Reimagining Employee Engagement In A Hybrid HEI: Managing Social Isolation And Well-Being In A South African University

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Abstract— In HEIs, shifting towards hybrid work models has had tremendous impacts on employee engagement, well-being as well as the social dynamics that are ordinarily prevalent in the world of work. Although hybridisation offers many opportunities inclusive of flexibility, they also introduce risks such as social isolation, disengagement, lack of employee well-being and reduced employee connectedness. This qualitative research investigates how a HEI in a hybrid work arrangement can reimagine employee engagement and manage social isolation and well-being. The paper uses the Self-Determination Theory and the Social Exchange Theory (1964). 23 lecturers at a public higher education institution in the Northwest Province of South Africa were interviewed to assess how hybrid work affects employee engagement and social well-being in a South African university, to identify the main challenges brought about by social isolation and to propose strategies for reimagining engagement and well-being practices for a hybrid HEI. Braun and Clarke's six phase Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the data. Findings highlight several ways of mitigating the negative effects of workplace social isolation and underscore the importance of the role of leadership in spearheading the transformational changes to thrive in a hybrid environment.

Keywords—Employee Engagement, Higher Education Institution, Hybrid Work, Social Isolation, Well-Being.

1. INTRODUCTION

All over the world, the work environment has gone through significant changes during the last decade, and this has led to the introduction of hybrid work models. Many organisations have embraced this hybridisation, spurred on by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. In South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), hybrid work, which is a blending of remote and on-site engagement, has introduced flexibility, improved autonomy, as well as productivity [1] However, it has also unfortunately disrupted the normal collegiality, collaboration, belonging as well as challenged traditional engagement mechanisms and all other elements that once contributed to institutional identity [2].

The hybrid work arrangement has significantly altered employees' world of work, to the point that it has become a cause for concern, warranting scientific research to find ways of countering its effects [3]; Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development [4]; [5]. Traditional mechanisms of engagement have changed, with several complaints surfacing, such as feelings of isolation, limited interaction with colleagues and unclear boundaries seperating work and home life [6]. Feelings of social isolation can be described as a state of having minimal social contact, relationships, or support from others, and in a work situation, this results in decreased productivity, higher stress, burnout, and problems of mental health such as anxiety and depression- in short, it is a state of being socially unwell while at work.

A. Motivation and objective

Employees' social well-being is very important to many organisations [7] those that uphold employee well-being in high esteem report highly engaged employees, greater productivity, reduced levels of absenteeism and lower health costs [8]. Successful organisations therefore have put in place strategies that manage as well as improve employee well-being. The absence of social well-being demoralises employees, as well as erodes institutional culture and its subsequent effectiveness. This paper investigates how employee engagement can be reimagined in a hybrid university context by focusing on managing social isolation and enhancing well-being.

The absence of normally intentional social designs in hybrid systems weakens both institutional culture and employees' morale. According to Davis- Platt [9], it is necessary to develop regular and meaningful interaction with workmates and supervisors due to associations that exist between relationships and the social dimension of well-being. University management therefore needs to rethink engagement frameworks that are designed to promote employee social well-being and belonging in a hybrid environment.

B. Research Objectives

1. To investigate how hybrid work affects employee social well-being and engagement in a South African university.
2. To identify the major challenges caused by social isolation and disconnection amongst university employees.
3. To propose strategies for reimagining engagement and well-being practices for a hybrid HEI

C. Research Questions

1. How has hybrid work influenced employee engagement and relationships among colleagues in a South African university?
2. What are the major work challenges that are caused by social isolation and diminished well-being?
3. Which institutional strategies can promote the reimagination of employee engagement and social well-being?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1) Employee engagement in a hybrid environment

Several definitions of employee engagement exist in literature, but all can be reduced to a small set of human motives [10]. Employee engagement, according to Kahn [11]; and Saks [12], is the emotional and cognitive commitment that employees show towards their work or the institution that they work for. In the situation of a hybrid university, such engagement goes beyond physical presence and instead, includes digital collaboration, psychological safety, as well as belonging. An "engaged employee" is defined as one who is fully immersed in and enthusiastic about their work and thus takes positive steps to enhance the organisation's interests as well as reputation [13]. While several studies have been conducted that are related to talent management, those within the employee engagement framework have scantily been researched on, particularly in institutions of higher learning.

2) Factors affecting employee engagement

In every organisation, committing to employee engagement is critical for sustaining high performance and realising long-term success [14]; [15] and [12]. Research by Shirina, Sharma, Agarwal and Sao [16], point out factors affecting employee engagement as Leadership, Work-Life Balance, Job Satisfaction, Career Development, Work Environment and Job Characteristics, but hybrid work has however, affected employee engagement as well as relationships among colleagues, especially in South African universities, in the following ways:

- Loss of casual interaction resulting in reduced spontaneous meetings. This reduces the informal gathering of information and knowledge sharing, mentoring, emotional support and quick problem-solving

-Teams are fragmented; employees only meet on different days, and all the while, they interact via meetings, which tend to be more formal and less social

-Perceived unfairness as remotely situated colleagues may feel overlooked for promotion opportunities and recognition while others are more visible as they are often in the proximity of opportunities

-There is more dependence on digital interactions, which reduces opportunities for building relationships

-different home conditions as well as different skill levels create unequal engagement amongst members of staff

These factors are looked at while taking into cognisance the contextual realities that are prevalent in South African HEIs, such as limited resources, cultural diversity, and institutional hierarchies which influence engagement dynamics, and these largely informed this research.

3) Workplace Social Isolation

Workplace isolation is a two-pronged psychological aspect that stems from an employee's comprehension of their isolation from fellow workmates, as well as from the organisation [17].

A small digression at this point is necessary to fully elaborate on social isolation. Social well-being at work is viewed as a feeling of integration with meaningful communities, short-lived interactions as well long-standing relationships with others [18]. The feeling of integration stems from the need to belong, while social interaction is inclusive of being aware of other people's presence and the intentional exchange of information – it involves the senses- hearing, seeing, smelling as well as touching other people.

It is the absence of such elements of social well-being that comprise social isolation. Isolated employees feel as if they are of no value or are not recognised either at their place of work and/or by their workmates, and according to literature, workplace isolation impacts negatively on workplace wellbeing, job satisfaction, colleague and supervisor satisfaction, as well as on commitment to the organization [19]; [20]; [17]. Workplace isolation means that individuals may have feelings of being alone, while they are actually not alone [21].

4) Social employee Well-being

Several scholars have attempted to define exactly what constitutes social employee well-being, and a few are worth noting in this research, and are tabulated hereunder.

TABLE 1: DEFINITIONS OF SOCIAL EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

Scholar	Definition
Pagán-Castaño et al. (2019:470) [22]	It has to do with all associations, interactions and relations at all levels

	within an organisation.
Marescaux et al. (2019:5 [23]	refers to mutual workplace issues such as fairness, social support, and trust
Hennicks et al. (2022:1) [24]	Refers to how well individuals function in their social lives and work relationships and their ability to work well with fellow workmates
Sakka & Ahammad (2020:356 [25]	positive interpersonal connections that enable employees to realise both individual and organisational goals and which in turn help to maintain employee well-being

Source: Authors' own

Wellbeing is all about establishing a balance in different areas of life. The importance of workplace social well-being should never be underestimated; it plays a central part in employees' overall well-being. The workplace flourishes when social well-being exists [26]. The absence of employee social well-being is detrimental, both psychologically as well as physically [27], while the physical and social workplace environment are also intricately interwoven [28].

5) Institutional strategies towards promoting reimagination of employee engagement and social well-being

While hybrid work brings flexibility, and many other benefits to the world of work, it also erodes informal social bonds, eats away at the much-needed organisational mentoring and negatively acts on the sense of belonging unless institutional management take deliberate actions to redesign work and how their interactive meetings are conducted in order to safeguard employees' inclusivity as well as relationship-building, such as:

-Establishing Communities of Practice (COPs).

A community of practice (CoP) is a grouping of people who have the same concern, passion, or interest in a subject matter, and who meet in order to learn how to work better through regular interaction, and this is achieved by sharing knowledge, solving problems, and advancing their collective expertise through ongoing engagement [29]. In the HEI domain, Hofer et al., [30] posit that for those who engage in these COPs, their social relationships tend to improve while according to Wiebe [31], COPs establish a sense of connectedness among academics. In the same manner, Schulte [32] mentions that COPs enable HEI employees to connect and learn to trust each other. Therefore, COPs build up

the social well-being of academics as a result of the established social connectedness and work relationships, which are components of social employee well-being.

-Communication

HEIs incorporate communication as a way of enhancing work relationships among academics, and this can also be considered as a tool to promote re-imagination of employee engagement. Both formal and informal communication enhances relationships among academic staff [33], while the same can also break or mold relationships among academics [34]. Communication among employees strengthens a sense of belonging [35].

-Training and Development

Training and development play a part in strengthening employees' sense of belonging [36]. According to Strayhorn [37], Management of HEIs can tap into professional development opportunities as a way of demonstrating their commitment to the growth and career progression of their employees, which in turn deepens their sense of belonging.

-Organisational Support

Establishing autonomy, implementing a manageable workload, and the feeling of appreciation and respect are some of the initiatives that are included under organisational support [38]. Intentional support services such as collaborative environment can also facilitate academics' well-being [39].

- Rewards and recognition

Acknowledging and appreciating employees is critical in heightening their sense of belonging [36], just as appreciating and recognising their academic achievements and contributions is important [37]. This can be demonstrated through hosting award ceremonies or circulating congratulatory email announcements. A great sense of belonging that is enhanced through affective commitment is noticeable among employees who are appreciated through recognition of their work efforts [40]. Efforts by an HEI to invest in a supportive environment may reverse the negative effects of workplace isolation, thus highlighting the need for a supportive organisational culture.

D. Theoretical Lens

This study uses the Self-Determination Theory of Deci & Ryan [41] and the Social Exchange Theory of Blau [42] to assist in explaining how employee relatedness and reciprocal trust affect employee engagement in a HEI.

Self-Determination Theory - Deci and Ryan [41]

This theory states that human beings have three universal and innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are important for their psychological growth, social well-being as well as intrinsic motivation. Satisfying these needs, according to the theory, leads to greater well-being, while suppressing them leads to negative consequences.

Social Exchange Theory – Blau [42]

This theory states that relationships are portrayed as a cost-benefit analysis whereby individuals act rationally to maximise rewards while minimising costs. People stay in relationships as long as the rewards (such as companionship, approval or support) outweigh the costs (time, effort, or stress involved). Should costs be viewed as being greater than rewards, individuals are more likely to terminate the relationship.

Combined, these two theories suggest that when social isolation is experienced, it undermines employees' psychological needs, leading to reduced motivation, organisational commitment as well as engagement.

III. METHODS

Population

The population was comprised of actively teaching academics at a public higher education institution in the Northwest Province of South Africa, regardless of their position and this enabled the gathering of rich and varied data.

Sample and sample size

To select research participants, purposive sampling was used since it allowed the researcher flexibility to select only those participants that helped to answer the research questions and satisfy the study's objectives. 23 research participants were considered sufficient for this study and thus made up the sample. According to Moser and Korstjens [43], in a phenomenological study, 10 or fewer participants are enough for data saturation.

Data collection instruments, coding and analysis

An interview guide or protocol was used to collect data, the questions therein were open-ended and broad, lasting between 34 and 64 minutes, thus allowing the capturing of detailed accounts of participants' perceptions. The guide was divided into Section A (demographic questions), and section B contained open-ended study-specific questions that assisted the researcher to find answers to the research questions.

The study used Braun and Clarke's [44] six phases of thematic analysis to execute their data analysis The phases are data familiarisation, initial code generation, searching for themes based on initial coding, review of themes, theme definition and labelling, and lastly, report writing,

Ethical considerations

The researcher observed and followed all the guidelines stipulated by the North-West Institutional Research Ethics Committee. Prior to data collection, the study's objectives were made known to the research participants and the researcher sought and obtained their consent to participate in the study, which was evidenced by their signing of the consent form. To adhere to confidentiality, the researcher made use of codes as participant identifiers, and audio recorded interviews were stored in a password-protected folder on a highly secured laptop.

IV. RESULTS

Theme 1: Effect of hybrid work on employee engagement and relationships among colleagues in a South African university

"The face-to-face physical interaction is missing …aaaaah it will always be missing" (RP1).

"I think social bonds are being affected by this hybrid environment" (RP22).

"Some things are better said and engaged in person…. Hybrid has killed off the physical phenomenon" (RP3).

Theme 2: Major work challenges that are caused by social isolation and diminished well-being

"The university does not provide or compensate you with data when you are working from home but expect you to attend some of these meetings and send students feedback…….resources do not commensurate to what you are supposed to be doing" (RP9).

"…… I will feel more valuable to the organisation if I was to get a printer at home and a network system which is mobile that I can use anywhere without having to pay it myself" (RP10).

Theme 3: Institutional strategies to promote the reimagination of employee engagement and social well-being

"We have daily communication from the university ……..you get to know what is happening around you" (RP11).

"They make sure you get the communication ……..the same message is posted on our WhatsApp group and as SMS" (RP5).

"You get all the information of events happening be it a training workshop, a social event or a breakfast meeting…….that way we not missing on opportunities" (RP9).
- We get to have trainings that we attend with other people in our department…. We connect with them" (RP13).
"We have writing retreats…... besides working on our research we also have time to interact and connect with others" (RP15).
"Our director has an open-door policy we can see him anytime……. it makes me feel important and has built our work relationship over years" (RP13).

V. DISCUSSION

In order for HEIs to thrive in the era of hybridisation of work, management needs to effectively manage social isolation and employee Well-being. From the results obtained, most of the participants decried the loss of physical interaction with colleagues. This used to strengthen informal bonds, but because of the hybridisation that was introduced, employee engagement and social well-being were greatly reduced. The zeal, the enthusiasm that once existed, have been eroded, leaving employees disengaged and mechanical in the approach to work, which resonates with the findings of [22]; [23], as well as of [21].
The study also sought to investigate the major challenges caused by social isolation at a higher education institution.
Social isolation causes a disconnection in employee well-being; there is a feeling of not being valued or even recognised as being a worthy cog in the wheels of the organisation. Existent literature, (Redelinghuys & Rothman [26]; Colenberg [18], as well as participant responses, have proven that workplace social isolation has a negative impact on workplace wellbeing, leading to job dis-satisfaction, colleague and supervisor dis-satisfaction, as well as diminished organisational commitment.
The study ended with the proposal of strategies that HEIs could adopt to reimagine employee engagement and well-being in HEIs that practice hybridisation. Practices such as establishing communities of practice, Rewards and recognition, Organisational support, training and development, as well as clear and open communication have been proven as useful in this endeavor.

VI. STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION

This research has both practical and managerial implications. Practically, HEIs are encouraged to curb workplace social isolation as it is detrimental to organisational well-being. At managerial level, the development and nurturing of employees is critical to enhance engagement. Engaged employees are a great organisational asset as they contribute towards high retention rates, increased productivity, profitability, growth, as well as stakeholder satisfaction.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Hybridisation at an Institution of higher learning presents both challenges and opportunities when it comes to employee engagement. Social isolation and employee well-being need to be managed using strategies that are intentionally designed to meet this goal. The support of leadership needs to be visible, or the initiatives may not be taken with the seriousness that they deserve. Reimagining employee engagement in South African HEIs is an imperative, necessitated by the evolving world of work, and cannot be ignored. The time to act is now to ensure future survival in the work world.

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