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Employee engagement in shared services in a regional university context

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ABSTRACT

A reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify factors that enhance and inhibit employee engagement amongst professional staff working in shared services teams in an Australian regional university. With efficient and effective client service delivery expected of people working in a shared services structure, employee buy-in and the need for them to feel engaged are important. However, little is known about the employee experiences of working in a shared services team. Despite this, shared services have become popular in universities by offering cost savings while improving service quality and output. We found that professional staff responded generally positively to working in a shared services team. Moreover, they indicated positive employee engagement when their working experiences responded to specific ‘rules of engagement’ applicable to their shared services environment.

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Introduction and background

This paper draws from a larger study exploring the factors that influence employee engagement amongst professional staff working in shared services teams in a regional university context. A ‘regional’ university is classified as a university with headquarters located in regional Australia (Regional Universities Network [RUN], 2023). The broadest definition of ‘regional Australia’ includes most locations that lie beyond Australia’s major capital cities of Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, leaving a vast area of Australia classified as ‘regional’ (Department of Home Affairs [DHA], 2021). Regional incentives are offered to encourage international students to study in Perth, Adelaide, Canberra, Gold Coast, Sunshine Coast, Newcastle/Lake Macquarie, Wollongong/Illawarra, Geelong and Hobart (i.e., Category Two Cities and Major Regional Centres) (DHA, 2021). However, the DHA (2021) offers the most generous incentives to students who study at any location outside the prior two categories (i.e., Category Three Regional Centres and Other Regional Areas). Australian universities typically have multiple, geographically dispersed campuses, and 15 universities have a main campus in either Brisbane, Sydney or Melbourne, and 17 universities have a main campus in Category Two regional

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areas. The remaining nine universities have a main campus in the remotest regional areas (Universities Reviews, 2021). It is within this final category – a university with a main campus in the remotest of regional areas – that our case study organisation is located.

Kahn's (1990) seminal paper outlining the psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work, initiated the pursuit to identify the factors contributing to employee engagement, and how to measure it. See for instance, Macey and Schneider (2008), Rich et al. (2010), Saks (2006, 2022), Schaufeli et al. (2006), Shrotryia and Dhanda (2019), Soane et al. (2012), Shuck et al. (2017), and Yulita et al. (2022). Scholars generally agree that employee engagement is a unique construct, that serves as an important job attitude associated with both worker well-being and organisational productivity (Bailey et al., 2017). Drawing on Saks (2006) and Albrecht's (2010) work, we define employee engagement as: *a positive, work-related attitude that consists of thoughts, feelings and behaviours that are associated with a person's individual job performances and characterised by their genuine desire to contribute to organisational success.*

In parallel, the discourse surrounding the re-structuring of departmentally based, service-provider teams into shared services emerged in the early millennium, with many businesses, government organisations and universities aiming to leverage the economies of scale and cost savings that the shared services model offered. The shared services structure (or model) can be defined as: *a coordinated business unit or team located within the organisational structure that provides support functions to the entire organisation* (Quinn et al., 2000; Schulman et al., 1999). A shared services structure combines duplicated support functions existing in separate business units, including the staff associated with these functions, into a singular team (Quinn et al., 2000; Schulman et al., 1999). The opportunity to increase both service quality and output by leveraging human resources and maximising reported cost savings (Bergeron, 2003; Knol et al., 2014; Richter & Brühl, 2021; Plugge et al., 2022) has particularly appealed to the university sector in Australia as the sector responds to successive legislative and funding changes and market challenges (Darbyshire & Shields, 2018). Research on shared services refers particularly to IT, HR and finance business units, where the concept of shared services first emerged, focusing more on its frameworks, implementation and case studies, rather than the worker's experience of being in a shared services team.

The working lives of many professional (non-academic) staff within universities are directly impacted by the shared services model, yet similarly, scant research has occurred on their experiences to date. Cognisant of Bossu et al. (2018, pp. 3–4) explanations of 'professional staff' in the university environment, we adopt a broad approach and define 'professional staff' as *university employees who operate alongside the academic employees, and who perform the administrative, technical, qualified-professional, managerial and/or leadership roles associated with the broad scope of university systems and functions.* This paper explores the nexus of how employee engagement is experienced by professional staff who work within shared services environments in a regional university context. By bringing into focus the experiences of these stakeholders working within such teams, this paper adds to the employee engagement and shared services literature and provides insight into the seldomly researched experiences of professional staff in regional universities. A reflexive thematic analysis of the transcripts from sixteen semi-structured interviews and two focus group discussions with professional staff in shared services

teams located within a single case study university, resulted in producing a set of employee engagement rules. These ‘rules of engagement’ offer information to supervisors, line managers, human resource specialists, and policy makers within (and potentially beyond) universities that are interested in the benefits of having engaged employees working within shared services teams.

Contemporary challenges confronting regional universities

Regional universities are anchor institutions in their communities. They are major employers providing significant social and economic value, both locally and nationally (Aslan, 2020; Productivity Commission, 2017; Regional Universities Network RUN, 2020; Shinnars, 2022). The seven universities that are members of the Regional Universities Network (RUN), are estimated to have delivered \$2.4 billion to their communities and created over 11,000 jobs in regional Australia, with seven out of ten regional graduates now working in a regional area (RUN, 2020). The challenges for regional and metropolitan universities are similar, however regional universities and their communities are more vulnerable to their impacts (Aslan, 2020; Ross, 2023; RUN, 2020). For example, universities’ are tackling fundamental shifts in how students consume their learning and the demands of online delivery, lost income from international students from the COVID-19 pandemic, fluctuations in domestic student enrolments, lost revenue in student accommodation, removal of enrolment caps (i.e., limits to number of students an institution can enrol), Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency’s (TEQSA)s issuing of the Coaldrake directive that a university must produce research at ‘world standard’ in at least half of its teaching fields, increasing student fees by the federal government in 2022, and more job losses than any other non-agricultural sector in the economy (Aslan, 2020; Littleton & Stanford, 2021; RUN, 2023; TEQSA, 2021; Thatcher et al., 2020; Ross, 2023). Universities have been reducing administrative costs as part of their strategies to remain financially viable/profitable in a semi-commercialised, demand-driven model (Birmingham in Baxendale, 2017; Robinson, 2019). Australian universities are expected to be financially stable organisations that operate at surplus and show value for money (Howes, 2018) producing substantial ‘world-class’ research to avoid de-registration (Ross, 2023). At the heart of it, universities are experiencing significant pressure to change in turbulent times (Ross, 2023). They must continue to evolve to remain relevant amidst changes in public perceptions of the value of universities, the open availability of knowledge through digital and AI platforms, changes to government funding, and a lack of bipartisan consensus at the political level (Friday & Cawood, 2018; Goodman, 2018; Ross, 2023). Within this industry environment, it is not unusual for Australian universities to implement a shared services structure for the delivery of common client services within their organisations

Shared services as a resource efficient organising structure

At its foundation, shared services refers to the practice of an organisation making the decision to share a common set of specialist services, such as finance and accounting, HRM, and IT, rather than have a series of duplicated specialist functions distributed across business units (Quinn et al., 2000, p. 11). Shared services is not centralisation,

providing instead the opportunity to combine the best of what centralisation – and decentralisation – can offer whilst leaving out the inefficiencies (Schulman et al., 1999). Shared services consolidate non-core business functions into its own organisational unit, primarily to save costs, generate value and improve services (Bergeron, 2003; Knol et al., 2014; Schulz et al. 2010). The employees who work in a shared services team can be either physically or virtually co-located to provide their service function to the entire organisation. Shared services structures appeal to public-sector organisations as a method to adopt a cost minimisation strategy that should also improve client services and efficiencies (Bergeron, 2003; Knol et al., 2014; Plugge et al., 2022; Richter & Brühl, 2021). The flexible nature of shared services structures allows for customised designs to suit organisational needs, however, the fundamental essence to share and to ‘standardise’ support activities remains broadly the same, i.e., the consolidation of duplicated, back-office services within a single area of an organisation (Borman & Janssen, 2013). Darbyshire and Shields (2018) suggest that shared services have become the new poster child of university bureaucrats as they seek to minimise burgeoning administrative costs and leverage efficiencies given the sector’s challenges.

The interest in shared services as an organising structure in workplaces has exponentially increased since the 1990’s (Borman & Janssen, 2013; Gospel & Sako, 2010; Klimkeit & Thirumaran, 2018; Miskon et al., 2011; Quinn et al., 2000; Schulman et al., 1999; Schulz et al. 2010; Soalheira, 2020). However, the complexities of moving to these structures are well noted (Borman & Janssen, 2013; Miskon et al., 2011; Richter & Brühl, 2021; Schulman et al., 1999), with employee buy-in integral to shared services successful implementation and ongoing success (Schulman et al., 1999; Quinn et al., 2000; Van der Linde et al., 2006; Walsh et al., 2008; Klimkeit & Thirumaran, 2018). Therefore, if employees have the power to make an organisation’s shift to shared services successful and sustainable, we need to understand how their experience of working within these structures interplays with their sense of employee engagement.

Employee engagement as a major work attitude

In an era where organisations continuously seek to find and leverage efficiencies, an engaged workforce can drive bottom line results through in-role and extra-role performance and creativity, and provide a competitive advantage (Anitha, 2014; Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Macey & Schneider, 2008). Employee engagement is a specific job attitude, meaning that employee engagement manifests in a way that an employee will ‘think’ they are engaged, ‘feel’ engaged, and ‘act’ engaged. The engagement literature has evolved significantly since Kahn’s (1990) original work that identified three antecedent psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work, i.e., meaningfulness, safety and availability.

Additional employee engagement antecedents have since been identified from which Whittington et al., (2017) assembled a comprehensive, integrated model of employee engagement that incorporates macro-levels factors such as organisational strategy, the HR strategy and the HR-value chain, and micro-level factors such as trust, leadership styles, enriching jobs and goal-setting that, when managed well, are associated with employee engagement. Scholars have also identified that employee engagement is multi-dimensional in nature, i.e., job engagement, as distinct from organisational engagement,

will combine to create employee engagement (Saks, 2006), and that employee engagement is unique from other major job attitudes such as job satisfaction, job involvement and workaholism (Anitha, 2014; May et al., 2004; Bakker et al., 2011; Bailey et al., 2017; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Schaufeli et al., 2006; Schauflei, 2014; Shuck, 2011b; Shuck et al., 2021). Evident within the Whittington et al. (2017) model are the theoretical foundations of Kahn (1990) and Saks' (2006) employee engagement descriptions. Saks (2006, 2019) used social exchange theory (SET) as the basis for explaining why employees engage in their jobs, to varying degrees, in response to their organisation's demands on their job resources. Bakker and Demerouti (2008) refer to the social exchange in their Job Demands-Resources Model (JD-R) in which they describe the 'social exchange' interaction between an employee and their manager/organisation. Job resources support employee engagement attitudes, whereas job demands have the potential to undermine employee engagement. Thus, the social exchange element refers to the availability of, and access to, job and personal resources, versus, the level of job demands that have the potential to become a 'stressor' if the employee lacks access to sufficient job and personal resources to counteract these stressors and sustain their work. Saks (2019) also suggests that organisations can cultivate employee engagement by focusing on skill variety, social support, reward and recognition, distributive and procedural justice and through learning and development opportunities. The more recent findings by Albrecht et al. (2021) and Saks (2022) continue to focus on exploring how collections of various work conditions and factors can create new understandings of how to support employee engagement, such as meaningful work and 'caring HRM' systems, respectively.

Methodology

The case study university has its main campus located in an area designated by the Department of Home Affairs as a remote, Category Three location (i.e., Regional Centres and Other Regional Areas). As the research question sought to explore the factors that were impacting the lived experience of employee engagement among people working in shared services teams, a qualitative, interpretivist approach was adopted. An interpretivist approach assumes that meaning is socially constructed, subjective and has multiple views, during which the researcher enters the world of the participant and experiences (Saunders et al., 2019). Following Human Research Ethics Committee approval granted by the case study university, invitations were emailed to a purposive sample of professional staff working in its shared services teams that included IT, finance, HR, student support services, and research services. The lead author conducted 16 semi-structured interviews and triangulated these discussions with two focus groups, each with four participants. Interviews were conducted via Zoom during 2020 and participants were de-identified using a pseudonym. The data collection period coincided with the emergence and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, and although not the focus of the study, the impact of COVID-19 inevitably formed part of the discussions. The interview participants were asked questions designed to explore the participant's perceived employee engagement through questions such as: *'What does employee engagement mean to you?'*; and *'Can you tell me about times when you have not felt engaged in your job?'*. Other questions were directed to explore their sense of organisational engagement, *'What does the*

organisation do that effects how you feel at work?'. Questions were also asked to identify their feelings about working within the shared services structure, for example, *'What would you like to change about the way the "shared services" structure that you work in, operates?'*. Interviews were transcribed and an aggregated, de-identified summary from the interviews was developed as a prompt for the ensuing focus group discussions. These de-identified summaries provided insights that were then triangulated via the two focus group discussions, with each focus group consisting of four (4) different participants. These focus group conversations were also transcribed and added to the data pool for thematic analysis.

The lead author analysed the data guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019, 2022) method for thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2019) describe several clusters of thematic analysis ranging from the positivist-orientated (small q) using coding reliability and codebook tools, to the organic and flexible (Big Q) thematic analysis using reflexivity, creativity and researcher subjectivity as its tools. In line with the reflexive thematic analysis, themes were generated as the researcher engaged with the data to find meaning of people's experiences of employee engagement whilst working in a shared services team. Thus, existing theory recedes into the background, providing just enough rudimentary conceptual basis to springboard into deeper meaning making through reflexive iterations, without being confined to a restrictive theoretical lens or template. This thematic analysis approach to analysing data, separates it from the positivist-leaning assumptions associated with the 'small q' forms of thematic analysis, that operate with either a priori theoretical template and/or pre-determined codes and assumptions of coder reliability.

Nevertheless, it is recommended that researchers should identify if/how a theoretical lens(s) has played a role in their analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022). Thus, the concepts of job engagement and organisational engagement, i.e., multi-dimensional employee engagement, provided the rudimentary framework to (a) develop the semi-structured interview questions and (b) to generate initial themes in the transcribed data. During the reflexive stage, the researcher moved through iterative stages of analysis, identifying semantic (explicit surface meanings) initially, and then increasingly recognising latent meanings (underlying ideas, nuances, suggestions, intentions) as her familiarity and comprehension of the intricacies in the data increased. The analysis generated a collection of themes associated with the oppositional factors versus supportive factors for cultivating employee engagement. For example, the opportunity to use one's skills and abilities, being valued for one's inputs and professionally respected, regional location, and positive personality strategies were supportive, enhancing employee engagement themes; whilst oppositional employee engagement themes included poor perceptions of fairness and organisational justice and the tension between the dedicated, customised services verses the generic nature of shared services.

Through successive rounds of reflection and refinement, this collection of themes evolved into a set of integrating principles, entitled the 'rules of engagement'. At this point in the analysis, social exchange theory (SET) provided a basis for creating these rules of engagement as the themes told a story of shared services employees holding expectations of reciprocal or beneficial exchanges with their management and each other. Following are the details of these themes before we present their refined culmination in the 'rules of engagement'.

Working in a shared services team in a regional university

All of the participants, from both the interviews and the focus groups, reported that overall, they liked working within their shared services teams. Based on their conversation, the shared services was a suitable team structure for supporting idea sharing, workload management, consistent and equitable service delivery, knowledge and skill development and enhanced communication with clients. As Sam expressed:

I think this is the model. So yeah, I am not sure there would be any positives [not having shared services] . . . some of the strategic aspects that we are working on probably wouldn't be achievable in a de-centralised structure.

Ruth also advocated for the benefits of a shared services structure, stating that:

having a central service ensures that there are not silos, it is open communication. You all have the same vision and the same plan of attack. So, it is a lot more equitable.

Additionally, the physical location and co-location of shared services teams was also a factor in facilitating and enhancing communication, relationships, learning and collaboration. Alice explained:

I think it really helps being in that shared space because the shared services allows you to call on those people that you need who are centres of excellence for what they know.

Alice also identified the cross-collaborative benefits of shared services and how this fed her employee engagement:

. . . it was interesting to be able to work with people who fall within my shared services space that I don't have a lot to do with . . . do some workshopping and discuss different ideas . . . I think that helped me feel engaged because there were people understanding me and I was understanding people and we were coming up with solutions that would help other people.

Similarly, Doreen commented that:

. . . I have elements of my job that I could not do if I did not have that person there ready to put that puzzle piece in place. . . I just simply can't do my job if there was just me.

Participants also explained how the shared services structure facilitated a subsequent team culture that provided a source of social support and collegiality. For example, Chrissy stated:

the team culture, the team support . . . collegiality with, you know, your team . . . that close access to support from the other teams . . . if you identify that there is a training need, you can just go up the corridor . . . and maybe discuss that.

Participants acknowledged their satisfaction with the job hygiene factors such as wages and conditions that their university provided them, with Alex declaring, '*we've got the best jobs, the best working conditions*'. More overt though was that the regional university context itself provided a distinct job resource supporting employee engagement, with participants referencing the 'family' and friendly nature of the university and its regional location, their fondness for their region, and their ability to see their impact of their work. For example, Wayne stated:

... it is your second family. You know what I mean, because it is regional ... you get to meet and know a lot more people. ... It probably enhances the engagement a little bit from a point of view that you actually see the impact that the university is having on the community in a bigger way rather than in a more city centre. Because it is a large employer, and you can actually see the difference in the community.

Enhancing factors associated with employee engagement in shared services teams

Positive employee engagement examples described by the participants were analogous to employee engagement manifestations of productivity, vigour and dedication (Maisyuri & Ariyanto, 2021; Nimon & Shuck, 2020; Schaufeli et al., 2006). For example, Madonna said:

wanting to turn up, and being fully present when you are at work, and really wanting to do the best that you can and focus ... working towards that common goal, but really being, present and going above and beyond,

and Alice, who said, *I'm perky when I am engaged*. Linda saw employee engagement as, *'actively wanting to be at work, are happy to be at work and are trying to make work a better place'*, while Rick stated:

the outputs of an engaged employee are that they are productive, they are happy in their work and they have a good work-life balance and ... they are making a good contribution to the business.

Notably, insights such as these indicate that the participants views were indicative of the multi-dimensional nature of employee engagement (Kahn, 1990), by expressing that employee engagement has benefits for both the individual worker, and beyond to the organisation.

Factors that enhanced employee engagement for professional staff in shared services were reflected through their appreciation of the social support that was available working in a shared service team, and that the shared services structure provided a manageable way of organising work. The shared services environment allowed them to share skills, ideas and workload, and participants liked being with their 'tribe' - a team of likeminded and similarly engaged individuals working towards a common purpose:

You don't want micro-management. The management piece needs to be about, here is our vision or our purpose, go and make it happen ... And that really allows you to form your own path and being engaged with the work you are doing in your own way. It shouldn't be dictated upon you, I don't think. There needs to be some flexibility around how you get from A to B. (Rick)

Participants felt engaged when they and their teams were recognised for their excellence and valued for the work they undertook, when their professional expertise was respected, and knowing that they were contributing to the purpose and outcomes of the organisation. In essence, they knew 'what piece of the puzzle' they offered, as expressed by Alice:

... they appreciate that we aren't just data monkeys, just pushing paper, that we have a really strong knowledge base and we are the service centre of excellence ... We do know our stuff so I think feeling appreciated and feeling like we are taken seriously, and that we can help influence some of the changes and we can help influence how some work areas might do things even if it is the same policies and how they might do them better.

In addition to the overt impact that a strong respect for their professionalism, being valued, and recognition had on the participants' employee engagement, these above findings draw into focus a range of leadership factors that support their engagement. Leadership factors such as perceived supervisor support, respectful interactions, trust, and autonomy versus micro-management, are additional employee engagement impact factors latent in these statements. Such findings align with employee engagement antecedents identified by Saks (2006, 2019) in relation to perceived social and organisational support, leadership and autonomy.

The implications of personal resources that a person brings to their role was also evident in the participants' discussions, in which they saw a shared responsibility for their own engagement. Particularly of note were how proactive and positive personality strategies '*as an approach to life*' (Ruth), had a role to play in employee engagement, with participants drawing on proactive personality strategies as a personal resource to '*reset/refocus during challenging periods*' (Wayne). Proactive personality strategies refer to a range of proactive and positive dispositional characteristics such as self-efficacy, optimism, autotelic and positive personality traits, and positive mindsets (Kahn, 1990; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2006, 2019). Evidence of these strategies as a personal resource, that could be encouraged in employees, included willingly embracing creative opportunities. For instance, Roger expressed that:

the last couple of years it has been a creative time for me I have been given the opportunity to . . . either make a difference or not . . . I just feel empowered to actually do something.

Similarly, Linda said, '*it was nice to have a challenge, it was good to feel like I was, you know contributing to better work standards*'. Ruth articulated a willingness to embrace challenges and owning a role in her employee engagement, stating that:

If you don't challenge yourself, or you don't participate in certain activities you could potentially be missing out on knowledge, on experiences, that other people are having. So, I think it is important to put yourself out there and be involved. You do have to have a responsibility to involve yourself as much as the university or the industry that you are working in pushes you to be involved and engaged in things. It is a responsibility on at least two parts to ensure that engagement is there.

Inhibiting factors associated with employee engagement in shared services teams

Despite their general support of the shared services structure and the regional university context, the participants were able to articulate their views on the reasons why employees become disengaged in such an environment. For instance, they referenced a type of passive disengagement:

. . . you see people go home at 4.30 pm and not a care in the world. I would see them as not engaged - disinterested in - you know they turn up, they get paid, and go home. (Merv)

Alternatively, they noticed that employees could be actively disengaged, with Rick explaining:

Someone who is not engaged is someone who will be . . . passive aggressive, or ummm, you know doing that sort of white-anting or gossiping, those sorts of things which are counter-productive, I think, for an engaged environment.

Oppositional factors that further inhibited employee engagement included perceptions of unfairness and failures in organisational justice. For instance, Rachel felt disrespected when she was not included in key discussions in which she was the subject matter expert, reflecting weaknesses in interactional justice. Gaps in distributive justice are detectable in Alice's perceptions around individuals progressing in the organisation based on who they know rather than the competency of their skills and abilities and their contributions. And Wayne's commentary represents breakdowns in informational and procedural justice, i.e.,

sometimes the decisions that are passed down, don't appear to have any reason behind them whatsoever, and when you ask for comments and feedback, it doesn't make any sense at all. And when you try and dig a bit further there is no further information provided.

Further inhibiting factors were challenges in finding the right balance in shared services design principles relating to standardising individual jobs within shared services for servicing a broad-spectrum of clients. The use of generic position descriptions with assigned remuneration levels reflects a one-size-fits-all approach for professional staff working in a shared services team, with limited customisation for specific needs. On this point, Linda explained:

. . . you know this particular person, is obviously competent in some aspects but not all of the aspects . . . it needs to be recognised that is not at the same level as someone else works at, and the next person works at. Like you can't just dump everyone into a broad spectrum of, you know, whatever group or whatever level.

The provision of a generic range of services to a broad spectrum of clients presented a further challenge for shared services teams. Chrissy expressed concern that she may not be understanding client needs as well as she might be if she were embedded within an assigned faculty:

. . . I wonder whether sometimes our advice is as good as it could be when we are actually sitting with them, interacting with them on a daily basis . . . You can't anticipate needs if you don't know what the business is exactly. Because we don't sit in the business it is a little bit hard to just keep your ear to the ground to know what might be coming.

Research was undertaken by Gander (2018) into the career behaviours of professional staff working in UK and Australian universities. They identified that professional staff are motivated by self-efficacy, referring to their need for self-directed, pro-active career planning, and self-actualisation, reflecting their need for ongoing learning and challenging work that allows them to upskill and not become bored. (The three other career motivators identified in Gander's study were person-organisation fit, work-life balance and recognition). This finding aligns with our final and paradoxical employee engagement inhibitor: the prevalence of the staff's 'intentions to stay' that is being driven by the positive working conditions and strong social and community networks associated with a regional university. In essence, a career stagnation effect was noted. Wayne's opinion was that . . . *people don't move jobs as much, which then creates fewer opportunities for*

career progression, which then falls back on the engagement a little bit. Meanwhile, Linda indicated frustrations with being saddled with underperforming employees:

... I don't think it is fair. ...in my particular team, there is a person who I feel, is not pulling their weight. And then because we are in the university sector...there is not enough repercussions ... There is no way that they will ever leave.

Connection and the 'rules of engagement'

Saks (2006, 2019) used social exchange theory (SET) as the basis for explaining why employees engage in their jobs, to varying degrees, in response to their organisation's demands on their job resources. Assuming these exchange parameters exist, we overlay the richness of the thematic analysis findings to produce Figure 1 representing the 'rules of engagement'. The 'rules of engagement' capture the inter-related and dynamic exchanges required for cultivating employee engagement amongst professional staff in a shared services environment. The 'rules of engagement' capture a contingent set of direct and indirect exchange expectations that accumulate to support professional staff in shared services to connect and invest their full selves into their work.

In Figure 1, 'connection' features prominently at the core of the 'rules of engagement'. This reflects that engaged employees will have a positive emotional connection towards their work and the values and purpose of their organisation, taking responsibility for their role towards the organisation's goals, and working with other employees in the pursuit of these goals (Anitha, 2014; Robinson et al., 2004). One of these connections that is key for

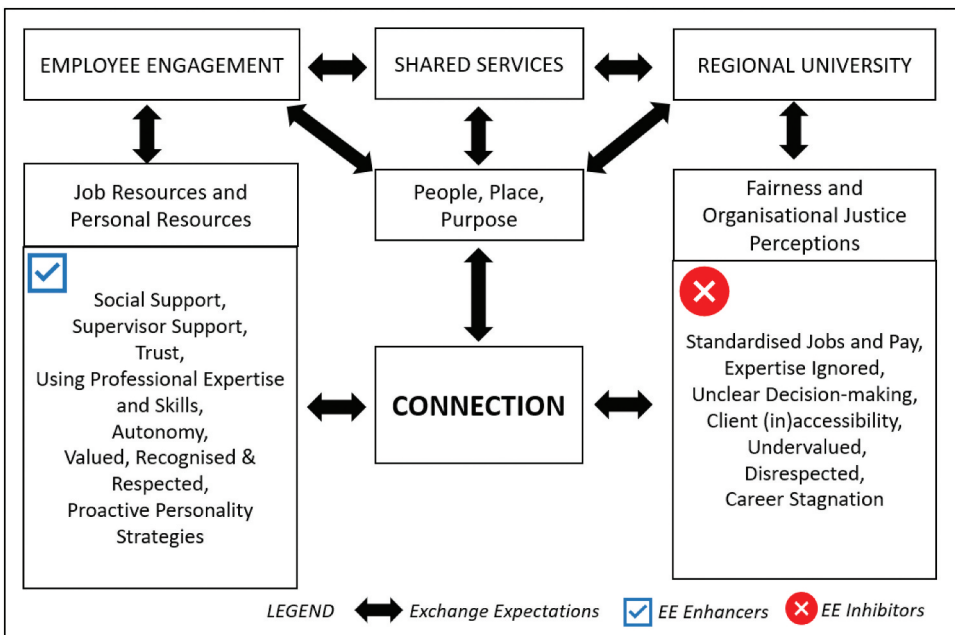


Figure 1. The 'rules of engagement' for cultivating employee engagement in shared services teams in the case study regional university. Source: Developed for paper

employee engagement in professional staff in shared services is a ‘people-place-purpose’ connection. For example, the professional staff valued working with their team of colleagues and helping clients (people); they valued the connection of their university to its local community, and more specifically through the physical co-location with members of their shared services team to develop quality relationships with co-workers, colleagues and clients (place); and they were committed to their clients, their employer, and they knew which ‘piece of the puzzle’ they contributed to the university’s mission (purpose).

The larger, left-side box in [Figure 1](#) captures the connection that professional staff have to their shared services environment, promoting employee engagement through the availability of specific job resources that they identified, and which are consistent with Kahn (1990), Saks (2006, 2019) and the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The specific job and personal resources evident for shared services teams were social support from within their shared services team as well as support from their supervisors and university leaders. Trust and autonomy and the opportunity to use their skills and abilities, being shown that they are valued and respected for their knowledge and inputs, and recognised as professionals with specialist expertise, were other salient employee engagement enhancers. Adoption of proactive personality strategies were also specifically identified by professional staff as a personal resource to develop resilience and a coping response to the challenges and demands of working in a shared services structure.

The larger, right-side box in [Figure 1](#) acknowledges organisational justice and perceptions of fairness are significant sources of connection to work in the engagement exchange and influenced by the university’s context. When done well, organisational justice and fairness assessments are job resources that enhance employee engagement. However, it appears that at times, professional staff felt that organisational justice and fairness were not at an acceptable standard, demonstrating that organisational justice treatments can deteriorate into job demand/‘stressor’ territory, and inhibiting employee engagement. Notably, as shared services teams are typically areas responsible for the distribution of resources or the ‘gatekeepers’ of organisational policy and procedures such as HR and finance, experiences where the organisation failed to act justly (by their perception) were felt quite deeply. Thus, given the flattened structure of shared services and the standardised nature of the work, the ‘rules of engagement’ requires organisational managers and leaders to address negative organisational justice and fairness perceptions. Professional staff identified that they expect appropriate treatment particularly in terms of recognition, pay and promotion (distributive justice), fairness in the design of work and ability to provide meaningful client services, including balancing the use of generic versus customised job design and client service approaches (procedural justice); being consulted with for their professional input which is subsequently valued and respected (interactional justice) and access to information around decision-making and applications of organisational policy (informational justice).

Conclusion

Based on this case study, the use of the shared services model within a regional university context appears to be a successful design choice, if the success measure is positive employee engagement amongst the professional staff working within these structures. However, there are potential flaws in the shared services model

inhibiting employee engagement. Universities should aim to leverage the job and personal resources and organisational justice dimensions identified in the ‘rules of engagement’ to counteract these flaws. Within the case study university, multiple benefits ensued for individuals and the organisation when professional staff are actively engaged in their shared services team. We encourage further research across universities and comparison with other industry contexts to improve the generalisability of these understandings. The proposed ‘rules of engagement’ do not require extensive funding or extensive timeframes. Most of these rules are based on respectful, interpersonal behaviours exchanges between organisational actors. Therefore, cultivating employee engagement for the people who work in a shared services structure is an accessible and budget friendly strategy that can be purposefully pursued, as universities manage imposing internal and external competing demands and expectations.

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