

Employee engagement in retail organisations: the new normal post covid-19?

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ABSTRACT

Satisfied employees play an essential role in bringing financial and non-financial outcomes for any kind of organisation. Employees need to be engaged, both mentally and physically, with the organisation's goals, mission, vision and roles. Research showed that companies can enjoy great customer experience and superior business results through engaging their employees. In the light of the health crisis of COVID-19 and its aftermath, the general aim of the study is to examine employee engagement practices among retail organisations in South Africa. The study adopted the approach "Five I's of Employee Engagement: Inform, Inspire, Instruct, Involve, and Incent" developed by Temkin Group. These five constructs were used to develop the conceptual framework and hypotheses, which were tested through quantitative method and structural equation modelling. The data were collected by means of a self-administered questionnaire that was circulated and hand-delivered to a sample of 250 employees functioning at various levels in retail organisations across South Africa. The results showed that, except for instruct, three employee engagement practices including inform, involve, and incentivise were significantly related to "inspire". It indicates that the organisations that are higher in inform, involve and incentivise practices are also higher in inspiring practice. In addition, an overall evaluation of the Five I's indicated low mean values, indicating employee engagement practices need more improvement. It has implications for human resource managers, decision-makers and retail managers regarding effective design and implementation of employee engagement practices, especially in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Keywords: retailing, South Africa; employee engagement; employee involvement; employee instruction

INTRODUCTION

Employees are one of the most essential resources for any kind of organisation. In the past few decades, a changing scenario in the world economy has been noticed regarding an emphasis on the need for increased employee performance (Jha & Kumar, 2016). These changes create more work pressures for the employees and force them to work much harder in order to survive in this competitive market (Jha & Kumar, 2016).

In recent months a new health pandemic, COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) barged to the forefront with added pressure to business and stressed workers. Many businesses are facing challenges such as shifts in demand, supply chains, transportation and mobility, lack of proper policy and good work environment, worker protection, and the communication gap between the management and employees. These have a negative effect on employees' psychological well-being. Workers face prospects of losing their livelihood, as it is estimated that on a global scale

195 million full time jobs will be lost (Bachelet, 2020). COVID-19 and work pressure leads to anxiety, worries about the future, unwillingness in work, absenteeism, lower productivity, and a stressful life.

In dealing with the health crisis and its aftermath business, must reassess the value of employee engagement and the importance thereof. "Employee engagement is a workplace approach resulting in the right conditions for all members of an organisation to give of their best each day, committed to their organisation's goals and values, motivated to contribute to organisational success, with an enhanced sense of their own well-being." (Engage for Success, 2020). According to Tower Perrin-ISR (n.d), employee engagement consists of three dimensions: cognitive – the employee's evaluation of the organisation's goals and values; affective – employees sense of belonging to the organisation; and behavioural dimension, which is the desire such as retention and willingness to go the extra mile for the organisation when necessary.

Organisations can enjoy great customer experience and superior business results through engaging their employees (Lucas & Temkin, 2012). A study conducted by Temkin Group revealed 25 best practices, which they termed as "Five I's of Employee Engagement: Inform, Inspire, Instruct, Involve, and Incent" (Lucas & Temkin, 2012). These Five I's of Employee Engagement are taken as a theoretical foundation for the current study.

In the light of health crisis COVID-19 and its aftermath, the general aim of this study is to investigate the extent of employee engagement practices among retail organisations in South Africa. Specific objectives include the following:

- To identify and validate the observed variables of inform, inspire, instruct, involve, and incentivise.
- To explore the extent to which inform, instruct, involve, and incentivise are related to inspire construct.
- To suggest the improvements needed in employee engagement for retail organisations.

This paper has been divided into four main parts. First of all, it starts with a review of relevant literature related to employee engagement. Next, the research methodology and data analysis techniques have been discussed. After that, results along with findings from analyses are discussed and summarised. The study concludes with a discussion of theoretical and practical implications followed by a conclusion, limitations and direction for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kahn (1990) denotes that engagement is both the psychological and physical presence of a person while conducting a role. Jha and Kumar (2016) define engagement as "a two-way process between employees and an organisation". Engagement is also used as a strategy for augmenting the productivity, performance, commitment, motivation and contribution of an employee towards successful goals and values achievement (Jha & Kumar, 2016). Engagement results in both financial (i.e. profit) and non-financial returns (i.e. customer satisfaction, service proficiency, attendance and retention). Kahn (1990) also identified two dimensions of employee engagement: emotional and cognitive engagement. Employees are emotionally engaged when they form meaningful connections, empathy and concern for others including co-workers and managers. On the other hand, cognitive engagement means employees are intensely conscious of their mission and role in the work environment. Employee engagement in either dimension ensures higher overall personal engagement. In contrast, employees who are disengaged tend to isolate themselves from work roles and withdraw themselves both cognitively and emotionally (Kahn, 1990).

According to Abraham (2012), employee engagement is the degree to which workers feel job satisfaction and an emotional connection to the success of their business, resulting in improved productivity, innovation and retention. As Hewitt (2005) defines, engagement is the measure of both emotional and intellectual commitment of employees towards the organisation and its success. In summary, employee engagement can be defined as an employee's emotional and psychological connection with an organisation as well as its people, which eventually leads to either positive or negative work behaviour (Cawe, 2006).

Research of Temkin Group showed that engaged employees are valuable assets and they show some characteristics such as trying harder, engaging customers and driving business results (Lucas & Temkin, 2012). Engaged employees try harder to get good recommendations for improvement; that is 3.5 times as much as disengaged employees. In addition, engaged employees are 5.8 times more committed to achieving organisational success than disengaged

employees (Lucas & Temkin, 2012). Companies that have superior customer experience possess around 75% of highly or moderately engaged employees. In addition, more sales and customer recommendations result from improved customer experience, which can be achieved through engaged employees. The bottom-line contribution (i.e. profits) can also be expected from engaged employees (Lucas & Temkin, 2012).

After interviewing thought leaders, vendors, and practitioners, Temkin Group identified “Five I’s of Employee Engagement” including the categories such as Inform, Inspire, Instruct, Involve, and Incent:

- Inform is defined as the practice of offering employees the required information for understanding vision, brand values, and customers’ feelings about the organisation.
- Inspire is defined as the practice of joining employees to the vision and values of the organisation with a view to making them believe it matters and to take pride in their job and the organisation.
- Instruct is defined as the practice of assisting employees through different programmes such as training, coaching and feedback in order to deliver the organisation’s brand promises to customers.
- Involve is defined as the practice of taking action with employees when designing their jobs, and solving problems identified through customer or employee feedback.
- Incent, or incentivise, is defined as the practice of employing pertinent systems to measure, reward and reinforce desired employee behaviours and motivate employees to give their best.

These practices are well recognised and utilised by several large-scale organisations (Lucas & Temkin, 2012). However, the empirical analysis using an employee engagement scale to measure employee engagement performance among retail firms in South Africa still remains under-researched. Therefore, the goal of this study is to investigate employee engagement in retail organisations in the context of South Africa.

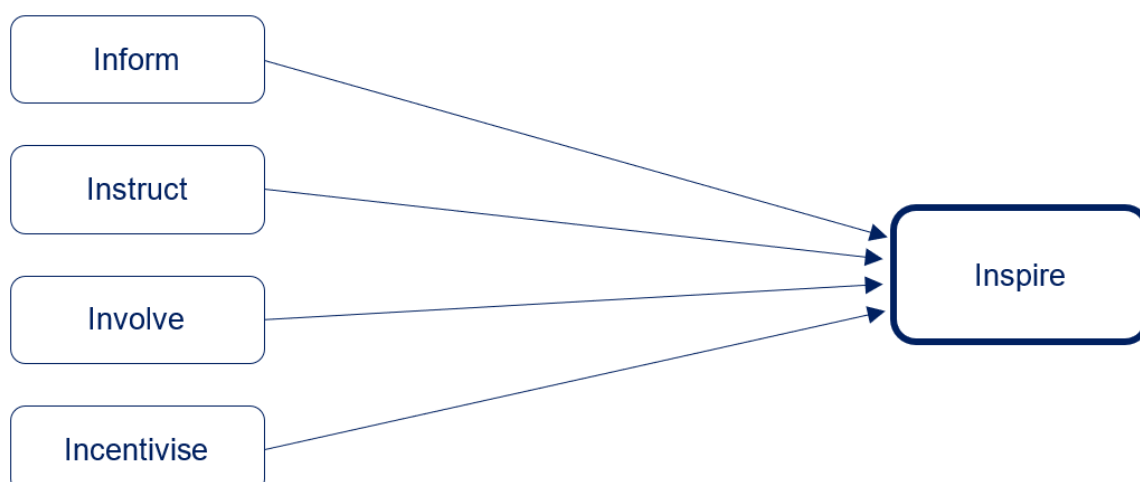
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

The aim of the study is to determine employee opinions of employee engagement in organisations within South Africa. After reviewing pertinent literature (Lucas & Temkin, 2012), the following model is proposed for structural equation modelling in this study.

From the above discussion, four hypotheses (from H1 to H4) were formulated.

- H₁: Employee engagement practice “Inform” is significantly related to “Inspire”.
- H₂: Employee engagement practice “Instruct” is significantly related to “Inspire”.
- H₃: Employee engagement practice “Involve” is significantly related to “Inspire”.
- H₄: Employee engagement practice “Incentivise” is significantly related to “Inspire”.

FIGURE 1
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



METHODOLOGY

Sampling design and data collection

Sample design is a procedure that includes a selection of a sample of respondents who typically are a part of the target population (Aker, 2015). The sample frame is the source or population from which a representative sample is taken. In this study, the sample population includes different retail organisations in South Africa.

A non-probability convenience sampling technique has been used because of the difficulty and expensive nature of the probability sampling process. Moreover, non-probability sampling may also produce good estimates of population characteristics (Malhotra, 2010, p.344). The study utilised a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional design. Data were collected by means of a self-administered questionnaire that was circulated and hand-delivered, to a sample of employees functioning at various levels in retail organisations across South Africa utilising the employee engagement survey questionnaire. Hair et al. (2019, p.133) denotes that the number of samples should be a minimum of 5-20 times as many respondents as the number of variables used in the research. This means that if a study includes 20 measurement items, the number of samples must be at least 100 (20×5).

Researchers also suggested using much larger samples (e.g. 200 and larger) as the number of variables and the expected number of factors increases (Hair et al., 2019, p.133). By considering the above facts, the current study determines a sample size of 250 respondents. The questionnaire has two parts. In the first part, demographic information had been asked including gender, age, rank or position in the organisation, job function, number of employees, and age of the organisation. In the second part, respondents were asked to rate on the 20-item employee engagement survey questionnaire, which requires respondents to indicate the degree to which certain activities occur within their company or organisation using a five-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 – “Never” to 5 – “Always”. A total of 250 responses were collected. Of those, 245 responses were retained, and the rest were discarded due to missing data. The confidence interval for this research is 95% and the rest is the margin of error.

Measurement instrument

The scale items for measuring employee engagement practices including inform, inspire, instruct, involve and incentivise were adopted from qualitative research and pertinent literature (Lucas & Temkin, 2012). The latent constructs and their observed variables are shown in the following table.

TABLE 1
CONSTRUCTS AND MEASURED VARIABLES

Construct	Code	Items
Inform (INFO)	INFO1	The company uses a formal customer experience plan identifying key topics, audience segments, delivery channels, and frequency.
	INFO2	Internal customer experience communications are tailored to specific job roles.
	INFO3	Employees across the organisation are provided easy access to feedback from customers.
	INFO4	Leaders across the organisation regularly discuss customer experience in their communications.
Inspire (INSP)	INSP1	The company has a clear set of values, which guides decision-making across the organisation.
	INSP2	Executives meet with employees at different levels across the organisation.
	INSP3	Stories about employees helping customers are retold to reinforce company values.
	INSP4	The company provides resources for employees to participate in volunteer causes.
Instruct (INST)	INST1	Customer experience training is embedded in orientation sessions for newly hired employees.
	INST2	All managers are trained to develop their skills in reinforcing the company's values with their employees.
	INST3	Managers coach employees on customer-centric behaviour and practices.
	INST4	Employees across the organisation are recruited to teach customer experience behaviours and practices to fellow employees.
Involve (INVO)	INVO1	Employee feedback is actively solicited and formally acted upon.
	INVO2	The organisation communicates the actions it takes based on employee feedback.
	INVO3	The organisation facilitates employee interactions across functional teams to raise awareness and increase collaboration.
	INVO4	The organisation uses a defined network of employees as ambassadors of its customer experience efforts.
Incentivise (INCE)	INCE1	The organisation has formal incentives for reinforcing good customer-centric behaviours and results.
	INCE2	Managers are evaluated based on the engagement levels of their employees.
	INCE3	The organisation has a formal peer-to-peer recognition programme.
	INCE4	Teams that demonstrate customer experience excellence are publicly celebrated.

TABLE 2
DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN OF RESPONDENTS

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Percent (%)
Ranking or title	CEO, VP, Director	2	0.8
	Senior Management	28	11.4
	General Management	19	7.8
	Manager	142	58.0
	Staff	53	21.6
Function or department	Product development	10	4.1
	Finance	18	7.3
	Logistics/ supply chain	8	3.3
	Pricing	1	0.4
	Sourcing/ procurement	4	1.6
	Operations	66	26.9
	Marketing	24	9.8
	Merchandise management	3	1.2
	Information Technology	6	2.4
	Human Resources	10	4.1
Other	94	38.4	
Number of employees	<10	25	10.2
	11-25	29	11.8
	26-50	27	11.0
	51-100	22	9.0
	101-200	23	9.4
	>200	119	48.6
Gender	Male	150	61.2
	Female	95	38.8
Age	18-24	3	1.2
	25-34	81	33.1
	35-44	105	42.9
	45-54	49	20.0
	55-64	7	2.9
Age of organisation	1-5	50	20.4
	6-10	30	12.2
	11-15	19	7.8
	16-20	7	2.9
	21-25	13	5.3
	25+	123	50.2

Data analysis

Data collected through a questionnaire will be analysed using SPSS and SmartPLS software tools. Frequency distribution and percentile measures will be used primarily for sample distribution. Moreover, the reliability of the scale items is established through the score of Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Data analyses specifically include demographic profiling of the respondents, coding the measurement variables used in this study, data normality test, descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, validity test, multi-collinearity test, and hypotheses testing using structural equation modelling.

FINDINGS

Demographic analysis

As shown in table 2, demographic analysis of ranking or title indicates that a maximum number of responses have come from managers (58%) followed by staff (21.6%). Next, analyses show that the highest number of responses have come from the operations department (26.9%) followed by marketing (9.8%). The range of highest frequency in the number of employees is more than 200 (48.6%) indicating maximum participation of large organisations. In addition, among the respondents, 61.2% are male and 38.8% are female. The age range "35-44" has the highest frequency (42.9%) followed by "25-34" (33.1%). The highest number in the organisation's age is "1-5" (20.4%) followed by "6-10" (12.2%).

Descriptive analysis

All independent constructs – including inform, inspire, instruct, involve and incentivise – were primarily analysed using the scores of mean and standard deviations. As illustrated in the following table, all values of skewness and Kurtosis values fall within the acceptable range. Thus, the normality of the data has been established.

Reliability analysis

A common method for examining the reliability of individual construct in research is called Cronbach's alpha

(George, 2011). The following table contains all the five variables and their observed items. The larger Cronbach's α value ensured the internal consistency among the constructs (Nunnally, 1978). All the Cronbach's α values range between 0.85 and 0.63, which is in the acceptable range. This means that the constructs used in the research are reliable for further analysis.

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was employed to analyse the data and test the conceptual model. A partial least square (PLS) SEM technique was employed using SmartPLS software version 3.

TABLE 3
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
INFORM	2.5221	.83993	.249	-.578
INSPIRE	2.7701	.77374	.179	-.467
INTRUCT	2.5857	1.03467	.374	-.582
INVOLVE	2.4133	.90698	.400	-.257
INCENTIVISE	2.3320	.92460	.330	-.609

TABLE 4
CONSTRUCT RELIABILITY ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Constructs	No. of items	Cronbach's alpha values
INFORM	4	.70
INSPIRE	4	.63
INTRUCT	4	.85
INVOLVE	4	.84
INCENTIVISE	4	.77

TABLE 5
MEASUREMENT MODEL SUMMARY

Construct	Items	Factor Loading	AVE	CR
INFORM	INFO1	0.646	0.517	0.810
	INFO2	0.664		
	INFO3	0.761		
	INFO4	0.795		
INSTRUCT	INST1	0.810	0.687	0.898
	INST2	0.826		
	INST3	0.867		
	INST4	0.811		
INVOLVE	INVO1	0.784	0.674	0.892
	INVO2	0.879		
	INVO3	0.867		
	INVO4	0.746		
INCENTIVISE	INCE1	0.750	0.584	0.849
	INCE2	0.748		
	INCE3	0.747		
	INCE4	0.810		
INSPIRE	INSP1	0.604	0.479	0.784
	INSP2	0.628		
	INSP3	0.774		
	INSP4	0.747		

Measurement model analysis

According to Hair et al. (2019), several measurement items with the numerical value obtained from the research participants are used for measuring a latent variable. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is a technique used to confirm the items to load on the relevant constructs (Hair et al., 2019).

Assessment of convergent validity

For assessing convergent validity, average variance extracted (AVE) and factor loading values are used. Factor loading and AVE values above 0.50 indicate good convergent validity (Ling & Ding, 2006; Hair et al., 2019). An AVE of 0.50 or more means that the latent construct accounts for 50% or more of the variance in the measured variables, on the average. Construct reliability can also be determined by Composite reliability (CR), which should be at least 0.70. All the values of the factor loading, CR and AVE indicate good convergent validity of each construct. The CR values range from 0.898 to 0.784, which fall in the recommended threshold level. AVE values, except the inspire construct, range from 0.687 to 0.517, which are above the recommended threshold AVE value of 0.50 (Hair et al., 2019).

Assessment of discriminant validity

Discriminant validity is determined by comparing the square root of AVE with the values of correlation coefficients among all the constructs (Hair et al., 2019; Fornell & Larcker, 1981) to ensure that there are no large inter construct correlations. It also ensures that there should be less cross-loading in order to achieve the unidimensional aspect of the model.

The following table indicates that all values of the square root of the AVE are higher than all the inter construct correlations. Thus, the discriminant validity of the model has been achieved.

**TABLE 6
RESULTS OF DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY**

	INCE	INFO	INSP	INST	INVO
INCE	0.764				
INFO	0.501	0.719			
INSP	0.540	0.538	0.692		
INST	0.534	0.538	0.487	0.829	
INVO	0.584	0.572	0.577	0.605	0.821

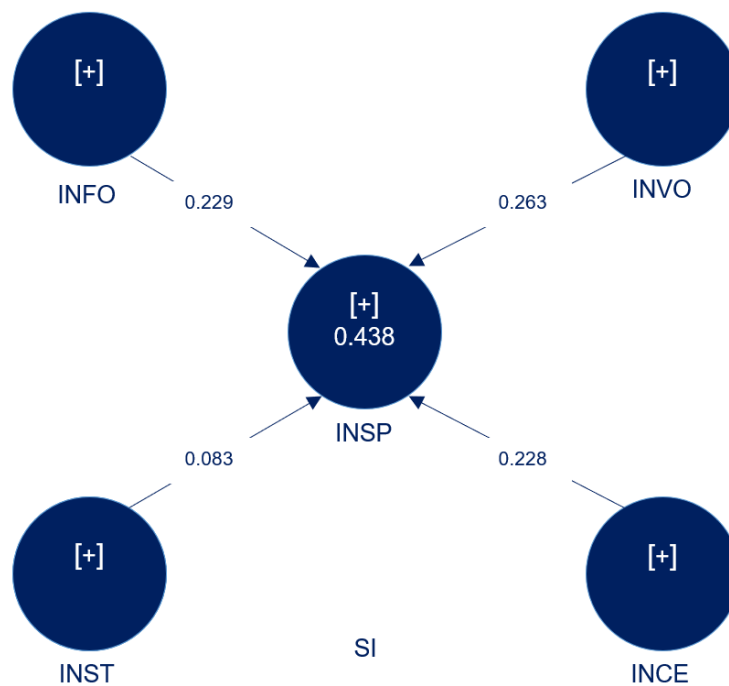
Structural model analysis

The structural model is examined after establishing the validity and reliability of the measurement model (Hair et al., 2019). To test the proposed hypotheses, structural model analysis is used. Structural model analysis accepts or rejects the stated hypotheses, which show the significance of the relationship (Byrne, 2013; Schumacker & Lomax, 2004).

Figure 2 indicates that the value of R^2 of the model is 0.438, which indicates around 43.8% variation in the endogenous construct (inspire) is explained by all the exogenous constructs (inform, instruct, involvement and incentivise).

For the testing significance of hypothesis, a two-tailed t-test with a significance level of 5% has been used where the path coefficient will be significant if the t-value exceeds 1.96. The results showed that three employee engagement practices – including inform, involve and incentivise – were significantly related to “Inspire” at $P < 0.05$. However, employee engagement practice “Instruct” was not significantly related to “Inspire”. Involve has the largest coefficient ($\beta = 0.263$), which indicates that if involvement is increased by 1, inspire will be increased by 0.263.

**FIGURE 2
THE STRUCTURAL MODEL**



**TABLE 7
STRUCTURAL MODEL ANALYSIS RESULTS**

Relationship	Path coefficients (β)	T statistics	P values	Result
INCE -> INSP	0.228	3.178	0.002*	Significant
INFO -> INSP	0.229	3.392	0.001*	Significant
INST -> INSP	0.083	1.273	0.203	Insignificant
INVO -> INSP	0.263	3.477	0.001*	Significant

Note: * $p < 0.05$, based on two-tailed test; $t = 1.96$.

DISCUSSION

The primary aim of the study was to investigate employee engagement practices among retail organisations in South Africa. Lucas and Temkin (2012) identified five practices of employee engagement including inform, inspire, instruct, involve and incentivise. A conceptual model was developed based on these practices and tested through SEM in SmartPLS. The results showed that, except for instruct, three employee engagement practices – including inform, involve and incentivise – were significantly related to “Inspire”. It indicates that organisations higher in inform, involve and incentivise practices are also higher in inspiring practice.

Descriptive analysis of the average means of inform, inspire, instruct, involve and incentivise showed the current situation of the retail organisations in South Africa regarding employee engagement practices. An overall evaluation of the Five I’s indicated low mean values. It means that the current situation of the retail organisations in South Africa regarding employee engagement practices needs improvement.

The findings are in line with Lucas and Temkin (2012). They conclude from an assessment of 255 large organisations that only 35% of firms received strong scores in employee engagement in four customer experience competencies developed by Temkin Group. The results are also supported by another study of Temkin Group, which found that services industries have the most engaged employees while the retail sector has the fewest (Temkin & Lucas, 2013). Specific analysis of the mean values of inform, inspire, instruct, involve and incentivise generated some insights.

Inspire has the highest mean score (2.7701), which indicates that organisations are higher in inspiring their employees than other employee engagement practices. Incentivise has the lowest mean score (2.3320), which indicates that organisations are lower in giving incentives to their employees than other employee engagement practices. Thus, more improvements are required, and more incentive programmes should be launched for the employees. Therefore, this study suggests some implications for human resource managers, decision-makers and retail managers regarding effective design and implementation of employee engagement practices.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The aim of the study was to investigate employee opinions of employee engagement in different retail organisations within South Africa. A conceptual model has been developed and SEM has been performed to test the proposed hypotheses related to the relationships between inform, inspire, instruct, involve and incentivise. Among 250 responses from different people working in various retail organisations, 245 responses have been finalised for analysis.

The results of the empirical analysis showed that three employee engagement practices, including inform, involve and incentivise, were significantly related to inspire. On the other hand, instruct has no significant relationship with inspire. Descriptive analysis with means also concludes that all the practices need to be improved for better employee engagement. Nevertheless, every study has limitations and scope for further research and this research is no exception. First of all, the results are difficult to generalise because of the use of a non-probability convenience sampling procedure, which may not be a representative of the population. Thus, a probability sampling method that represents the population properly can be used to generalise the results. Second, a greater sample size can be used by future researchers for the precision of the results. Regardless of these limitations, the present research has contributed towards existing literature by examining employee engagement practices including inform, inspire, instruct, involve and incentivise.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Prof MC Cant for useful discussions and Mr S Hassan for statistical guidance.

English Language editing services supplied by Charné van der Merwe.

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