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## Strategic HR challenges in large scale companies in India to boost employee engagement

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### Abstract

Workforce management is a critical Human Resource (HR) function that has emerged as a strategic and integral component of a globally competitive organization. This is due to the intensifying role of HR managers in handling, engaging, and retaining talented workforce in modern businesses. This study aims to identify and assess the strategic HR challenges in large-scale companies in India to boost employee engagement. In this regard, the study adopted a systematic review methodology to evaluate the challenges concerning employee engagement. It was observed that employee engagement is challenging in large-scale companies and some of the major challenges include employee career growth challenges, challenges of engaging heterogeneous workforce, multigenerational workforce challenges, and motivational challenges. Therefore it was implicated that strategic human resource management has several challenges about employee engagement in largescale companies in India.

**Keywords:** employee engagement, strategic HR, human resources, systematic review.

### 1. Introduction

The multidisciplinary function of Human Resource Management (HRM) saw a major and extraordinary transition during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. HRM attempts to synchronize the workforce in remote working with the goals of the organization. This played a vital role in organizational smooth functioning during the pandemic. However, to espouse the recent changes in the working pattern and operations of organizations, the HR department had to face several challenges in employee engagement. The approach of HRM in large-scale companies is to utilize the knowledge and expertise of people most efficiently and competitively. (Nasir, 2017) elucidates that it is a vital task of the human resource department to integrate the internal as well as external changes in an organization. Employee engagement was a challenging task in Covid-19 due to remote working culture, the inability of the workforce to meet their team leaders, and lack of belongingness in the new recruits towards their firm and its vision (Capgemini Research Institute, 2021). Challenges of work-life balance are also appended to the difficulty of the employee engagement of large-scale organizations. All these issues concerning the restructuring of the organizational framework as per remote working led to major challenges for the HR department as resourcing of right talent on the job, retaining them, and motivating for productivity are considered the integral role of HR managers in organizations (Jose, 2021). Therefore, this study aims to identify the HR challenges concerning employee engagement in large-scale companies in India. It also aims to understand the significance of employee engagement in such organizations.

### 2. Literature review

#### a) Importance of employee engagement in large-scale firms

Large-scale firms have a set of work culture and management practices and their business models are framed around the compelling proposition of that respective culture (Belsare, 2015). In such organizations with a huge and diverse workforce, it becomes crucial to engage the talent pool in such a way that the efficiency of the firm is maintained to attain desired business results. Employee engagement provides a trajectory for the organization to attain business goals (Vance, 2006; Szabowska-Walaszczyk, Zawadzka and Brzozowski, 2013; Chanana and Sangeeta, 2020). Organizations having stabilized workforce tend to perform better than those with high attrition and lower employee satisfaction (Bernard, Anandan, & Ravikumar, 2019).

Employee engagement also enables firms to reduce attrition and control the huge costs involved in the recruitment process and training of new staff (Robertson-Smith and Markwick, 2009; Ashraf and Siddiqui, 2020). It is a progressive practice wherein the career growth and leadership roles of employees are considered important for high productivity and therefore the top management takes care of employees' competencies and performances so that retention of the workforce in the organization can be ensured

(Arasu and Nagarajan, 2014). It creates a progressive work culture wherein the employees, community, and the organization grow together towards continual improvement.

#### **b) Why employee engagement is challenging in large-scale firms**

Staff commitment and engagement become challenging in large-scale firms as the workforce is heterogeneous and diverse. When employees from different countries work together for the productivity and profitability of the firm, the cultural diversity and perceived religious discrimination create challenges in terms of engagement of employees (Balaji, 2014). (Panicker, 2019) emphasizes that the workforce diversity dimension is decisive of the degree of commitment and engagement of employees in large-scale firms. The study was based on organizations operating in gulf countries and it revealed that motivational techniques are necessary to transcend the diverse workforce in such a manner that organizational goals can be achieved.

Further, the multigenerational workforce also explicitly reveals the difference in energy, efforts, and encouragement to go the extra mile to earn rewards and recognition (Tamunomiebi and John-Eke, 2020). This variation and dynamics between young and experienced workforce also create employee engagement challenges in large-scale firms wherein the employees having vast experience also accompany the young workforce.

### **3. Research methodology**

A systematic review was conducted to acquire relevant information on employee engagement in large-scale companies in India. There have been various challenges concerning employee engagement during Covid-19 and the role of HR managers in handling the engagement practices in large-scale firms have been researched using systematic review and content analysis. This methodology has helped to extract relevant and necessary information on employee engagement challenges and concerns.

#### **a) Search strategy**

PRISMA application (preferred reporting items for systematic review) was used for conducting the systematic analysis. The paper encapsulated various studies based on HR practices during Covid-19 and employee engagement challenges, and the findings were identified and laid down. Additionally, for the search strategy, various databases such as social world abstract, E-book collection, PsycINFO were checked and appropriate material from the already existing database was identified. Further, the Google scholar database was used for studying articles and understanding the HR challenges. Published dissertations and thesis were excluded from the research.

#### **b) Inclusion criteria**

- Studies for which complete information and full access were available.
- Studies only in the English language were considered.
- Studies having relevant keywords were included.
- Studies conducted done by international writers.

#### **c) Exclusion criteria**

The study included certain criteria which were not relevant and therefore they were excluded:

- Studies having a restricted view of the only abstract section.
- Studies having limited or outdated information.
- Studies published in other languages than English.
- Studies that neglected the challenges of employee engagement.

#### **d) Study selection**

A total of 990 studies was identified out of which 300 duplicate studies were removed which had irrelevant and repeated content. 690 studies were identified as relevant after the first screening. Further, abstract screening was done and 212 studies were removed and 478 studies were left for analysis. Out of these 478 studies, 400 were removed for limited access and improper representation. 78 studies were included after the full-text screening out of which only 9 could meet the inclusion criteria.

### **4. Discussion**

One of the foremost strategic HR challenges identified through the study of (Vance, 2006) is a career growth opportunity. According to the employee's opinions and feedback, the study revealed that employees in search of better opportunities and higher recognition change their jobs, and during the process of transition the job satisfaction and performance of the employees downgrade. When employees are offered greater pay and a higher job profile, their tendency to shift increases thereby affecting the organization's flow of work and business results.

The challenge of recruiting and handling a heterogeneous workforce in large-scale companies in India is yet another challenge faced by the HR department in terms of employee engagement. (Woodka, 2014) highlights that several attitudes and behaviors working against the engagement of employees. One of them is the heterogeneity of the workforce. When the employee base of the

organizations is varied and heterogenous especially in the case of remote working in Covid-19, the sense of belongingness of employees towards their leaders and managers were very less, this led to a lack of employee engagement on the job. Employees who connect with their firm's goals and with the team lacked unity and dedication.

Another important struggle of the HR department perceived through the study of (Baran and Sypniewska, 2020) during Covid-19 was the difficulty of work-life balance in employees. The study revealed female workforce tends to sacrifice their jobs more frequently during Covid-19 and remote working than the male. The motivation of employees towards their organizations became passive and their need to foster the families during lockdown became a significant and active cause of lack of engagement in employees towards their organizations. Further, the recruitments embraced during the period of remote working saw a lack of connectivity and effective leadership due to the online work culture.

The multigenerational workforce challenge was another adjustment issue that stimulated the employee's effectiveness on the job. During Covid-19, remote working created a lack of openness and cooperation among the workforce affecting the physical and mental capacity of the employees towards their job roles. Further, the organizations working on old offline models had to instantly develop an integrated network of online working wherein communication and interpersonal relations got negatively affected. This was a major challenge identified by (Nazim and Taylor, 2019).

(D. Juevesa and P. Castino, 2020) identified that there are no fixed beginning or end of the generational distinction but it impacts the engagement of employees as multigenerational phenomenon brings lack of recognition for work in young employees. Further, the researcher mentions that fair reward for an equal amount of work also occurs as a challenge in teams having employees of different age groups. Such engagement issues affect the commitment of employees and their satisfaction level.

Another important factor impacting the job engagement level during the Covid time is the lack of enthusiasm for work. (Jose, 2021) reveals that lockdown and remote working created a challenging context especially for the HR department to manage and productively engage the workforce so that business results are not impacted negatively. Due to the radical changes in the social environment and the global well-being, employees were in limited contact with team leaders, HR managers, and other colleagues. Consequently, the enthusiasm for work depleted in the workforce over a span of time leading to engagement issues.

(Autiello and Horgan, 2021) observes that the current pandemic created a situation in which the psychological needs of the employees got de-prioritized as organizations were facing challenges of financial viability, the market was declining, and therefore it became challenging for HR leaders to address engagement issues in the light of this unprecedented situation. Thus, the cultivation of employees' mental health and engagement on the job was sacrificed due to changing workplace environment, changing compensation structure due to losses of the firms, and also due to the uncertainties of a long-term association with the firms.

Overall, an important concern that led to engagement issues in employees was overburdening of the employees with piled-up work as a result of high absenteeism during the disease isolation or quarantine period. This led to a series of remarkable activities that decreased the motivation and engagement of employees and also impacted the turnover of large-scale firms (Lippens *et al.*, 2021). The study also revealed that the role of HR managers was crucial in this period to ensure job satisfaction and the continuation of work among the employees. Various programs for motivating and engaging the workforce and boosting their mental health played a vital role in creating work effectiveness.

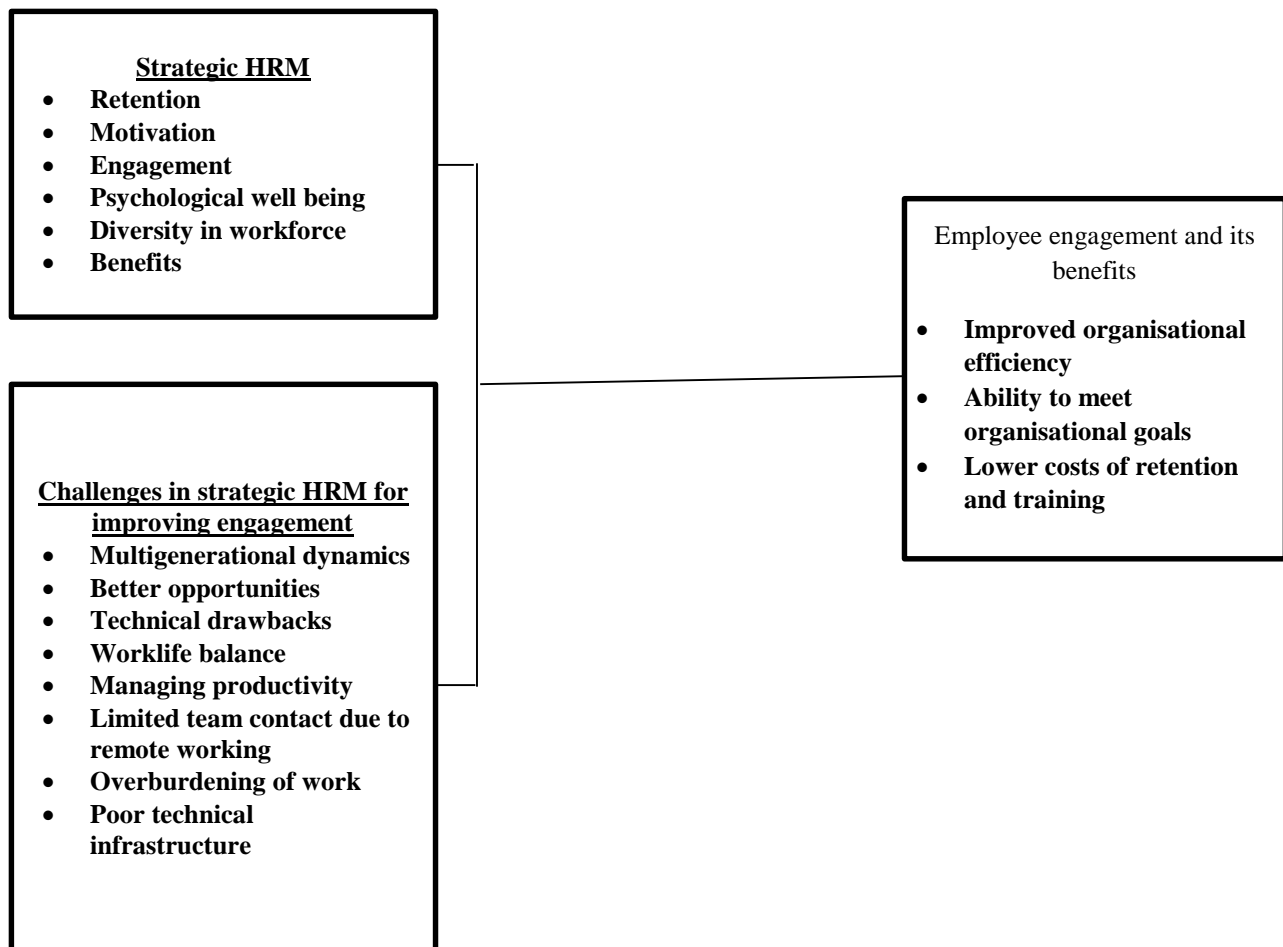
Further, an important aspect in boosting employee engagement in large-scale firms in India is technical glitches, especially in remote working. Organizations create a pool of networks for their operations and smooth functioning. However, in the case of remote working, the technical problems including lack of technical infrastructure make the working of employees delayed and disturbed (Deloitte, 2020). There are various spectrums associate with home working. Employees belonging to remote areas of India where connectivity issues are higher tend to have lesser motivation and engagement towards their job roles than the employees operating from metro cities or big cities of India. When the physical boundaries of home and work are narrowed, the experience of one employee may differ hugely from another.

Author	Study sample	Research conducted	Result	Limitations
(Vance, 2006)	The study conducted on employees of MNCs in the service sector	To identify challenges in employee engagement.	For better career opportunities, employees opt for the transition from one organization to another.	The study included a questionnaire mode for data collection and detailed and the open-ended interview was avoided.
(Woodka, 2014)	Research article based on firms operating in Washington D.C	To identify the attitude and behavior of the workforce contributing to employee engagement	Heterogeneity of the workforce affects the sense of belongingness of employees towards their leaders and managers.	The study only examined ethnic and geographic heterogeneity.

(Baran and Sypniewska, 2020)	Study based on the impact of HR practices on employee motivation	To understand the issue of work-life balance in employees during a pandemic.	Female employees have a higher tendency to quit their job due to remote working challenges.	The study was based solely on data collected through quantitative research of one firm only.
(Nazim and Taylor, 2019)	Study of a multigenerational workplace and its challenges	To analyze the challenges of different generation dynamics in a workplace.	Communication and interpersonal relations gets affected	A correlational study was not interpreted in terms of the impact of multigenerational dynamics on employee engagement
(D. Juevesa and P. Castino, 2020)	Study on generation phenomenon in employee engagement	To understand the reward and recognition challenges in terms of a multigenerational workplace.	Fair reward for an equal amount of work also occurs as a challenge in teams having employees of different age groups.	The validity of the research was limited as the selection of participants was not generalized and random.
(Jose, 2021)	Study based on a systematic review of academic writings and research articles	To understand the well-being of employees during Covid times	Due to less contact with team leaders and colleagues, the enthusiasm for work got depleted	Limited papers were reviewed.
(Autiello and Horgan, 2021)	Study based on questionnaire data collection through quantitative analysis	To understand the psychological needs of employees as an HR practice	Due to financial limitations during the pandemic, the HR department faced challenges in providing mental well-being to the workforce.	The study did not use a random selection of participants that led to sampling bias.
(Lippens <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	A study based on a multinational firm and a 150 sample size was researched for the study.	To understand the issues and challenges faced by the HR department in engaging the employees in remote working	Engagement issues in employees were due to overburdening of the employees with piled-up work as a result of high absenteeism during the disease isolation or quarantine period	The validity of the test was limited as half of the sample size was staff having less than 2 years of experience.

## 5. Conceptual framework

On the basis of the literature reviewed above, the conceptual framework for this study can be presented as below.



## 6. Conclusion

The systematic review revealed the critical challenges faced by strategic HR department in employee engagement during Covid-19. The studies that were thoroughly reviewed adopted different ways to understand and highlight the challenges of engagement during the pandemic. In addition to this, the studies also highlighted the crucial role of HR managers in integrating the mental well-being of the employees with recognition and motivation on the job. However, to achieve better results, organizations must amalgamate their HR practices with remote working in a more effective manner so that the loopholes and behavioral challenges can be curbed.

Academicians can further research the larger aspects of the SHRM practices in multinationals during Covid-19. More studies must be based on workforce management challenges in remote working. Empirical study involving survey participants must be conducted to explore the internal as well as external challenges concerning the engagement issues in large-scale companies in India.

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