The inferential findings revealed that employees' communication had a significant positive influence on job engagement and organizational engagement. Hence, $H_{1a}$ and $H_{1b}$ were both accepted. The significant influence of employees' communication can be attributed to the fact that the respondents agreed that they had access to organizational information. It was also found out that employees had received feedback on their progress and clearly understood the business objectives accompanied by the friendly communication channels. This implies that employees of the contacted SMEs clearly understand their progress and business objectives; access organizational information, and that employees' engagement is promoted by the existence of friendly communication channels that promote employee's engagement.

In the case of less educated and experienced employees, employees' communication becomes of great importance because employees need to be supervised and guided properly to perform their responsibilities. This has been revealed in this study where the majority of the respondents in the SMEs were relatively less experienced and not highly educated.

The findings are supported by Mishra *et al.* (2014) who argue that employees' communication enhances employees' attachment and commitment to the organization mission. It is also supported by other studies by Hidayat, Hanisha, 2019 and Shafi *et al.* (2013) who argue that employees' communication promotes employees' engagement. However, the findings of this study went further to explain the influence of employees' communication, specifically job and organizational engagement. This is because the aforementioned empirical studies mainly focused on employee engagement in general and not on specific categories of employee engagement; job engagement and organizational engagement.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This study concludes that employee's communication has an influence on employee's engagement (Job and organizational engagement) when it is connected to the organizational needs. In this case, employees' communication has an influence on job and organizational engagement when the communication is done in accordance with organizational needs and communication channels within an organization.

The findings also revealed that communication has a significant positive influence on organizational engagement. This implies that communication enables SMEs' employees to understand the requirements, strategies and plans of their jobs. Communication also enables SMEs' employees to understand organizational goals, plans, values and even the organization culture.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

SME owners should make sure that employees have first-hand information on time, especially what they are supposed to do and how they should do it to achieve the expected results. Managers should have the ability to convey information about the mission and vision so that the employees can understand them. Furthermore, feedback is very important to the employees, thus managers/owners should make sure that they provide feedback about performance/achievements. If not, they should also communicate as to why they did not perform.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study was purely quantitative and it aimed at providing in-depth qualitative information on how employees' communication influences organizational engagement and job engagement. Moreover, this study focused on the SMEs only and it is likely that the findings may not be applied to larger firms. Differences in business size and operations may limit the generalization of the research findings to larger firms. The implementation on the way SMEs communicate differs from larger firms. With this fact, the findings of this study are only relevant to SMEs and not for larger firms.

## AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

From the finding of this study, another study may be conducted on the qualitative study in order to explore in-depth information on employee communication among SMEs' employees. Also, a similar study should be conducted to larger firms. Despite the fact that there are several studies that have been conducted on large firms, the individual influence of communication on job engagement and organizational engagement is missing. Due to this, it is important to conduct a similar study on larger firms in order to contribute to the body of knowledge on SMEs.

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