Customer Service Improvement through Engagement: A Study of the Semi-skilled, Frontline Workforce in the Retail Industry in South Africa

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Abstract

In economically challenging times, business needs to focus on all elements of operation to improve profitability. Engagement has been identified as an emerging theme that is successful in increasing profitability by creating a workforce that is more dedicated and actively present. Within the service and retail industries, engagement levers can be used as a mechanism for enhancing levels of customer service, their primary communication channel with customers. The question of how to maximise engagement within this core frontline, often semi-skilled, workforce is therefore crucial, and it cannot necessarily be approached in the same way as a white-collar, highly educated workforce. A qualitative, inductive and exploratory approach was taken to understand what impacted on and influenced engagement in this setting. Nominal group interviews were held within a South African retail environment, and the responses of 54 participants were captured. Qualitative and quantitative metrics were extrapolated and analysed to add to the understanding of the topic. The key findings revealed that the role the customer played in generating staff engagement was a key lever in a frontline environment, a link not made by existing literature on engagement. The study proposes a Frontline Service Engagement model that provides insight into the complexities of engagement in an African context, and, compared to an international context, helps understand the difference in approach required. Through understanding the complexity of the influences that contribute to this new lever, a strategy to address engagement

can be improved to equip managers to increase profitability even in difficult economic times.

Introduction

The creation of employee engagement is seen by many as a key determinant of organisational success. The concept of engagement first emerged in 1990 from Kahn's seminal work in which he defined engagement as "being psychologically present in particular moments" (1990, p. 693). This concept is something that is seen to help build a workforce that is more committed, positive and involved (Anitha, 2014; Bakker & Schaufeli, 2004; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Although the literature has contributed significantly to the challenge of measuring engagement, a deeper understanding of its use as a tool for business effectiveness across different situations is required by both academia and business (Anitha, 2014; Bakker, Albrecht, Leiter, & Michael, 2011; Menguc, Auh, Yeniaras, & Katsikeas, 2017; Soane, Truss, Alfes, Shantz, Gatenby, & Rees, 2012).

Understanding how semi-skilled, customer-facing (frontline) employees think and are motivated, was the key focus of this study. The added complexity of studying the topic in a South African context (a developing country with a weak economy), created a need for a contextual study that led to recommended actions to increase profitability without significant financial investment. Frontline employees in South Africa constitute a significant part of the working population, with semi-skilled workers having increased by 66 per cent since 2004, and service workers representing 16 per cent of the employed population (Statistics South Africa, 2014, 2016). These employees fulfil monotonous roles, and they are used by business because of their low cost and the perception that they have limited career aspirations, partly due to their limited education. Currently, seven per cent of South African service industry employees are engaged in work, which is a concern for those who rely on these same frontline staff to be the primary interface that customers have with their brand (Gallup Consulting, 2013). Within the retail environment, employees' ability to listen to customers, and their product knowledge and problem-solving capabilities are key to business success, especially with the recent advent of social media and revolutionary technology changes (Albrecht, Walsh, Brach, Gremler, & Van Herpen, 2016; Jacobs, Renard, & Snelgar, 2014; Karatepe, 2013; Ostrom, Parasuraman, Bowen, Patrício, & Voss, 2015; Potter, 2014; So, King, Sparks, & Wang, 2016).

As the research into engagement increases, a link between engagement and customer service is being established, and the effect of engagement on customer service is being explored (Gallup Consulting, 2013; Gupta & Sharma, 2016; Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 2008; Karatepe, 2013; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004; Menguc,

Auh, Fisher, & Haddad, 2013; Menguc et al., 2017; Salanova, Agut, & Peiró, 2005; Zablah, Franke, Brown, & Bartholomew, 2012). Research has established the validity of the levers required for engagement; however, there have been limited recommendations on how to influence these within an employee subset that has limited scope for role change or innovation. It is likely that individuals occupying different roles in a business hierarchy have different levers of personal engagement (Louw, Sutherland, & Hofmeyr, 2012). If those making decisions on how to enable staff do not perceive their needs correctly, a misalignment in terms of focus and policy can occur, which is shown through staff productivity, which in turn directly affects profitability (Anitha, 2014; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Heskett et al., 2008; Saks, 2006).

A clear link has been established between engagement and increased organisational performance (Anitha, 2014; Kahn, 1990; Maslach et al., 2001; Saks, 2006; Soane et al., 2012). This organisational performance in retail- and service-focused sectors is governed increasingly by frontline employees and their level of service to customers (Albrecht et al., 2016; Menguc et al., 2013; Salanova et al., 2005). The advents of social media, increased competition and reduced consumer spending power have caused companies to look at alternative ways of improving their proposition to the market beyond simply reducing prices and pulling marketing and operational efficiency levers (Heskett et al., 2008).

Attributes of the level of roles identified by this study are similar (e.g. these roles are monotonous and have limited task significance). Roles that are high in these characteristics are generally low in engagement, and staff turnover and absenteeism are expected to be high (Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004; Saks, 2006). With onerous South African labour laws making firing staff expensive and time consuming, changing the employee is not a solution, despite the perception that it is cheaper than changing the organisation (Maslach et al., 2001). Increasing engagement is a more sustainable and pervasive solution.

This study addressed the issue of how a large South African corporate retailer with a large workforce of semi-skilled frontline individuals could promote engagement.

Literature Review

Employee Engagement

The construct of engagement has, since the seminal work of Kahn (1990), attracted attention from a variety of angles, although there is limited clarity on a universal meaning or attributes of engagement (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Gupta & Sharma, 2016; Truss, Shantz, Soane, Alfes, & Delbridge, 2013; Viljevac, Cooper-Thomas, & Saks, 2012).

Several studies have built on the concept that engagement is a state of mind rather than a set of behaviours; however, most of the measurement tools follow the latter approach (Bakker et al., 2011; Christian et al., 2011; Soane et al., 2012). Engagement is not seen as an attitude towards work but as a persistent sense of fulfilment that creates dedication in employees, and subsequently heightens their performance (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2004; Rothmann & Rothmann, 2010; Saks, 2006; Soane et al., 2012). In the extreme, an engaged employee would have complete control over their working situation, be energised by their work and believe fully in the value they are creating, not just for the business but for themselves (Anitha, 2014). Time at work would pass quickly and concentration on any task would be easily achieved; there would be absolute support from both the business and direct managers, and employees would have all the resources at their disposal to excel in their task (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2004; Maslach et al., 2001; Saks, 2006). However, increasing productivity and ambition within a team without the necessary resources to reward or promote those individuals according to their needs and efforts, will leave an engaged workforce ultimately more frustrated, especially if they have foregone a work/life balance to commit to being more dedicated and absorbed. This is a potential challenge in monotonous hierarchical organisations, such as retailers, where margins are tight and there are few management positions on offer.

Engagement Levers

It is almost impossible to act on any one engagement lever without affecting the others (Maslach et al., 2001). The interlinking nature of the constructs makes their separation academically and practically difficult. To create a shift in engagement, the correct integration of the levers must occur, and prioritisation within a specific workforce must be established (Maslach et al., 2001). The literature also is not definitive as to the order of impact of the levers discussed (Anitha, 2014; Jacobs et al., 2014; Karatepe, 2013; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010; Saks, 2006). Although quantitative studies have assigned statistical significance to some over others, a definitive list of importance is a gap in previous studies, including in-depth literature reviews on the subject (Attridge, 2009; Shuck & Wollard, 2010; Simpson, 2009).

Job Characteristics and Fit

Job characteristics are one of May et al.'s (2004) central recommendations for the creation of engagement, and a key statistically significant antecedent identified by Saks (2006). May et al. (2004) found that, in a monotonous workforce environment (similar to the one focused on in the present study), selecting the right employees for roles was a key link to increased engagement; in essence, the demands on people could be greater than their physical ability (Maslach et al., 2001). The construction of a role and the variety of the work need to be carefully matched with the personal desires and competencies of an individual to create true engagement. Employees should be set a variety of tasks that are not constantly repetitive, and that have constant stimulation.

This is a challenge for those in a repetitive retail environment. These constructs have been linked to heightened motivation and a sense of learning and progression (Renard & Snelgar, 2016b), and are based on Hackman and Oldham's (1980) formative job characteristics model. They identified five key characteristics for any role, which are held to be true for the measurement of engagement: skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback (Saks, 2006).

Personal Characteristics

Given that employee engagement's foundation as a construct is based on emotions and behaviours, the natural state of an individual before coming to work is likely to have an impact on the way they approach their role, and the energy they put into their work (May et al., 2004). For example, May et al. (2004) found that self-consciousness had a significant impact on engagement, which might be reduced by a higher level of self-efficacy. Goussinsky (2012) linked self-efficacy and disposition to a service environment, finding that low self-efficacious employees had less ability to handle aggressive customers, and thus they disengaged from their environment. Zablah et al. (2012) found that customer orientation was another aspect of personal psychology that influenced engagement. Their study showed that customer-orientated behaviours were a result of psychological differences between individuals, and that the desire to be in a role that was customer-facing arose from an individual's attitude and behavioural type.

Work Environment and Organisational Support

There are many elements of a work environment that have been shown to directly impact on engagement, including structure, culture and communication. Anitha (2014) found these to be leading antecedents of engagement, representing 53 per cent of engagement in the participants in her study, a study which was built on the studies of both Crawford, Lepine, and Rich (2010) and May et al. (2004). Her study linked both physical and emotional environmental factors explicitly with better customer service, thus creating an overlap between working environment and organisational support. Saks (2006) also found organisational support to be a statistically significant antecedent of engagement.

Colleagues

A relationship with co-workers and a supportive team of peers is indicated as a key lever throughout the literature. Kahn (1990) found that a supportive team added to the psychological safety required for engagement, and that an environment where colleagues were seen as supportive, fostered a more experimental environment with greater levels of trust. Anitha (2014) found that co-worker relationships were the second-most significant cause of increased employee engagement, representing 36 per cent of participant engagement. "Higher order needs, such as achievement and collaborative decision-making, that reflect team and co-worker relationship, lead

employees to take on greater responsibility to achieve shared goals and visions" (Anitha, 2014, p. 319).

Reward and Recognition

Reward can take many forms, and has always been a key measure in recruiting and retaining employees (Jacobs et al., 2014; Karatepe, 2013). If rewards are seen as valuable and generous, the employee will see greater value in the work they are doing and be positively engaged (Kahn, 1990; Maslach et al., 2001). It is therefore more important to understand the value and impact of reward for different employee groups than develop a standard approach (Snelgar, Renard, & Venter, 2013).

Leadership

Strong leadership or supervisor support creates psychological safety, which has been shown to increase engagement (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Kahn, 1990; May et al., 2004; Rich et al., 2010). Leadership, in this instance, is defined as the direct supervision of employees on a day-to-day basis rather than the overall leadership of a specific organisation. May et al. (2004) found that a more trusting and respectful relationship between employee and manager led to higher engagement because employees had a more positive attitude towards their work. A positive link is created through an environment that does not have negative consequences, but instead has managers who set realistic expectations and react accordingly when mistakes are made (Crawford et al., 2010).

Training and Development

Anitha (2014) found training and development to be key antecedents for engagement. Given the link to service accuracy and performance, it is particularly relevant for this research (Anitha, 2014; Heskett et al., 2008). Training is seen to create engagement through a boost in confidence, which creates a reward seen as equivalent to increased pay. Soane et al's (2012) study also found that training was directly linked with engagement, and they recommended that a positive learning cycle be created to understand how to create a continuous environment for learning.

Organisational Justice

Two types of organisational justice were identified by Saks (2006): distributive justice (the fairness of the employer's decision), and procedural justice (the fairness of the decision-making process). The link to reward and the distribution of organisational resources especially are keys in terms of allocation as they both create citizenship behaviour, which is linked to trust and engagement (Biswas, Varma, & Ramaswami, 2013). Maslach et al. (2001) also saw the overall fairness perception as a key characteristic needed for engagement. This can also apply to the fairness of stakeholders, including how customers treat staff. They often act from a position of

power as they know staff cannot respond to an aggressive customer even though it is often not the staff member's fault (Grandey et al., 2004).

Resources Available

Any employee faces two factors when working: the demands of their job, and the resources given to complete that job (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2004). Salanova et al. (2005) linked this to engagement: "Basic human motivation is directed toward the creation, maintenance and accumulation of resources" (2005, p. 1218). Resources can be defined as not just the physical tools and infrastructure, but also adequate training on how to use that tool and support. Feedback from supervisors can contribute just as equally, and a strong link is demonstrated between these needs and engagement (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2004; Saks, 2006).

Customer Service and Profitability Outcomes

The ability that a business has to add value to its customers through the interaction between customer and seller, is a core academic and business concept, and the trend shows the increasing importance of this interaction (Albrecht et al., 2016; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). An explicit link exists between customer satisfaction and profit within a service environment (Heskett et al., 2008), and increasing these levels of interaction can have mixed impacts on staff's well-being (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). Salanova et al. (2005) demonstrated that customer loyalty itself created a positive service environment because customers were shown to constructively influence morale over time. One of the challenges for large stores in a retail frontline environment, as opposed to a more bespoke hotel or restaurant setting, is that the customer is less likely to interact with the same employee regularly, making relationships harder to foster. Heskett et al. (2008) looked into comparable service environments (fast-food restaurants and call centres). They found success in policies that linked pay to customer ratings in stores, and an employee satisfaction programme that featured self-examination and constant communication with what the workforce needed.

Environmental Context

The fast-paced, key-performance-indicator-driven, low-margin and cost-reduction environment of retail is also an important factor for analysis as it will have an influencing factor on any proposed engagement framework. Thompson and Newsome's (2016) study looked at the manufacturing sector and found a negative correlation between a repetitive environment and overall engagement. The limitations of using a manufacturing study in a retail environment was shown by Kumar and Pansari (2016), who found that employee engagement had a much higher impact on customer engagement in service versus manufacturing firms. The consensus drawn from the literature is clear: the climate of the organisation is key to the impact that engagement has on profitability, customer loyalty and customer service; therefore, studies in distinct

environmental settings will contribute to a wider understanding of the subject (Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Menguc et al., 2017; Saks, 2006; So et al., 2016).

Following on from the literature, two research questions were developed in the present study for further investigation into the role and process of engagement in enhancing customer service improvement. The first question specifically asked what engagement levers were relevant for semi-skilled frontline workers in a South African retail context. The second question built on the first by asking what actions would ultimately improve this engagement.

Research Methodology

Research Design

Jacobs et al. (2014) found that the language in the international measurement indexes caused mixed understanding in participants in South Africa, and that the results of indexes were skewed as a result. This, combined with the limited amount of existing research into a semi-skilled workforce in a developing context, was the reason for deciding on a qualitative, inductive and exploratory approach for the present study in order to build a general theoretical base. This allowed for investigating how and why employees were engaged, and for piecing together an action plan based on conversations with those directly affected. Taking it one step further than conducting a quantitative study, in-depth research was done through using nominal focus groups, which allowed for consensus to be built on discussion and true participant understanding of the constructs proposed. The literature points to various areas where engagement can be influenced, and the exploratory approach allowed for the narrowing of these factors into a more focused set of parameters within a specific frontline and semi-skilled environment (Saunders & Lewis, 2012).

The nominal group technique was initially designed by Delbecq, Van de Ven, and Gustafson (1975). It allows for a detailed understanding of various aspects of organisational culture, including in the service industry (Chiu, 2002; Ipe, 2003; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). This technique has been shown to be a complex but effective way of generating greater expression of ideas and consensus that underlie decisions (Boddy, 2012; Lunenburg, 2011). The approach is a hybrid of an independent survey and a focus group discussion as it allows for the merits of both. This has been shown to lead to higher levels of idea generation (Girotra, Terwiesch, & Ulrich, 2010).

As a collaborative technique, it is most suitable in environments where real outcomes are required through suggestions, providing the richness of qualitative insight required by this study. It also allows for prioritisation of responses, thus making the recommendations for business more relevant and actionable. Given the limited educational levels of the group in the current study, the simplicity of the questions and the control of the facilitator in a nominal focus group (in comparison to a full focus

group) made conversations directive, transparent, and, most importantly, ensured a full understanding of the issues at hand (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014).

Population and Sampling

The population for this study was frontline store staff within a retail business that had contact with customers within a store environment.

This study focused on one specific listed retailer in South Africa, with a national presence of over 890 wholly owned stores (in South Africa) and 32 000 employees. The total number of participants was 54, and overall they provided 809 answers to the two questions posed. Given the detailed conversations with participants and the basic similarities between retail stores, the results obtained can be considered representative and transferable. One nominal group was proposed in each of the ten stores selected.

Stratified random sampling was used to select these ten stores and the invited employees, providing a random representation of the population and ensuring no bias from the store manager. Two pilot studies were conducted to enhance the sampling method and confirm the questions posed.

The next section presents the results of the study, addressing the findings against each of the two questions that framed the research.

Results

Results: Research Question 1

Research question 1: What engagement levers are relevant for a semi-skilled frontline workforce in the retail sector in South Africa, and why?

The aim of this question was to investigate whether the engagement levers outlined by the (predominantly international) literature were relevant in a South African retail environment with semi-skilled frontline staff. In respect of research question 1, the nominal group participants were asked two subsidiary questions, namely, what things they liked about their job that helped them to serve customers better (designated as question A, see Table 1), and what things about their job stopped them from helping customers (designated as question B, see Table 1).

The results, which, for the purpose of this analysis, were coded and named "sub-levers," were then collated and grouped into themes or "main levers" to enable easier scrutiny against the literature. Many of the levers explained one output but had a root cause in a different place. To keep the data clean, each one was considered at a semantic level, and any other latent causes that fed into that lever were described in the conversational analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The frequency of responses was also considered to show the numbers of individuals who noted each sub-lever under each main lever in

total. This frequency was considered as part of the content analysis. The ranking was applied to give a holistic overview of importance in answering research question 2.

Overall Analysis of Engagement Lever Relevance

Questions A and B posed to the nominal focus groups were designed to generate discussions about what the participants felt engaged and disengaged them at work. Table 1 shows the results of both nominal group questions A and B. Where levers were the same in answer to both questions, these were combined to show the overall frequency of the levers and the sub-levers that influenced the main lever. The frequency of each response is also shown.

Table 1: Results of nominal group questions A and B: Levers that increase and block engagement

Main lever	*Q*	*F*	*Sub-lever*	*F*	*Sub-lever*	*F*	*Sub-lever*	*F*
Role of the customer Total 154	A	100	Customers show appreciation.	15	Feel challenged by customers.	8	Diversity of customers	13
			Customers smile/are nice.	29	Learn about customers.	10	Older customers	2
			Customers give encouragement.	6	Learn things from customers.	3	Customers get attached to the staff member	7
			Customers show respect.	6	Speak language of customers.	1		
	B	54	Customers are rude.	20	Customer's sabotage	4	Discrimination	6
			Customers are disrespectful.	16	Customer is not always right.	8		
Resources available Total 125	A	16	New equipment	3	Name badge	2	Shelf standards/enough stock	11
	B	109	Not enough staff/long queues	36	No stock	28	Old uniforms	4
			Faulty machinery	7	Quality of stock	12	Wrong prices	16
			Offline systems	6				
Job characteristics and fit Total 124	A	92	Being empowered to help	12	Customer service	30	Varied roles	3
			Every day is different	5	Job keeps you busy	9	Challenging role	12
			Allows the gaining of knowledge / technology	17	Job allows you to go extra mile	4		
	B	32	Language barriers	1	Stress/pressure	20	Not empowered	5
			Doing double jobs	6				
Work environment and organisational support Total 114	A	18	Free drinks and meals	5	Good internal communication	6	Coming early to work (hours)	1
			Free transport	7				
	B	96	Space in canteen	2	Work conditions	8	Scheduling	20
			Cutting hours	29	Forced labour	10	Communication	21
			Outsourcing	6				

Main lever	Q	F	Sub-lever	F	Sub-lever	F	Sub-lever	F
Leadership Total 90	A	11	Always there to assist	1	Challenged by managers	3	Encouragement	3
			Manager quality	3	Not mixing business with pleasure	1		
	B	79	No accountability	12	Poor behaviour and attitude	23	Lack of support	8
			Supervisor delay	6	Managers not being prepared	4	Management not helping customers	9
			Lack of respect	17				
Reward and recognition Total 47	A	17	Living wage for family	5	Pay day	11	Recognition	1
	B	30	No performance by management	5	Less payment	4	No positive feedback	3
			Incorrect (short) payments calculated	8	Pay	10		
Colleagues Total 40	A	35	Collaboration with colleagues	10	Happy colleagues	9	Unity among staff	1
			Support	7	Like family	8		
	B	5	Ignorant staff	5				
Training and development Total 29	A	8	Learning and growth	8				
	B	21	Training and development	21				
Organisational justice	A	28	Fairness	11	Unequal promotion of staff	8	Promise of uniforms	4
			Unpredictability	5				
Personal characteristics	B	19	Alignment with vision and mission	1	Pride/making miracles	18		

Note. Q = Nominal group question; F = Frequency of responses.

Individual Lever Analysis

The lever analysis was based on the generalised responses of the focus groups. The findings reflect the discussions during the sessions. Statements that make reference to participants having a certain view are made when there was broad consensus across the groups regarding a particular observation. In cases where a specific group, or an individual, had a view, this is made clear in the analysis.

Role of the Customer

During the discussions, the role of the customer was the most influential factor raised, and participants showed a lot of passion when unpacking each element of the customer role. This is reflected in this overall concept having the highest frequency (154) and the most sub-levers. This passion can be seen as additional weighting behind the issue discussed (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014).

On-the-job and Other Resources Available

The resources available to staff came through as positive engagement factors in three areas. The participants felt that on-the-job resources (as set out in Table 1) allowed not only for efficiency of operation but also linked to the pride employees had in their store.

The name badge also had an impact on employee pride, as indicated by one participant: "It makes a huge difference when customers use my name to say hello. It's a sign of respect and the name badge allows that." The last resource sub-lever raised was shelf standards, which was again linked to the pride of the employee in the area that they managed, and their ability to serve customers well when they had enough stock.

Job Characteristics and Fit

The characteristics of the role played by employees in the organisation and their fit in that role were shown to have the second-highest frequency of responses (see Table 1, Question A).

Participants were positive about their roles and generally felt they were in positions that suited their skills, although they also voiced higher aspirations, especially the younger ones in the groups. Customer service, as indicated in the literature, was by far the most influential sub-lever in this category. All in all, 30 out of 54 participants included this in their list of engagement factors.

Work Environment and Organisational Support

The lever of employees' work environment and level of organisational support had an overall frequency of 114 responses. Specific topics of discussion in this area dealt with the provision of a positive working environment. The participants mentioned that the retailer provided breakfast and snacks to staff for free during the day, as well as free transport home if they worked later shifts and missed their public transport. Two participants passionately articulated the role this support played in their day-to-day lives: "The company gives us food so we can serve customers with a full stomach" and "I normally leave home without breakfast so the bread provided helps a lot." Particularly in the African context, this represents the fulfilment of a basic human need.

Leadership

Leadership was mentioned as a factor of engagement 90 times during the study, with most of the references being in relation to leadership as having an impact on blocking engagement. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the sub-levers under this main lever, describing the role of the leader in the engagement and disengagement of employees.

Reward and Recognition

There was resistance by participants to mention or discuss the reward aspects of their role, although it was mentioned 47 times during the study. The facilitator did try to probe this factor, but it was clear that it was a socially unacceptable topic rather than one that was not important (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). One reason for this, which was expressed by more than one participant, was an embarrassment to talk about money as it reflected a degree of greediness, and there was a stigma attached to just working

for cash rather than enjoying your role. Only one participant mentioned intangible rewards in terms of recognition as a positive factor experienced in their environment.

Colleagues

Colleagues were another factor discussed extensively in the group sessions, although it only had an overall frequency of 40 responses. The retail group was seen to have a family culture created by colleagues, although this did not generally include managers.

Training and Development

Training and development was the least frequently mentioned factor and it only had one sub-lever that was mentioned on eight occasions. The discussion of this lever focused on formal learning and development, which differentiated it from the learning that happened as part of the job characteristics discussed earlier.

Organisational Justice

The results of the discussions about the unfair treatment of workers as a factor that blocked engagement are shown in Table 1. Fairness was a concern for staff, predominantly the treatment of the individuals in their teams. As summed up by one participant: "We simply aren't treated equally."

Personal Characteristics

Participants did not highlight their own personal characteristics extensively in the conversations. Pride was mentioned consistently but it was also linked to other factors (which have been described elsewhere). The personal alignment of employees with the mission of the company is an individual construct; it was only referred to by one participant (as shown in Table 1).

Results: Research Question 2

Research question 2: What actions will ultimately improve engagement of a semi-skilled frontline workforce in a retail environment?

Building on research question 1, research question 2 was posed so as to be able to make recommendations applicable to those operating in the retail environment, taking into account the recommendations made in the literature. No quantitative measure was applied here, and the responses in Table 2 were noted by the facilitator during the discussions. Responses were collated to reduce duplication across focus groups; however, similar comments with potentially different interpretations were included to enhance understanding.

Table 2: Results of question 2: Recommended actions to increase engagement

Grouping against levers	Recommended action
Job characteristics and fit	• Keep rotating roles to give opportunities for more experience. • Let people show their potential by moving them around in the store. • Give more hours for variable-time employees.
Resources available	• Ensure enough stock of promotional lines; plan it better so employees do not have to tell the customer it is the distribution centre's fault. • Make the process of ordering new equipment/fixing equipment better and quicker. • Hire more staff or create a better balance between outsourced and internal, permanent labour. • Be more aware of peak times in each store to avoid queues. • Improve the stock management system to avoid being out of stocks.
Work environment and organisational support	• Communicate any changes by scheduling in advance. • Communicate why hours are being cut/why outsourcing is being implemented. • Save costs (e.g. reduce the transport needed in the evenings as it is a waste to use a 22-seater bus for 5 staff). • Be transparent about communication; if the economy is so bad, why not cut costs everywhere? • Improve scheduling of staff to cause less stress and pressure. • Increase the speed of the stock system. • Look at decentralising deliveries to prevent stock shortages. • Improve recruitment to reduce incompetence. • Look at situation of having two cashiers at tills whereas competitors have eight at a time. • Schedule ahead to increase planning if hours are cut.
Leadership	• Supervisors are young; there is a need for more experienced talent. • Managers should lead by example, work the same hours and not just sit in their offices. • Provide training to managers about respecting employees and about not abusing their power. • Promote transparency of managers' work, so that there is less scepticism about what they do in their offices all day. • Make it a policy that managers help out on the floor when the shop is busy and/or short staffed. Some do and some do not.

Grouping against levers	Recommended action
	• Discipline managers about making personal calls, reading the newspaper, surfing the internet, and so forth.
Colleagues	• Utilise younger rather than older supervisors. • Create better teamwork. Everyone must get their hands dirty.
Reward and recognition	• Give staff discounts to show loyalty. • Money is a motivator. Stop cutting hours and outsourcing work. • Increase pay per hour to compensate for fewer work hours, so that employees can still put food on the table.
Training and development	• Ensure training is provided to all staff and outsourced labour. • Provide training to outsourced labour so that their work is of the right standard. • Offer more training to frontline staff. • Implement regular training for both managers and frontline staff. • Focus on the development of people. • Teach managers to show employees respect. • Do people management training. • Attend to skills development and general development of all staff.
Organisational justice	• Be open when there are promotions available, and allow all staff to apply for positions and not just those who are liked by the manager. • Do not use outside agents as managers; they do not understand what it takes to run a store. • Provide new uniforms when promised.

Discussion of Results

Research Question 1

Engagement Levers

The results, once analysed for themes, were found to be aligned with the overall results reported in engagement literature. However, the findings indicated an additional lever in the study's context, namely that of the role of the customer. According to the participants, the customer was a distinct factor influencing their engagement with their work. This concept is present in a wide range of literature on customer service, and it features prominently in the marketing field (Grandey et al., 2004; Heskett et al., 2008; Karatepe, 2013).

Role of the Customer

The role that the customer plays in the work life of a frontline employee in terms of engagement is a factor that generated 154 answers to the two nominal group questions posed. The ability that customers have to change the mood and temperament of employees is a concept covered in a variety of literature, but it is not explicitly linked to the engagement of staff in classic engagement models (Anitha, 2014; Kahn, 1990; Maslach et al., 2001; May et al., 2004; Rich et al., 2010; Saks, 2006; Schaufeli, Salanova, Gon Alex-ro, & Bakker, 2002; Soane et al., 2012).

The creation of conversation around what really improves the daily life of staff in their roles, allowed for the unpacking and questioning of factors normally explored in a fixed quantitative study. This lever is explicitly underpinned by many of the others, which is perhaps why it has not been specifically focused on in previous studies. For example, the results of this study show that a happy customer is created when there are enough staff members at the tills, when their desired items are available, and when the staff have the energy and endurance to be helpful and to remain proud of their work.

Participants clearly linked the negative behaviour of a customer with disengagement, and the positive behaviour of a customer with engagement: "Dealing with customers isn't easy and only the loyal customers are friendly." As mentioned, the literature linking these concepts is limited, although both Goussinsky (2012) and Grandey et al. (2004) found that the higher the quantity of aggression from customers towards employees, the more the latter were likely to experience increased emotional exhaustion and disengagement. However, they indicated that the personal characteristics of individuals also played a role, a finding that was confirmed in the present study. Emotionally demanding customer interactions can have an impact on staff by increasing the emotional demand on them to stay calm and react positively to often negative feedback (Zablah et al., 2012). The studies by both Goussinsky (2012) and Grandey et al. (2004) were conducted in call-centre environments where the role of the customer is reduced because they are not physically present. In a retail frontline environment, staff are not able to turn their backs and to pass the pressure they feel on to customers. In a face-to-face environment, the challenges facing employees are less clearly defined: they are required to be ambassadors for the brand of the company even when customers disrespect them (Zablah et al., 2012). The aim of employees to avoid conflict may explain Karatepe's (2013) finding that employees often paid special attention to customer problems and prioritised going the extra mile. In face-to-face environments, the link between engagement and customer service as a tool for increased sales is heightened (Bowen & Schneider, 2014).

On-the-job and Other Resources Available

The factor that had the largest negative effect on engagement was the resources that employees had available: this issue showed a frequency of 109 responses in its category

(see Table 1). Only 16 individuals mentioned resources as a positive factor, and in almost all the cases it correlated directly with a situation of stock levels being high. The reverse was also true: when the factor of resources was described as negative, it had to do with stock levels that were low. Therefore, overall, the level of stocks is a factor that highly influences engagement (judging from the frequency of responses), and it is closely connected to various areas of engagement. This finding reinforces findings in the literature (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2004; Karatepe, 2013; Saks, 2006). The retailer's use of name badges was a source of pride for employees, and this fact may also differentiate the African context from developed economies, particularly as automation becomes more prevalent.

Although physical resources are shown to have an impact on engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Bakker & Schaufeli, 2004), studies indicate both physical and psychological resources as conjoined factors that together have a much larger impact. Resources in the study were mentioned predominantly in terms of physical challenges, although, in probing participants' answers, these challenges seemed to be linked to feelings of either pride or embarrassment. Employees either had or did not have the right tools of trade, and this was linked to the influence of their customer experiences in the store. Therefore, the reason that resources were so highly ranked is because a lack of resources affects the work environment of staff and their ability to serve customers. Apart from resources, these two levers achieved the highest number of responses across the two questions asked. The results showed that the lack of stock, the long queues and the wrong prices frustrated customers, and they took their frustration out on staff, which in turn reduced staff's engagement.

Job Characteristics and Fit

According to the literature, the characteristics of an employee's role, and employees' fit in their role, were considered important elements of engagement (May et al., 2004; Saks, 2006). Participants also rated this lever as important to their engagement, matching the findings of May et al. (2004) that in a monotonous environment it is important to find individuals who can carry out their duties with a positive attitude. The findings of the current study support Olivier and Rothmann's (2007) study that indicated role fit as a mediator of engagement in a South African setting. Overall, the construct of job characteristics was mentioned 92 times as a factor that could increase engagement and 32 times as a factor that could block it (see Table 1).

Participants regarded enjoying the elements of customer service and the interaction with customers as key job characteristics that ensured role fit. This sub-lever was positively related to increased engagement, with 30 participants mentioning the construct in research question 1. This supports the findings of Jacobs et al. (2014), Kahn (1990) and May et al. (2004) that meaningfulness of role is considered fundamental in the study of engagement. The fact that participants "enjoy interacting with people and making them

happy" and that they find this challenge to have real meaning for them, give further weight to the overall construct of fit, supporting the finding that it takes a certain individual to find this type of work interesting (Renard & Snelgar, 2016b).

Overall, the lever of job characteristics and fit is important in the context of a semi-skilled frontline workforce in the retail sector in South Africa. The role of employees in a business, their interface with customers, and their fit in that role, were discussed during the study. The findings that roles that have high autonomy, less stress and more meaning give rise to higher levels of employee engagement, support the findings in the literature.

Work Environment and Organisational Support

The environment that individuals work in was shown to be a factor in whether they were engaged or not. This is especially true for a workforce in a developing economy. The negative influence of this far outweighed the positive, with 96 participants mentioning this main lever as a factor that blocked engagement, and 18 mentioning it as a factor that increased engagement (see Table 1). The sub-levers of work environment and organisational support have been dealt with in the literature, especially the aspects of communication and physical environment; however, some idiosyncrasies of the South African environment that came to the fore, added a different angle to the body of research. These include attending to basic needs such as the provision of drinks, meals and free transport, and even the use of name badges, which differentiate the African context from many First World countries.

In the current study, communication, both positive and negative, was indicated as an influencing construct. One participant observed: "We only hear negative messages … there is no communication." Communication is covered extensively in the literature (Anitha, 2014; Bazigos & Caruso, 2016; Crawford et al., 2010). In the present study, negative communication was shown to have a greater impact, with 21 responses indicating negative communication and only six indicating positive communication. Communication was also mentioned as a potential cause of other sub-levers, such as scheduling, outsourcing and cutting work hours. Overall, the concept of open communication was discussed at length, and participants pointed out that many challenges could be avoided if the business was clear about its motives and goals. This links up with the constructs of organisational justice and leadership where transparency is seen as a fair and motivational way to lead and communicate with staff (Anitha, 2014; Mishra, Boynton & Mishra, 2014).

The lever of work environment and the level of organisational support provided was found to be relevant for a frontline workforce, especially in a low-income, developing environment. This finding builds on existing literature regarding elaborating small policies that can really influence employee engagement in this context. Any policy or environmental shift must be regarded as fair and must be communicated well if it is to be influential and create true engagement.

Leadership

Leadership is considered in the majority of the literature as one of the stronger factors influencing engagement and creating psychological safety (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Kahn, 1990; Rich et al., 2010). It was surprising in this study to find that leadership had relatively little influence on engagement in comparison to the other factors. Saks (2006), one of the key contributors to the field, also found a limited relationship between the two. The fact that the link is less influential in the context studied may be explained by the overall situation of employees finding themselves in a depressed developing context, a factor that has more impact than a leader's influence. Frontline employees in lean organisations who have to deal with antagonistic customers, long commutes and antiquated resources, put these issues ahead of management when pushed. Nevertheless, as indicated in the results, the conversation around this topic was very passionate and employees found it easy to speak about it.

Engaging leaders are seen as having realistic reactions to problems, and this study confirms this finding (Crawford et al., 2010). Management has the ability to offset any stress caused by the customer, to manage the interaction, and not to side with the customer always (Grandey et al., 2004). This may be challenging when the policy of the organisation is that the customer is always right. Participants were disengaged by managers who did not back them up when it came to dealing with situations that were not their fault, predominantly with regard to customers. This may be a finding that is unique to a more racially charged environment such as in South Africa, or it may be a symptom of the reduced management training of a younger generation of black managers who are not empowered themselves with knowledge to be truly transformational leaders—something that is required in a difficult economic climate (Cummings & Worley, 2014).

Reward and Recognition

The employees in this study focused more on their extrinsic reward requirements than on their intrinsic requirements. They were grateful that their basic needs were being attended to, such as having a job and being paid at the end of each month so that they were able to put food on the table. Work has been done in this area in the context of the South African retail sector, and this study goes some way to further substantiate existing findings (Jacobs et al., 2014; Rothmann & Rothmann, 2010). The local studies showed that a younger generation of employees increasingly required a mix of reward types and that extrinsic rewards, even within a low-level, low-skill environment, were not enough to create true engagement (Jacobs et al., 2014; Rothmann & Rothmann, 2010). Of the 60 per cent of participants in the present study who were under 35 years of age, only 15 per cent mentioned intrinsic rewards as influential, whereas 45 per cent mentioned extrinsic rewards as important.

Colleagues

The influence of colleagues was found to be one of the most established levers of engagement in the literature (Anitha, 2014; Kahn, 1990), and existing research proved to be relevant to the context of this study. As a negative influencer, this construct generated almost no discussion; yet, with 35 responses, it was the third-most frequently mentioned positive factor. Employees clearly value a supportive relationship with their colleagues and the creation of psychological safety through this level of family-like trust (Kahn, 1990; May et al., 2004).

Training and Development

As the lowest frequency lever in question 1(A) and the second to last in question 1(B), the factor of training and development cannot be considered as a main factor. Although the findings in the literature about the significant impact of training were not directly disproved, the absence of conversation around this theme was revealing in itself. The tenure of participants in the lowest-level jobs is relevant here. The development of individuals is sporadic, but this could be attributed to many different factors, including individual competency, a topic which is beyond the scope of this study. A reason for a lack of training could be a lack of investment rather than a lack of recognition of the requirement. The economic situation could have created a lack of focus on this lever, but this would require further investigation—the participants in the current study were unable to confirm this conjecture.

Organisational Justice

Unfairness of decisions, predominantly concerning promotions, created a lack of psychological safety among 28 respondents (see Table 1). Although this was overall one of lowest impactful factors, its lack of inclusion as a positive lever in any form (the only lever not included) indicates that it is impactful, linking it to Maslach et al.'s (2001) view that fairness was a key to engagement.

The literature links heightened self-consciousness to those who are most affected by organisational justice, and it further finds a positive correlation between this effect and the amount of customer interaction within a role (May et al., 2004). Its relatively low frequency, in terms of responses, in being a driver of engagement is therefore surprising given that all the participants are in a situational context where justice plays a role. This study may be more aligned to the study of Saks (2006), which found that only procedural justice had an impact on engagement. Context for this lever is therefore key, and this realisation can help define the requirements for engagement in a developing frontline workforce. While keeping promises and being fair about promotional choices will have a positive impact on engagement, these aspects should not be viewed in isolation, and they require analysis in conjunction with other factors such as leadership and communication. Participants put the blame for their being treated unfairly and for their promises being broken squarely on inexperienced managers.

Personal Characteristics

In the literature, the personal circumstances of individuals outside the work environment were also considered to be a lever of engagement (May et al., 2004). The long hours it takes to travel to work and the fact that 57 per cent of employees work more than 36 hours a week (leaving little time for their families) may have an impact on employees' engagement. These factors were relevant to this study as specific contextual factors existing in a developing environment where there are lower levels of employment.

As found in the literature, the lever of personal characteristics remains one of the hardest to analyse and assess, but it needs to be included as an element that is relevant to the overall findings. Although it has no direct influences, it influences many of the other levers and builds on the innate qualities that need to exist in employees in this environment to be engaged through other levers such as self-efficacy and pride.

Research Question 2

Research question 2: What actions will ultimately improve engagement in a semi-skilled frontline workforce in a retail environment?

Engagement Levers

The results in relation to research question 2 were in some parts specific to the situation of the retailer studied, which is to be expected, given the nature of the questions the participants were asked. In the discussion, the participants were asked to generalise their thoughts as much as possible, which makes the responses more transferable in a retail setting.

Role of the Customer

What is interesting to observe from the results, is that it is virtually impossible to change the role, or perhaps the personality, of the customer directly, which was accepted by the participants. All the solutions discussed fell under other levers, reversing the findings relating to the preceding questions that found that many of the influencers were relevant to the main lever of the customer. This is not surprising, given the nature of the customer lever. The influencers have to do with staff's empowerment to deal with challenges, and with the provision of additional resources, which in turn create shorter queues and fewer complaints about the lack of stock. It is therefore important to address the need to create a positive customer relationship in service interaction in order to increase frontline staff engagement. The literature makes a few recommendations about this. Albrecht et al. (2016) recommended the training of individual staff in how to deal with difficult customers so that these individuals could be dispatched and empowered to take the pressure off not only the manager but also the affected individuals. Training in general was one of the main recommendations of the study despite it only being seen as having a 3.3 per cent impact as a specific lever. The training influence on the main customer lever is therefore a key mechanism for business. The sub-levers discussed in the

dialogue around why the customer lever is so impactful are also addressed by including the training of managers. This training addresses the concept of "the customer is always right," and how management can deal with that aspect of a confrontation. Advanced training for staff to ensure that they understand that confrontations are not personal, and that they need to continue being polite even in adverse situations, was also recommended by the literature and the participants: "Offer more training for frontline staff" (see Table 2). This is a recommendation that would also address some of the challenges relating to the personal characteristics element of the influence. Putting in place training and hiring policies that ensure employees are capable of handling negative attitudes also links the role of the customer to job characteristics and fit.

Resources Available

The recommendations to improve the level of resources available were very practical. They covered creating more management understanding about the store and how to effectively staff and stock the environment adequately: "Better stock management system" and "Hire more staff." However, both of these are likely to require significant financial investment. In the literature there is more focus on emotional resources (social support, participative management and team building), making the current study's recommendations less aligned to the engagement theory (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2004; Kahn, 1990; Saks, 2006). The overall efficiency of the working environment and the provision of resources to create an adequate and comfortable place to work in and to ensure there are fewer aggressive customers, are therefore key recommendations for a retailer that has a significant contingent of frontline staff.

Work Environment and Organisational Support

Building on the sub-lever of resources in the work environment, communication was the main sub-lever about which recommendations were made: "Be transparent about communication" (see Table 2). A number of the challenges faced by staff about logistics and policy (e.g. cutting of hours) could be avoided if communication was sufficient and fair. It may be required to involve the human resources department of a business to achieve a shift in approach (Arrowsmith & Parker, 2013).

The recruitment policy also gave rise to a recommendation of the study, in this case "to reduce incompetence" (see Table 2), a recommendation that can be linked to the recommendations about the role of the human resources department (Arrowsmith & Parker, 2013). Although policies are specific to work environments, the recruitment of individuals whose personalities fit the required role descriptors is always a part of business policy. Recruiting individuals who are customer orientated and are aligned with the values of the business is a key mechanism for creating a workforce that will be fully engaged (Zablah et al., 2012). Roles must match staff aspirations, and it was clear that the aspirations of staff were beyond those of the opportunities offered for frontline

staff, especially since there was a significant number of employees in low-level roles: "Be open when there are promotions available to allow all staff to apply" (see Table 2).

Leadership

The issue of leadership is discussed at length in the literature and was found to be a contributor to engagement in this study. Recommendations from staff, such as "transparency of managers' work" (see Table 2), mirror the literature in terms of demanding transparent leaders who are held to the same levels of accountability as their staff (Anitha, 2014; Crawford et al., 2010). Leadership training was a recommendation of various levers. Arguably, the relative inexperience of leaders in the context of this study, and their lack of understanding of how to lead truly in a transformational way from the front, can be managed through training (Rich et al., 2010). Organisational justice is a lever that overlaps with that of leadership, as the primary issues of leadership focus on the actions of leaders and their distributive justice. Recommendations addressing leadership include being transparent about promotional opportunities, not letting personal bias interfere with decision-making processes, and disciplining managers and staff equally when incorrect processes are followed. The literature also notes the importance of the sharing of responsibility between supervisor and employee to ensure consistent outcomes against shared and transparent goals (Biswas et al., 2013).

Reward and Recognition

Reward and recognition are influenced by two factors: personal characteristics, and work environment and organisational support (Jacobs et al., 2014; Renard & Snelgar, 2016a). There were also direct recommendations that arose from the current study to improve this element of engagement. In the study it was made clear that the issue of performance management and intrinsic reward is not recognised as a significant factor at this level of operation. Recommendations centred on staff discounts, increased pay and basic extrinsic rewards, which are also emphasised in the literature (Kahn, 1990; Maslach et al., 2001). Snelgar et al. (2013) found that adequate cash incentives were often a solution to reward dissatisfied employees, and they recommended using competitive pay scales to ensure that pay remained attractive. The market and economic conditions in South Africa mean that although reward is a less impactful lever of engagement, the degree to which it is a basic requirement to workforce survival makes it important in a context characterised by minimum wage levels and increasing inflation.

Conclusion

Introduction

There is a clear link between the engagement of staff, their level of customer service and the impact of their service on the overall productivity and performance of a business (Anitha, 2014; Heskett et al., 2008); Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Kahn, 1990; Maslach et al., 2001; Saks, 2006; Salanova et al., 2005; Soane et al., 2012). This concept was

fundamental to this study, which set out to understand how the context of both tough economic conditions and a developing country would affect existing influencers of engagement in a frontline service environment. Members of this workforce have, through their designation, a limited ability to create fundamental job innovation, and, although they are considered key brand ambassadors of their business, they must rely on levers that differ from those applicable in a white-collar office environment (Jacobs et al., 2014; Karatepe, 2013). The methodology of the study allowed for a more qualitative analysis of the concepts proposed by existing quantitative literature, and this marked a shift in understanding and in the complexity of analysis.

The present study proposed a conceptual Frontline Service Engagement model that represented the study's findings. This model, which is discussed below, was used to inform making recommendations to managers wishing to engage with a frontline workforce, and presenting ideas for extending the study in future research.

The Frontline Service Engagement Model

Construction of the Model

The Frontline Service Engagement model (shown in Figure 1) was developed based on a review of the levers identified in the literature, and on the results obtained in the current study from six nominal group interviews. These qualitative interviews were held with frontline employees in a retail environment in South Africa. Each lever found by the research was carefully analysed to unpack its impact on engagement in the specified context, and its link to or detachment from the existing constructs and the influence of each lever on the others were identified. The Frontline Service Engagement model in Figure 1 is a diagrammatic representation of the key aspects of the study's findings, and it aims to present the different engagement levers required in a specific context. The model adds to the literature discussed earlier, and it represents the key findings of the current study.
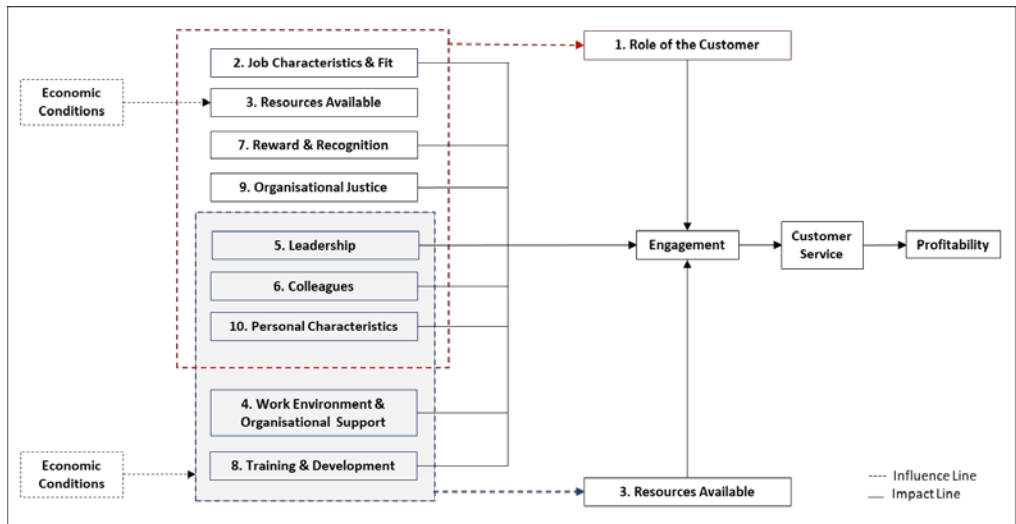
Economic Conditions

2. Job Characteristics & Fit
3. Resources Available
7. Reward & Recognition
9. Organisational Justice
5. Leadership
6. Colleagues
10. Personal Characteristics
4. Work Environment & Organisational Support
8. Training & Development

Economic Conditions

1. Role of the Customer

Engagement

Customer Service

Profitability

3. Resources Available

---- Influence Line
—— Impact Line

Figure 1: Frontline Service Engagement model

Explanation of the Model

The Frontline Service Engagement model shows how the levers identified impact on engagement and influence each other. These findings were drawn from research questions 1 and 2. The ten levers identified are presented in the model and numbered according to their impact level. Their impact is portrayed by the solid arrows connecting them with the construct of engagement. The dashed lines represent the interconnected influential relationship between the factors. Given that the number of influencing factors between the top two levers and the rest fell considerably, only these two are represented separately. These two main influences are shown by the dashed boxes that represent the influences that the levers inside the boxes have on either the role of the customer or the resources available. These levers in turn have a direct impact on engagement and leadership, for example, on engagement through increased transparency (shown by the solid line) and through the leader empowering the employee to deal with the customer better, create a happier customer and an employee who is more engaged.

The lever of resources available is featured twice; once as an influence on engagement through the role of the customer, and as a separate lever directly impacting on engagement. Economic conditions are also shown to have an influence on resources available; therefore this has an implicit or explicit influence on both main levers. The levers of training and development and of work environment and organisational support are placed outside the influence of the role of the customer as no influence link was found. The same applies to those not found to influence the lever of resources available.

The final link is from engagement to customer service, and to profitability. This link has been established in existing studies; therefore it is not a new finding.

Recommendations for Management

One of the key aims of the problem statement was to provide a model for management to improve profitability in organisations by creating a vigorous, dedicated and absorbed workforce (Schaufeli et al., 2002). This model, which was created through addressing research questions 1 and 2, is now applied directly as a set of proposals to management.

- The role of the customer is the most impactful lever and should be addressed as a priority by management in order to increase engagement. Empowering staff through training to handle customers, improve the awareness of management, and ensure that employees enjoy interacting with customers will assist in creating positive relationships between customers and staff. Management must strike a careful balance between supporting their staff in situations where aggravated customers are antagonistic and providing first-class service to those customers, whether their complaints are justified or not.

- Given the monotonous nature of the role of frontline workers, it is important to ensure they are challenged and kept busy. The definition of the job and its characteristics must be clear, and be devised in a way that allows for learning. Learning does not have to occur through formal training: enabling a management culture of skills transfer and job rotation will increase engagement.

- Making resources available to improve engagement is based on the need to make the customer happier through, for example, shorter queues and better stock systems. Innovation around improvements in these areas will assist in ensuring that customers are more satisfied with their experience in the store, and this will influence staff engagement positively. A service business needs to look at ways in its specific work environment to create efficiency for customers. Empowering staff to respond to customers' complaints, about stocks for example, by explaining the reasons why challenges are being experienced, will provide short-term relief and reduce the stress placed on both the customer and the employee.

- Improving communication within the store environment is a key recommendation linked closely to the lever of leadership. This can be addressed in several ways, but the outcome of this study suggests working on transparency of communication between the human resources department and frontline workers. Management should be open by discussing their schedules, day-to-day tasks and projects. A stricter open-door policy, encouraging managers to roll up their sleeves and become more involved, is one area of focus. This will also assist in addressing and improving teamwork, and creating a culture of fair accountability and family. Management training in respect, attitude and accountability might be implemented. Expecting individuals, who aspire to become leaders, to stand out from their peers without support and mentoring

can cause even the best potential leaders to fail. Simple measures can be highly impactful here, like delivering uniforms as and when promised.

- At this level of employment, although pay was not seen as highly impactful, small gestures to ensure a basic level of subsistence are important to creating a workforce that has the physical and mental strength to be present at work.

- The high level of complexity and the interdependence of the levers create the need for management to be aware of their actions across different areas. Engagement is not something that can be achieved quickly by using one isolated recommendation. If the focus is on only one area, or if there is a lack of focus on another area, it is likely to have an influence on other areas. An integrated and comprehensive approach to the improvement of engagement is required to enable this as a mechanism for increased profitability.

Recommendations for Future Research

Given that engagement literature is, relatively speaking, still in its infancy, and that a solid link between engagement and customer service has not been established yet, further empirical evidence is required to build on this study and develop a broader base of understanding. Based on qualitative research, this study has created a model for influencing engagement within the context specified. The following recommendations arising from this study could allow significant development of the findings of this research:

- The qualitative outcomes of the study have revealed new areas of potential research that should be tested through a quantitative study.

- The personal characteristics of respondents who enjoy or do not enjoy interacting with customers, and the effect these have on the element of engagement, require further research. Having participants complete personality tests before conducting qualitative interviews with them would allow for more in-depth analysis of this lever, and address a substantial gap in the current literature.

- Testing engagement across multiple levels of a business would provide a different perspective on the leadership lever. Understanding how leaders in service industries perceive the challenge of engagement, and establishing if the views are aligned, would add to the body of literature and allow even more focus in terms of recommendations.

- To truly test the universality of the challenge of engagement, various retailers in a variety of contexts would need to be examined using the same methodology (Boichuk & Menguc, 2013). Within a developing market context, understanding the engagement levers and how they differ in the informal sector may also add to the body of knowledge (Hugo, Haskell, Stroud, Ensor, Moodley, & Maritz, 2016).

- The purpose of this research was not to extend the body of knowledge on the link between service improvement, brand loyalty and profitability increase. A longitudinal study investigating if the implementation of the various recommendations could improve service levels in a service environment would add to the power of the connection.

Limitations of the Research

There are various limitations of the research that need to be considered when looking at the findings and recommendations. These revolve primarily around the access and bias of the researcher (Collis & Hussey, 2013).

The principal limitations are as follows:

- Given the location of the sample there was a potential geographical bias. Covering fully representative rural and urban areas in South Africa was not possible.

- The generalisability of the sample could not be established as only one retailer was used. Some of the individual metrics mentioned were specific to the circumstances and operating practices of that retailer. Each recommendation must therefore be applied with careful consideration of the business-specific context (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

- The facilitator is a company employee, which may have influenced the conversations and led to researcher bias (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

- The inability to record the nominal group interviews meant that some richness in data may have been lost.

In conclusion, South Africa is one of many developing nations that are facing a tough economic climate and an increase in both poverty and unemployment. The retail and service industry is potentially a key contributor to economic growth and profitability, not only in contributing to GDP but also in having the capability to decrease unemployment. A recent Gallup study reported that businesses with high engagement achieved 17 per cent more productivity and 21 per cent higher profitability (Gallup Consulting, 2017). If South African retailers, through the levers identified and the model developed in this study, can achieve even small increases in productivity and profitability, it will have advantages for the economy. Therefore, the contribution of this study, in effecting an increase in the overall profitability of a sector, such as the retail sector, through improving employee welfare and meeting the needs of demanding consumers, lies in the value it has not only for managers operating in this environment but also for the economy as a whole.

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