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EMPLOYEE DISENGAGEMENT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES: A HOTEL CASE STUDY IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

Employee disengagement in the hotel industry is deepening, with profound impacts on customer service delivery. However, there is scant empirical evidence focusing on employment and human resource management in the hotel industry, particularly predicated on the perceptions of employees. This study examines employee disengagement from the perspective of employees in a selected hotel organisation. More particularly, it focuses on frontline employees, whose jobs involve daily service encounters with clients. Frontline employees are central to customer satisfaction. Gaining insights from the viewpoint of these employees can help enlighten both management and human resources practitioners in formulating and implementing appropriate strategies that can help mitigate employee disengagement. The study followed a qualitative case study approach using a sample of 30 participants, drawn from frontline service departments, including frontline service managers and a human resource management representative. Data was collected using two focus group discussions with frontline employees and 9 semi-structured interviews with management. A thematic approach was utilised to analyse data. Findings reveal that frontline employees regard management behaviour as the major factor to their disengagement. When managers, particularly those in frontline service departments, become unappreciative of employee effort, do not appear to be supportive or engage in unfair assessments, the behaviour of frontline employees becomes evident to clients, in the form of a lack of

promptness in serving clients, poor food preparation and failure to keep a constant smile during service encounters. Management efforts to mitigate the disengagement of frontline employees is essential in creating sustainable and positive customer experiences in the hotel business.

Key Words: employee disengagement, employee engagement, Human Resource Management, hotel, frontline employees

1. INTRODUCTION

This study characterises employee disengagement from the perspective of frontline employees in the hotel industry. Globally, disengagement of employees remains a challenge and a key subject of research enquiry (Barros, Costello, Beaman & Westover, 2016). Human Resource Management (HRM) literature reflects vast evidence of research focus on employee engagement (Arrowsmith, 2018). Nevertheless, employee disengagement is deepening in the contemporary world of work (Ismail, Wahab, Ismail & Latiff, 2019; Balliester & Elsheikhi, 2018; Hyman & Grumbell-McCormick, 2017; Allam, 2017; Masvaure, Ruggunan & Maharaj, 2014; Shoko & Zinyemba, 2014). There is an observed decline in the productivity levels in many types of industries in the global economy, intensified, in part, by the presence of employees who are disengaged in the workplace (Allam, 2017; Anitha, 2014). The disengagement of employees has a profound effect on the performance and effective functioning of organisations (Allam, 2017; Barros et al, 2016; Albrecht, Bakker, Gruman, Macey & Saks, 2015).

Hotel employees play a significant role in delivering effective customer service, particularly the frontline personnel who directly interact with customers (Ruzic, 2015). These employees are at the core of customer satisfaction. The behaviours and attitudes of frontline personnel impacts on service delivery and customer satisfaction (Robinson, Martins, Solnet & Baum, 2019; Ismail et al., 2019). Nevertheless, hotel employment is reportedly associated with employment conditions that give significant rise to employee disengagement (Ismail et al., 2019; Casado-Diaz & Simon, 2016). The changing nature of the world of work is leading to exacerbated precariousness levels for hotel employees (Robinson et al., 2019). Precariousness of employment signifies work that is typically irregular and insecure (Keune & Pedaci, 2019; Kalleberg, 2018). Such work can result in

employees becoming disengaged. Consequently, customer service delivery and the attainment of organisational productivity is affected (Beukes & Botha, 2013; Ncube & Jerie, 2012).

The context of the study is the hotel industry. Globally, this industry contributes significantly to employment creation and economic growth (World Bank, 2017; ILO, 2016; Herderschee, 2016; Casado-Diaz & Simon, 2016; Baum, 2015). However, human resource literature is deficient in empirical evidence on people issues in the hotel industry (Robinson et al., 2019; Casado-Diaz & Simon, 2016). This study investigates employee disengagement, which is a major challenge in the hotel industry (Aslam, Muqadas, Imran & Rahman, 2018: Baum, Kralj, Robinson & Solnet, 2016). The study explores the perceptions of frontline employees. Various researchers avow the need for research that is predicated on employee experiences and perceptions (Baum, Kralj, Robinson & Solnet, 2016; Casado-Diaz & Simon, 2016; Ruzic, 2015; Truss, Shantz, Soane, Alfes & Delbridge, 2013). The term 'perception' in this study is used to describe how employees individually interpret and view employee disengagement. In a study on retention Al-Emadi and Schwabenland (2016) used the term 'perception' to explore the views of employees concerning human resource management HRM practices.

Predicated on the perceptions of hotel frontline employees regarding employee disengagement, the study findings are envisioned to help empower management practitioners in formulating and implementing appropriate human resource management strategies for addressing dis-engagement among employees. Doing so will help improve customer service delivery, increased employee and organisational productivity, and enhance organisational success (Othman, Mahmud, Noranee & Noordin, 2018; Bailey, Madden, Alfes & Fletcher, 2017; Coetzee, Schreuder, & Tladinyane, 2014; Rothmann & Rothmann, 2010).

This study answers the following main research question:

What are the perceptions held by frontline employees in the hotel business regarding employee disengagement?

The specific aims of the research are to:

1. describe the behavioural actions associated with disengagement for frontline employees.

2. understand factors behind employee disengagement, as perceived by frontline employees.

3. find out frontline employees' perceptions of practices that help mitigate disengagement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Understanding employee disengagement

Employee disengagement has been conceptualised by Kahn (1990) as a disconnection of oneself from work roles, precisely the physical, cognitive or emotional withdrawal of employees during role performances. Allam (2017) defines employee disengagement as referring to a display of a lack of interest, commitment and enthusiasm by employees in the workplace.

The origin of the concept of disengagement can be found in the ground-breaking works of Kahn (1990) who distinguished disengagement from engagement. Kahn conceptualised disengagement from one's personal perspective (Allam, 2017). In personal disengagement one engrosses in the withdrawal and defence of the preferred self, shows behaviours that reflect a lack of connections, including emotional, physical and cognitive absence and passiveness during role performances (Kahn, 1990). Engagement, on the other hand, is understood as a management practice, aimed at getting employees motivated, committed and going an extra mile in role performance and in their relations with others (Ruck, Welch & Menara, 2017; Purcell, 2014).

Bailey, Madden, Alfes and Fletcher (2017) identified employee engage-ment (or disengagement) approaches, as summarised below:

- Personal role engagement- founded on Kahn's (1990) works, engagement is seen as the expression of the individual's cognitive, emotion and physical self at work.

- Work task or job engagement - rooted uted in the works of Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonz´alez-Rom´a and Bakker (2002), engage-ment is regarded as a positive state of the mind, with engaged employees displaying a strong sense of vigour, dedication and absorption during task performance.

- Multidimensional engagement - work by Saks (2006) is found to be informative for this approach. Engagement is viewed as an individual's display of cognitive, emotional and behavioural components during role performance. It is considered possible to understand and distinguish engagement at an individual and group or organisational level.

- Engagement as a composite attitudinal and behavioural construct- engagement is seen as a measure of not one but both attitudinal and behavioural constructs, a perspective that is adopted in this study to describe behavioural actions associated with disengagement for frontline employees. The work of Swanberg, McKechnie, Ojha and James (2011) give credence to this approach.

- Engagement as a management practice - scholarly work in the domain of human resource management HRM has begun to view employee engagement in terms of management practice, predicated on soft and hard HRM approaches as well as the unitarist and pluralist views to employment relationships. Truss, Alfes, Delbridge, Shantz and Soane (2014) as well as Purcell (2014) enlighten this approach. This study is guided by this approach in exploring frontline employees' perceptions of practices that help mitigate disengagement.

While there has been an intensified research attention on the concept of employee engagement (MacKay, Allen & Landis, 2016), research that particularly addresses employee disengagement in different settings remains limited (Aslam, Muqadas, Imran and Rahman, 2018; Allam, 2017). This study addresses this concern from a hotel circumstance, particularly focusing on frontline employees, who are at the core of customer service delivery.

The theoretical framework guiding the study is the social exchange theory. This theory is popular in studies focusing on employee engagement or disengagement (Bailey et al., 2017). Its major premise is that relationships between employers and employees are founded on the principle of reciprocity. When employees perceive to be treated well and valued at work, they in turn respond by displaying effort and higher engagement (Bailey et al., 2017; Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees & Gatenby, 2013). Equally, when employees become disengaged, they in turn respond by reducing effort and commitment to their jobs and organisation (Allam, 2017).

2.2 Manifestation of employee disengagement

The disengagement of employees can manifest in different ways as indicated on Table 1 below.

Table 1: Indicators of employee disengagement

Unwillingness to take part in problem solving
Show negative attitude to the vision, purpose and values of the organisation
Less loyal to the organisation
Lack of interest in productivity maximisation
Work within, and display unwillingness to extend beyond, the stipulated organisational standards
Do the minimum possible to accomplish tasks
Show lack of commitment, interest and enthusiasm to work
Disconnected from the organisation, management and workmates
Increased absenteeism and presenteeism
Display intentions to leave the organisation

Sources: Aslam et al. (2018), Allam (2017), Govindarajo, Kumar and Ramulu (2014).

The indicators of employee disengagement are listed in Table 1. Allam (2017) contends that employees who are disengaged disconnect themselves from the organisation's vision and values, displaying high intentions of leaving an organisation. Disengaged employees frequently present attitudes and behaviours that negatively impact on customer service delivery, as found by Ismail et al. (2019).

2.3 Sources of employee disengagement

Literature focusing on the sources or causes of employee disengagement is extensive. In a study by Govindarajo, Kumar and Ramulu (2014), they categorise sources of employee disengagement into three causes. Firstly,

there are external environment causes that disengage employees such as insecurity and instability arising from the actions of governments, company shareholders and labour unions. Secondly, there are psychological causes such as one's lack of safety and trust in the workplace, perceived inequity in rewards, a lack of sense of belonging and identification with the organisation, feeling undervalued and general anxiety, stress or disinterest. Thirdly, there are organisational causes which include company restructureing, transformational change, a company culture that is predicated on malpractices and flouting of policies and practices through unethical actions such as sexual harassment and discrimination. Also, lack of management and leadership support, poor working conditions coupled with a lack of resources and acceptance of substandard performance, are some of the organisational causes identified to result in the disengagement of employees. Govindarajo et al. (2014) also identified substance abuse by employees, illness, poor relational skills, competency issues and laziness as leading to employee disengagement.

Aslam et al. (2018) consider major sources of employee disengagement to include managerial actions that include acts of unfairness, above the rule practices, work overload and organisational injustice. Shuck, Rocco and Albornoz (2011) concluded that the disengagement of employees results from negative environmental and personal factors. The environment is seen to include the people, physical space and organisational climate, while personal factors include the personality, physical traits and emotions that one displays. When the elements identified in these factors are negative, they lead to employee disengagement.

The 21st century has come with many pressures and the world of work is rapidly transforming. Technological advancements and increased competetion are reportedly intensifying the challenge for the HRM practice, resulting in major changes on how work is organised (ILO, 2019; Hayter, 2015; Stone & Deadrick, 2015). Work and employment have become more precarious (Robinson et al., 2019; Hyman & Grumbell-McCormick, 2017). Employee disengagement can deepen under conditions that place strain on organisations. Nonetheless, the field of HRM must not risk losing its people focus (Marchington, 2015).

2.4 Implications of employee disengagement

Albrecht, Bakker, Gruman, Macey and Saks (2015) found that firms with a higher proportion of disengaged employees were outperformed by those

with a higher proportion of engaged staff by almost 147 per cent in earnings per share. With disengaged employees, organisational success is difficult to guarantee (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015; Dromey, 2014).

Govindarajo et al. (2014) aver that the disengagement of employees can lead to deprived affairs with work colleagues and supervisors, often resulting in disruptive conflicts in the workplace. In addition, disengaged employees can perform poorly as a result of a lack of interest or emotional connection with the organisation and their roles, often leading to employee turnover. Employee turnover can result in low productivity and negatively affect customer service delivery (Ismail et al., 2019; Sithole, Zhou, Chipambwa & Sithole, 2015).

Allam (2017) considers employee disengagement an epidemic to an organisation due to negative attitudes displayed by disengaged employees in the form of deficient organisational citizenship behaviour, a lack of enthusiasm and commitment. Promoting teamwork is difficult when employees display little cooperation and collaboration to be part of a team. Allam further argues that violence and workplace bullying can manifest in situations where employees are disengaged. The manifestation can take the form of relentless abusive and teasing jokes, aggression, physical assault and threatening behaviours. Conflict can result, and acts of misconduct can escalate when the employees are disengaged. Ultimately, as Allam (2017) concludes, creativity and innovation can become stifled for organisations with disengaged employees. Disengaged employees lack the capacity to be innovative and competitive (Ruck et al., 2017). Furthermore, a workplace with a high proportion of disengaged employees presents challenges to the management of employment relations (Budd & Bhave, 2019).

2.5 Addressing employee disengagement

Mitigating employee disengagement is regarded significantly important to helping organisations attain higher levels of organisational performance, productivity, customer satisfaction and the retention a happy and engaged workforce (Aslam et al., 2018; Govindarajo et al., 2014). Effective human resource management HRM practices can be developed to overcome employee disengagement (Allam, 2017). The practices are based on policies and procedures established by the employers to manage their employees (Budd & Bhave, 2019). The engagement of disengaged employees is a possibility (Lynch, Hofmeyr & Price, 2018).

Table 2 identifies how human resource management HRM practices can be formulated to help mitigate the disengagement of employees.

Table 2: Practical actions for mitigating employee disengagement

Ensure fair allocation of job assignments
Design roles to capture employee interests and lessen monotony
Provide strategic clarity through setting clear and realistic goals and targets
Structure, culture and HR communication be supportive of employee and team performance
Craft generous, valuable and equitable rewards
Promote trusting and respectful leadership
Engage in high-impact training and development
Enable a supporting and engaging management style
Design feedback or reinforcement systems
Establish employee voice schemes
Create a safe and flexible working environment
Provide adequate tools, support and appropriate infrastructure

Sources: Lynch et al. (2018)';Aslam et al. (2018); Matthews (2018); Al-Emadi et al. (2016); Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees & Gatenby (2013).

To effectively develop and implement various practices to mitigate employee disengagement and create positive employee experiences, Mathews (2018) affirms human resource and management practitioners must adopt behaviours that are more engaging and possess vital people management competences. The engagement of previously disengaged employees is a vital to business success and growth (Industrial Psychology Consultants, 2019). Engaged employees become emotionally connected to their organisations and exert discretionary effort during role performance, due to the existence of a work environment that allows for open, supporting and trustful relationships to exist (Industrial Psychology Consultants, 2019; Binita & Usha, 2016). Consequently, retention of employees is improved, leading to the delivery of consistent and effective quality service.

2.6 Hotel industry: A global outlook

The hotel industry is concerned with hospitality and service provision for guests, with an aim of satisfying and retaining customers (Ismail et al., 2019). Globally, hotels are seen as major sources of employment creation (Baum, 2015), with hotel frontline employees at the heart of delivering customer service (Ruzic, 2015). Customer satisfaction regarding hotel service is generally based on their evaluation of attitudes and behaviours of these employees, with whom they interact on a daily basis (Ismail et al., 2019). The professionalism and conduct shown by frontline employees is central to customer retention in hotel business. Kukoyi and Iwuagwu (2015) state aptly, that it is vital in hotel business for customer service employees to listen, be patient, tolerant and helpful to customers, for customer satisfaction is the foundation of good business.

Hotel employment is, however, associated with conditions that make hotel jobs more precarious (Robinson et al., 2019; Ismail et al., 2019; Casado-Diaz & Simon, 2016; Ruzic, 2015). Globally, indecent, unsatisfactory working conditions are reportedly widespread in the hotel industry, leading to poor industrial relations outcomes (Baum, 2015: ILO, 2010). The conditions are characterised by the spread of low status jobs, long anti-social working hours, low pay, unstable employment, lack of a balance in work-life, lack of entitlements associated with full-time employment as many are on fixed term or temporary contracts, inadequate welfare and employment protection and gender discrimination (Ismail et al, 2019; Robinson et al., 2019; Casado-Diaz & Simon, 2016; Ruzic, 2015). In many parts of the world, hotel employees earn less than the average for all industries (Robinson et al., 2019). These negative features have persisted over time (Casado-Diaz & Simon, 2016; ILO, 2010) despite the industry witnessing a massive entrance by a younger, educated and better-qualified generation, who expect working conditions that are decent (Robinson et al., 2019; Baum, 2015).

Employment conditions in the hotel industry can intensify employee disengagement. Employers in the service sector such as the hotels need to pay more attention to their employees in order to attain effective customer service delivery (Ismail et al., 2019; Lynch et al., 2018). Knowing the perceptions and experiences of employees towards the practices developed and implemented to motivate or engage them is vital to service performance (Al-Emadi et al., 2016). Little attention, however, has been given

to understanding employee issues in the hotel industry (Robinson et al., 2019; Casado-Diaz & Simon, 2016). As articulated by Baum et al. (2016), hospitality workforce research remains neglected. Research focus-ing on human resource issues in the hotel industry is scant (Robinson et al., 2019). By understanding employee disengagement from the perspective of front-line employees in the hotel industry, this study will contribute significantly to practice and academic scholarship.

2.7 Locating Zimbabwe's hotel industry

Zimbabwe's hotel industry contributes immensely to the economic activity in the nation. A 2016 World Bank Economic Update Report revealed that the industry had then, contributed 16% to the Gross Domestic Product (Herderschee, 2016). A 2018 Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries (CZI) Manufacturing Survey identified the hotel industry as one of the 5 key sectors earmarked to drive the country's economy (CZI, 2018). Neverthe-less, several challenges confronting hotels are resulting in poor working conditions that can disengage employees. These challenges include: in-creased cost of doing business, increased competition from small to medium hotel businesses, perceived negative country image, poor infrastructure and liquidity problems (CZI, 2018; Abel & Mudzonga, 2016). Past studies found employees in the hotel industry to be disengage-ment due to deplorable working conditions, a lack of career growth opportunities, increased levels of labour casualisation, underpayment, long hours of work and inadequate employment protection (Nguwi, 2014; Bhebhe & Nyanhete, 2013; Ncube & Jerie, 2012). Eliminating employee disengagement among frontline employees in hotel business is vital to creating memorable customer experiences as declared by (Ismail et al., 2019).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study followed a qualitative case study research approach. This approach is credited for enabling the empirical examination of a phenol-menon in-depth and within its real-life situation as avowed by Bryman (2012). It enabled the study to focus on the participants' opinions con-cerning employee disengagement. A qualitative case study approach allows

for empirical enquiry into a social phenomenon guided by research questions that answer the 'what' and the 'how' in a study (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

For this study, the questions explored were: How important is service delivery in hotel business, particularly by frontline personnel?; What behavioural actions do you perceive as being associated with employee disengagement in frontline service delivery in hotel business?; What are the factors behind employee disengagement in hotel business?; and, How do you perceive existing human resource management HRM practices in mitigating disengagement among frontline employees in the hotel?

Exploring perceptions enables better understanding of the experiences and impressions held by individuals about a phenomenon (Al-Emadi et al., 2016), and a qualitative case study design becomes superlative (Creswell, 2014). Experiences and perceptions about employee disengagement differ across industries (Aslam et al., 2018; Allam, 2017). Studies point towards deepening employee disengagement in the hotel industry (Ismail et al, 2019; Casado-Diaz & Simon, 2016; Ruzic, 2015; Bhebhe & Nyanhete, 2013), yet, empirical evidence focusing on this phenomenon in the hospitality industry is insufficient (Robinson et al., 2019; Casado-Diaz & Simon, 2016; Baum et al., 2016). The hotel industry delineated the context of this study.

The study investigated the characterisation of disengagement concept from the perspective of 21 frontline employees, who were conveniently chosen from three front-line service departments in a large hotel organisation, namely, rooms and amenities; food and beverages; and, front office and reservations. Each department provided 7 participants. Also participating in the study were 8 managers, drawn from the 3-front-line service departments and 1 human resource management HRM representative. The service managers and HR representative were purposively selected, to gain rich insights regarding employee disengagement in the hotel. The total sample size for this study was 30, which Salkind (2018) considers as sufficient to draw meaning in a qualitative study.

Two (2) focus group discussions were conducted with frontline employees, one constituted of 10 participants and the other 11. Nine semi-structured face-to-face interviews were held with the service managers and HR representative. In respect of the frontline employees, the focus group technique allowed for data collection from participants at the same time.

This flexible technique enables the enquiry of unforeseen issues and empowers participants as they share views (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Each focus group lasted about 2 hours, and rich discussions were generated. The researcher moderated, guiding the discussion, while a research assistant took field notes. In the case of the interview method, a research guide containing open ended questions was used. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour each, enabling direct engagements with the managers.

The selected hotel gave permission for this study to be conducted and the consent of all research participants was obtained. In addition, assurances were also made to safeguard the interests and confidentiality of the information gathered. The research was conducted in a professional manner with no intention to cause any harm. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. Findings of the study have not been misinterpreted. Rigour in the findings was enhanced through gathering data from frontline employees and management representatives. Direct quotations were used to enhance the dependability of the findings. Moreover, the researcher shared the study findings through the gatekeeper, to ensure validation.

Data was analysed using the thematic approach. It is a flexible qualitative analytic method that allows the researcher to develop a detailed descriptive account of a phenomenon and enable a constructionist analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013:178). Themes based on the study objectives were developed. The major limitations related to control issues during focus group discussions. Some participants constantly displayed domineering tendencies in sharing their views, and continually interfered as others expressed their views. The researcher constantly reminded all the participants of the need to respect the different views shared by others.

4. FINDINGS

Data is presented in themes that address the study aims, relating to characterisation of employee disengagement.

4.1 Theme 1: Behavioural actions of disengagement frontline employees

In all three focus group discussions, the participants acknowledged the importance of delivering superior service to the hotel clients. Various views were shared:

> *It is important to keep our guests happy so that they return and the hotel revenue increases*, said a female receptionist.

> *Without clients, the hotel will close and we will all become jobless*, reiterated a male chef.

> *On a daily basis during roll-call our managers remind us of the importance of our roles to the hotel. No hotel can survive without customers. We all have to work to keep these happy as they market our hotel where ever they go*, expressed a male host.

Management and workers committee members shared similar views, revealing the responsibility of all in the organisation towards placing the customer at the centre of their daily roles. The HR representative made reference to the mission statement that identifies and places the guest at the highest point of hotel service.

Participants expressed knowledge on the value of their jobs to effective customer service with a number stating that frontline employees were the face of the hotel and the first point of contact by guests. In all discussions, participants considered the disengagement of frontline employees detrimental to customer service and hotel performance, with a reservationist expressing:

> *If employees are disconnected from the organisation, customers will never come back. There are many hotels and accommodation facilities in this resort town, the competition is tough, it is very important that we are all kept happy at work despite the challenges that we experience daily in the country.*

Participants shared the behaviours associated with disengagement of frontline employees in hotel business. These are summarised in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Behavioural actions of disengaged frontline employees

Persistently slow customer service particularly in restaurants
High levels of absenteeism and constant production of sick notes
Delays in checking in clients
Poor food preparation and food quality
Insistently not providing clean rooms or failing to provide clean linen
Staff dressing reflecting a lack of personal cleanliness
Showing a lack of promptness or a display of negative attitude by employees
Constantly dirty public areas and facilities
Constantly and openly showing a lack of knowledge about the hotel when guests make enquiries
Showing a lack of interest about hotel systems and not willing to help guests
Failure to constantly smile and showing a gloomy face

The focus groups revealed the above-mentioned behavioural actions as providing indicators upon which the disengagement among frontline employees can be observed in the hotel. One manager stated:

> *Disengaged employees in hotels display a lack of care on attending to customer queries and often show negative attitude to the organisation. Front office personnel are required to be alert during service times and not be distracted as guests expect undivided attention during their stay. Despite resources being made available and clear procedures set, a disengaged employee will constantly not show concern for the customer.*

Another line manager reiterated:

> *When you constantly receive negative feedback from clients concerning poor service in terms of food quality, cleanliness of rooms and general attitude of employees, this provides an indication of employees who are neither committed nor willing to*

> *outshine themselves in order to make the guests happy. A smile is always a good measure that impresses upon the guest that they are cared for, and frontline employees especially receptionists and waiters are always expected to smile during service encounters with guests.*

The HR representative said:

> *Various forums may be established to involve employees in decision making and tapping into the experience and knowledge they may have in order to improve our service. When employees fail to attend or openly share information it can indicate dis-engagement challenges. When employees constantly absent themselves or resign from work, service delivery is affected. As I speak, many frontline personnel, especially in the food and beverages department are leaving the organisation in numbers. While exit interviews reveal they are not happy with the working conditions we have been doing our level best as a hotel to keep our employees happy.*

4.2 Theme 2: Factors behind the disengagement of frontline employees

This theme presents factors perceived as likely causes of disengagement among hotel frontline employees.
Table 4 summarises information from frontline employees.

Table 4: Factors causing employee disengagement among frontline employees

Unappreciative managers and supervisors for work done
Unkind and unfair assessment of performance from supervisors and managers
Poor salaries and a lack of incentives despite surpassing targets at times
Managers who do not support continuous training or require employees to return to duty during the training
Favouritism of some employees
Constantly being ridiculed in the presence of colleagues and sometimes clients
Temporary nature of employment contracts

Constantly being told 'the door is open if you no longer want to work for this hotel'
A weak workers committee that 'dines' with management
Poor communication concerning the state of things
Long and anti-social working hours
Constantly being reminded 'we are nothing' or 'we lack creativity'

The participants bemoaned the poor support system in the organisation, while recognising how the country's deteriorating economic situation has been worsening their situation. Many were of the view that managers received salaries and perks that were lavish at the expense of employees. One participant voiced:

> *We work very hard, smiling at the guests for more than 8 hours and receive poor salaries while managers drive expensive cars and receive huge salaries. Unfortunately, there are few, employment openings in Zimbabwe are scarce, so we are stuck and have to bear the sad situation we are in. However, the market for the learned especially chefs is high as many are joining cruise ships, even the HR can tell you.*

The line managers stated that the economic situation pertaining in the country hindered the hotel from improving the quality of life of hotel employees. However, they concurred that the welfare of their employees was fairly well-taken care of despite the challenges. The factors identified by the managers to cause disengagement of frontline employees include challenges regarded beyond the company capability such as the increasing market prices of goods and services, the temporary nature of their contractual arrangements which could not be avoided due to fluctuations in levels of room occupancy and the diminished competitiveness of the Zimbabwean tourism market. The HR representative said:

> *The situation in the country is making it difficult to timeously fulfil all promises to our valued employees. This may affect service to our guests. Efforts are continuously being made to keep our staff happy such as providing assistance on housing and education issues.*

4.3 Theme 3: Practices for mitigating employee disengagement

The participants noted the existence of human resource management HRM policies and practices that are geared towards creating an enabling environment for employees to effectively perform. They identified policies relating to recruitment and selection, learning and development, performance management and reward management. The major concern held by the participants concerned the implementation of these policies. Some views expressed:

> *Managers do what they want no one cares about policies*, said a waitress.

> *I think managers do not take HR issues seriously. They should show care and concern for our situation, to help us overcome challenges that we face which affect our work. It is not easy to come to work happy given the highly stressing situation our families face in Zim,* a barman contributed.

Employees shared that management some issues did not require finance but a commitment by the management through regular communication and feedback to keep everyone informed. They said managers were not being sincere about the performance of the hotel but were quick to defend the claims that the hotel had no money and therefore could not offer better rewards or incentives. Also expressed was the need for a supportive leader-ship by managers as these affected relations at work and consequently how one carried him or herself during service delivery.

All the 4 management representatives acknowledged the existence of human resource policies, raising the need for constantly review these to address contemporary issues. For instance, it was stated that the training policy needed to be reviewed to help facilitate employee reskilling in line with the latest trends in the hotel industry, particularly relating to the use of technology. It was a shared view that more training programmes be implemented to help develop mangers and all the supervisors in the hotel to deal with human resource concerns.

5. DISCUSSION

The data indicates that frontline employees are conscious of the role their jobs play in delivering effective service to clients, confirming similar conclusions that frontline employees in the hotel business are at the apex of both customer satisfaction and retention (Ismail et al., 2019; Ruzic, 2015). It is therefore important that hotels formulate and implement strategies geared towards the eradication of employment conditions that can disengage employees and impact on the delivery of flawless service to guests. Concerning behavioural actions that can signify the disengagement of frontline employees, the findings reflect that frontline employees engage in acts that have an immediate and direct impact to customers. These actions include making unnecessary delays in rendering a service to customers in relation, *inter alia*, to check in, food quality and information provision. Researchers have expressed that disengaged employees frequently express a lack of interest and enthusiasm for their work, resulting in customers becoming agitated with the quality of service (Allam, 2017). Service employees are required to be dedicated and actively present at all times during service encounters (Lynch et al., 2018). The behavioural actions that participants revealed as indicating disengagement of frontline employees point towards significant challenges hotels may face in delivering effective customer service and satisfaction.

Findings reveal various factors that disengage frontline employees at work. While management participants largely considered factors of disengagement as external, discussions with frontline employees centred mostly on organisational and management factors. Management actions were found not supportive in terms of performance management, training and appreciating work done. Govindarajo et al. (2014) identified a lack of management and leadership support as intensifying the disengagement of employees. This results in employees losing a sense of attachment, interest and commitment to the organisation, ultimately compromising the effective delivery of service to customers as found by Sithole et al. (2015). According to the International Labour Organisation (2019) Also identified as a possible cause for disengagement among employees was the use of temporary contracts in the hotel. Such contractual arrangements are a result of organisational transformation in a changing world of work as revealed in the. ILO (2019). However, they lead to precarious employment as affected employees become insecure or are deprived from rights and benefits often associated with permanent employment. Robinson et al. (2019) concludes

that hotel employment has become more precarious, attributed, in part, to the temporariness of employment. Frontline employees on temporary employment forms can easily disengage.

The state of the economy was identified to be a factor that can lead to employee disengagement, particularly given the low wages which participants said were not enabling them to survive. The management participants also shared the same understanding, pointing towards the economic and national crises facing Zimbabwe, and impacting on labour. The CZI (2018) revealed a deepening economic crisis in Zimbabwe. Past studies (Bhebhe & Nyanhete, 2013; Ncube & Jerie, 2012) revealed underpayment and perceived low salaries as deterring effective customer service in the hotel industry in Zimbabwe. The worsening economic situation is more likely to impact labour, if no action is taken by policy makers at national or company level. Consequently, hotel service will be negatively impacted as frontline employees fail to deliver.

Findings reveal the existence of HR policies in the hotel. The implementation of the policies and management behaviour were found to be major antecedents to the disengagement of frontline employees. Matthews (2018) acknowledged the importance of developing people management competences and engaging behaviours for managers and HR professionals. When frontline staff perceive management support as lacking, the resultant employee behaviours become evident to clients during service encounters, for example through service delays and inability to maintain a smile, considered central in hotel service. Consequently, creating positive customer experiences becomes a major challenge (Ismail et al., 2019; Ruzic, 2015). Customer satisfaction and retention are central in hotel business, there is need for managers to pay more attention to employee issues. This can be achieved through formulating and implementing policies and practices that can help circumvent possible employee disengagement while promoting higher engagement levels (Budd & Bhave, 2019; Ismail et al., 2019; Lynch et al., 2018).

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study investigated perceptions concerning employee disengagement, from the viewpoint of frontline employees in a hotel organisation. Particularly, this research addresses concerns about the existence of insufficient empirical evidence about employee disengagement in hotel industry, from the perspective of the employees. The major findings reveal

potential factors that disengage frontline employees in hotel business, mainly centred on management behaviour, such as failing to express appreciation for work done, unfair performance assessments and failure to effectively communicate. Actions depicting the disengagement of frontline employees in hotel organisations include lack of promptness in serving guests, poor food quality and expressing unwillingness to help hotel guests. Consequently, service delivery is negatively impacted, leading to a failure in retaining clients. The study confirms existing research findings on the important role played by frontline employees in the hotel industry, and particularly reiterates calls for management and human resource practitioners to focus on addressing people issues in hotel service. By so doing, service interactions can be enhanced, resulting in memorable and positive customer experiences.

The study presents recommendations for practice. First, there is need for capacitating managers with requisite people management competencies. By so doing, managers will develop engaging approaches in their interactions with employees who are at the core of service delivery in hotels. Second, management and human resource practitioners need to be on the look-out for behaviours that can imply disengagement of frontline employees. This can be achieved through allowing for open and frequent discussions concerning service conditions for the employees. Instruments can be developed to gain evaluate the perceptions of employees about service conditions and human resource practices. Third, human resource practices be continuously reviewed to adapt to critical people issues within the changing world of work. For example, a training policy geared towards reskilling of frontline employees. Last, regular workshops to enlighten frontline employees about the value of their jobs and roles to customer service delivery will help enhance role performance.

In relation to future research, three recommendations are made. First, comparative studies within the hotel industry can be conducted, to explore the perceptions held by frontline employees about employee disengagement. Second, researchers can investigate management response concerning the deepening levels of employee disengagement among hotel employees, as reportedly found in the literature. Third, this study followed a qualitative approach, based on the views of a relatively small sample among frontline employees. Future researchers can study hotel employees across various departments utilising the survey method to measure perceptions.

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