

Investigating the Role of Employee Engagement in Organizational Effectiveness: A Study of Employee-Led Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how employee engagement influences organizational effectiveness through the lens of employee-led initiatives in Tehran-based organizations. A qualitative research design was adopted to gain in-depth insights into the experiences and perceptions of employees actively engaged in self-initiated workplace improvements. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 participants from diverse organizational backgrounds in Tehran. The participants were purposively selected based on their involvement in bottom-up initiatives that aimed to enhance organizational processes, culture, or outcomes. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using NVivo software, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach to thematic analysis. Strategies such as member checking and peer debriefing were employed to enhance trustworthiness. Analysis revealed three overarching themes: drivers of employee engagement, the nature of employee-led initiatives, and the outcomes of engagement. Engagement was primarily driven by intrinsic motivation, supportive organizational culture, recognition, and empowering leadership. Initiatives were characterized by autonomy, collaboration, and responsiveness to organizational gaps, but were also constrained by barriers such as bureaucracy and limited resources. Outcomes of these initiatives included enhanced organizational learning, improved performance, higher employee morale, increased retention, and stronger organizational reputation. The findings underscore that employee engagement is both a driver and consequence of organizational effectiveness. The study highlights the transformative role of employee engagement when expressed through self-initiated actions that align with organizational goals. Fostering a culture that supports psychological safety, autonomy, and recognition can significantly enhance engagement and, in turn, organizational performance. Organizations should reposition engagement as a dynamic, employee-driven process central to sustained innovation and effectiveness.

Keywords: employee engagement; organizational effectiveness; employee-led initiatives; proactive behavior; qualitative research; Tehran; organizational culture; psychological safety.

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of contemporary organizations, employee engagement has emerged as a central construct in understanding and enhancing organizational effectiveness. Defined broadly as the extent to which employees are emotionally and cognitively committed to their work and organizational goals, engagement is now viewed not only as a driver of individual performance but also as a critical determinant of broader organizational success (Saks, 2006). Organizations striving to remain competitive in dynamic markets must leverage the full potential of their human capital, and employee engagement has increasingly been identified as the mechanism



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through which this potential is realized (Kahn, 1990; Rich et al., 2010). However, a growing body of research suggests that engagement is no longer solely a top-down managerial function. Instead, employees themselves are actively shaping organizational outcomes through bottom-up, self-initiated initiatives that signal new forms of participative behavior (Bakker et al., 2012).

Employee engagement is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct encompassing physical, emotional, and cognitive components (Kahn, 1990). Engaged employees exhibit vigor, dedication, and absorption in their roles (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Numerous studies have linked high engagement levels with enhanced productivity, job satisfaction, customer loyalty, and innovation (Harter et al., 2002; Christian et al., 2011). Moreover, engaged employees are more likely to exhibit proactive behavior, voice constructive feedback, and take initiative to improve systems and practices within their organizations (Saks & Gruman, 2014). Despite these benefits, much of the literature has focused on the organizational drivers of engagement—such as leadership, organizational justice, and HR practices—while less attention has been paid to the role of employee-led initiatives as both a product and a catalyst of engagement.

The current study seeks to fill this gap by examining the nature and impact of employee-led initiatives as expressions of engagement and instruments of organizational effectiveness. In contrast to traditional hierarchical models of decision-making, employee-led initiatives are self-directed efforts undertaken by staff to improve organizational processes, products, or culture, often without formal authority or top-down mandates (Detert & Burris, 2007). These initiatives can range from grassroots innovations and quality improvements to social responsibility campaigns and cultural interventions. Importantly, such efforts reflect a deeper level of engagement, where employees act not merely as task executors but as change agents who contribute meaningfully to organizational development (Grant & Ashford, 2008).

Theoretical foundations for this study are grounded in both engagement theory and the concept of proactive work behavior. Engagement theory posits that individuals bring their full selves to their roles when provided with psychological safety, meaningfulness, and availability (Kahn, 1990). When these conditions are met, employees are more likely to immerse themselves in their tasks and contribute beyond formal job descriptions. This intrinsic investment is often manifested in discretionary behaviors, such as taking initiative, suggesting improvements, or helping colleagues—behaviors that align closely with proactive work behavior (Crant, 2000). These behaviors are particularly important in today's knowledge-based economy, where innovation and responsiveness are crucial for sustainability and competitive advantage (Parker & Collins, 2010).

Recent empirical evidence supports the notion that engaged employees are more likely to initiate and sustain organizational change. For example, research by Bakker and Xanthopoulou (2009) found that engaged workers exhibit higher levels of personal initiative and learning behavior. Similarly, studies have demonstrated that engagement enhances employees' psychological empowerment, leading them to take responsibility for their work environment and outcomes (Spreitzer, 1995; Tuckey et al., 2012). These findings underscore the potential of engagement to serve as a foundation for employee-driven innovation and transformation.

However, the effectiveness of employee-led initiatives is not guaranteed and may be contingent upon a variety of contextual factors, including organizational culture, leadership support, resource availability, and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). In organizations with rigid hierarchies or punitive environments, even the most engaged employees may feel constrained in their ability to act. Moreover, the success of bottom-up initiatives often depends on whether they are aligned with organizational goals and whether employees perceive their contributions as valued

and impactful (Detert & Treviño, 2010). Thus, understanding the facilitators and barriers to employee-initiated engagement is essential for realizing their full potential in enhancing organizational effectiveness.

The context of this study—Tehran-based organizations—adds another layer of relevance and complexity. In many Iranian workplaces, traditional authority structures and centralized decision-making processes remain dominant. However, the rise of a younger, more educated workforce is introducing new expectations regarding autonomy, participation, and innovation. This cultural shift makes the study of employee-led initiatives particularly timely and significant. It provides an opportunity to examine how engagement is being redefined within changing organizational and societal norms.

Qualitative research is particularly suited for exploring these dynamics, as it allows for deep insight into participants' lived experiences, motivations, and challenges. While quantitative studies can establish correlations between engagement and performance metrics, qualitative methods can uncover the processes and meanings underlying engagement behaviors (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Through semi-structured interviews with employees who have led or participated in self-initiated initiatives, this study aims to generate rich, context-sensitive understanding of how engagement is enacted on the ground.

This study contributes to the literature in several important ways. First, it reconceptualizes employee engagement as an active, generative process rather than a passive state or managerial outcome. Second, it highlights the agency of employees in driving organizational change, thus challenging conventional top-down paradigms. Third, it identifies key conditions—such as psychological safety, autonomy, and recognition—that enable or inhibit the success of employee-led efforts. Finally, by focusing on organizations in Tehran, the study provides cross-cultural insights into engagement practices in non-Western contexts, an area that remains underexplored in the literature.

In sum, as organizations seek to navigate complexity and drive innovation, the role of employee engagement must be expanded beyond traditional metrics and managerial strategies. Engagement must be understood not just as something organizations do to employees, but as something employees do for organizations—often in spontaneous, creative, and unstructured ways. By investigating employee-led initiatives as manifestations of engagement, this study seeks to advance our understanding of how organizations can cultivate environments that not only motivate but also mobilize their people toward meaningful, sustainable impact.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the role of employee engagement in promoting organizational effectiveness, particularly through employee-led initiatives. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations within their organizational contexts. The research employed a purposive sampling strategy to recruit individuals who had actively participated in or led engagement-driven initiatives within their organizations.

The study involved 20 participants from various public and private organizations in Tehran. These individuals represented a range of roles and departments to ensure a diverse and comprehensive understanding of employee-led engagement efforts. Participants were selected based on their direct involvement in initiatives aimed at improving organizational processes, culture, or performance through employee participation. The demographic

diversity in terms of age, gender, and organizational tenure provided rich and varied perspectives on the subject matter.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, allowing for both consistency across interviews and flexibility to probe deeper into emerging themes. The interview protocol was developed based on a review of the literature on employee engagement and organizational effectiveness and covered areas such as motivation for initiating change, support received, perceived outcomes, and challenges encountered. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted face-to-face in a quiet, neutral setting or via secure virtual platforms, depending on participant preference and availability.

The interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no new themes or significant information emerged from the data, indicating that the research questions had been sufficiently addressed. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to assist with coding, organization, and retrieval of themes across the data set.

The coding process was inductive, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data rather than being imposed a priori. To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, member checking was conducted with a subset of participants to validate the researchers' interpretations. Additionally, peer debriefing and audit trails were used throughout the coding process to ensure analytical rigor and transparency.

Findings and Results

Theme 1: Drivers of Employee Engagement

Intrinsic Motivation.

Participants frequently emphasized the role of internal drives, such as personal growth and a sense of purpose, in initiating and sustaining engagement. Several interviewees noted that "the desire to make a difference" or "feeling a sense of ownership in the organization's future" was a key motivator. One participant stated, "I didn't wait for approval because I believed in the idea and wanted to see it through."

Organizational Culture.

A culture characterized by openness, innovation, and shared values was reported as foundational for engagement. Participants from organizations with a transparent and collaborative ethos felt empowered to act. As one interviewee mentioned, "Here, everyone is encouraged to speak up. You don't feel like you're stepping on toes by suggesting improvements."

Recognition and Feedback.

Many participants highlighted that recognition from peers and supervisors significantly enhanced their engagement. Timely feedback created a sense of validation. One employee noted, "Just a simple thank-you from my manager when our team hit the target really boosted my motivation to do even more."

Leadership Style.

Supportive and empowering leadership emerged as a key driver. Leaders who trusted their employees and involved them in decision-making processes were viewed as facilitators of engagement. A participant remarked, “My supervisor gives us room to try new things, even if it means failing once or twice—that trust makes all the difference.”

Job Design.

Engagement was linked to how jobs were structured—especially when roles included task variety and autonomy. Participants appreciated when their positions allowed for innovation and responsibility. “When I can decide how to approach my work, I feel more committed to the outcomes,” shared one employee.

Career Development Opportunities.

Opportunities for learning and career advancement motivated employees to invest themselves more deeply in their organizations. This included access to skill-building programs and mentorship. One interviewee commented, “Being given a chance to upskill told me the company is invested in me, so I reciprocate that.”

Psychological Safety.

A psychologically safe environment where employees could take risks without fear of retribution was crucial. One participant observed, “I wasn’t afraid to bring up problems anymore after our new manager arrived—she made it clear mistakes were part of the process.”

Theme 2: Nature of Employee-Led Initiatives

Initiative Types.

Employees described a wide range of self-initiated projects, including process improvements, team-building exercises, sustainability campaigns, and CSR efforts. One participant said, “We started a waste reduction campaign in the office kitchen. It wasn’t mandated—it came from us.”

Initiative Triggers.

Initiatives were often sparked by perceived organizational inefficiencies, unmet needs, or external benchmarking. A participant shared, “We noticed our competitors had streamlined onboarding, and that pushed us to rework ours from the inside.”

Collaboration and Teamwork.

Successful initiatives were usually collaborative. Cross-departmental partnerships and brainstorming sessions were common. “I couldn’t have done it alone. Getting HR, finance, and operations to work together made our project possible,” noted one interviewee.

Autonomy and Ownership.

Participants stressed the importance of having autonomy in both the design and execution of their initiatives. Ownership led to higher commitment. One said, “When you’re trusted to run a project, it’s no longer ‘the company’s idea’—it becomes your mission.”

Resource Utilization.

Access to resources—whether in the form of management backing, internal networks, or time flexibility—greatly influenced the success of employee-led efforts. As one respondent put it, “My manager cleared my schedule for two weeks just so I could work on the proposal. That support made all the difference.”

Barriers to Implementation.

Despite enthusiasm, barriers such as bureaucratic hurdles, change resistance, and lack of funding were frequently mentioned. Some also feared potential blame for failure. “It took three months to get sign-off on a simple pilot. The red tape is exhausting,” lamented a participant.

Theme 3: Outcomes of Engagement

Organizational Learning.

Employee-led initiatives often catalyzed learning at both individual and organizational levels. Feedback loops and reflection became embedded practices. A participant noted, “After each initiative, we sit down and evaluate what worked and what didn’t—it’s how we grow.”

Performance Improvements.

Improvements in operational efficiency, customer satisfaction, and cost reduction were attributed to these initiatives. As one interviewee said, “After revamping our internal reporting tool, we cut reporting errors by 60% and saved two hours weekly per team.”

Employee Morale and Wellbeing.

Employees described increased job satisfaction, emotional investment, and decreased burnout following successful initiatives. “There’s nothing more uplifting than seeing your idea not only implemented but making a real impact,” shared a team lead.

Talent Retention.

Participants reported higher retention intentions due to feeling valued and empowered. One stated, “I’ve had job offers, but I’m staying because I feel like I’m building something here.”

Organizational Reputation.

Internally, engaged employees felt proud to be associated with their organization; externally, stakeholders responded positively to employee-driven improvements. “When clients heard our new program was an internal initiative, they were impressed by how proactive we are,” said a project manager.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the multidimensional and dynamic nature of employee engagement and its critical role in shaping organizational effectiveness through employee-led initiatives. Participants reported that their engagement was primarily fueled by intrinsic motivation, a supportive organizational culture, recognition, and empowering leadership. These findings resonate strongly with Kahn’s (1990) foundational model of engagement, which emphasized the psychological conditions—meaningfulness, safety, and availability—as essential to employee involvement in organizational roles.

The subtheme of **intrinsic motivation** confirms previous research suggesting that personal meaning and internal satisfaction are central to engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Employees who reported initiating projects out of personal conviction rather than obligation demonstrated higher persistence and creativity, consistent with the self-determination theory, which argues that intrinsic motivation fosters deeper engagement and innovation (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Moreover, autonomy and the alignment of personal values with organizational goals were recurring concepts, reinforcing the role of value congruence as a predictor of sustained engagement (May et al., 2004).

The **organizational culture** described by participants—characterized by openness, shared values, and encouragement of voice—aligns with literature that positions culture as a catalyst for engagement and proactive behavior (Denison, 1996; Schneider et al., 2013). In psychologically safe environments where speaking up is not

punished but welcomed, employees feel empowered to lead change (Edmondson, 1999). These findings support Detert and Burris (2007), who highlighted that open communication climates increase employee voice and the emergence of grassroots initiatives.

Recognition and feedback emerged as key engagement enablers. Numerous studies corroborate that both formal and informal recognition strengthen employees' sense of contribution and belonging (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Harter et al., 2002). Participants' experiences confirm that appreciation from both peers and supervisors can significantly reinforce engagement, especially when tied to visible outcomes of employee-led projects. Similarly, supportive **leadership styles**, particularly empowering and participative leadership, facilitated initiative-taking, echoing findings by Tuckey et al. (2012) and Breevaart et al. (2014), which demonstrate how leadership behavior influences job autonomy and engagement levels.

Job design and **career development opportunities** were also noted as powerful contextual features shaping employee engagement. Consistent with the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), the presence of task variety, autonomy, and opportunities for growth were frequently linked to proactive behaviors. Career development, through mentoring or upskilling, not only satisfied employees' growth needs but also sent a strong message that their potential contributions were valued (Saks & Gruman, 2014).

Another prominent driver was **psychological safety**, a concept well-documented in high-performing teams literature (Edmondson, 1999). Participants described their organizations as spaces where experimentation was not penalized, thus encouraging risk-taking and innovation. This aligns with Baer and Frese (2003), who found that error management cultures, rather than punishment-driven ones, foster innovation and proactive work behavior.

When considering the **nature of employee-led initiatives**, the study revealed that such efforts ranged from incremental process improvements to broader cultural and social responsibility campaigns. These initiatives often emerged from perceived **organizational gaps**, benchmarking comparisons, or personal experiences. This reflects the idea of "job crafting" (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), where employees redefine their roles to create more meaningful work.

Collaboration and teamwork were essential in the success of these efforts. Multidisciplinary cooperation and shared leadership were common among initiatives, supporting Parker and Collins's (2010) assertion that proactive work behavior is often collective rather than individual. Moreover, employees emphasized **autonomy and ownership**, reinforcing the findings of Grant and Ashford (2008) who argued that proactivity is fueled by feelings of personal responsibility and psychological ownership.

However, participants also described **barriers** such as bureaucracy, resource constraints, and resistance to change—challenges that are also noted in studies by Morrison (2011) and Detert & Treviño (2010). These obstacles highlight the importance of organizational structures that facilitate, rather than stifle, bottom-up innovation.

The **outcomes** of engagement reported by participants extended beyond improved performance. They noted enhancements in **organizational learning, morale, retention, and reputation**. These results confirm the broader impacts of engagement discussed in the literature, such as increased adaptability, knowledge sharing, and employer branding (Christian et al., 2011; Saks, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). The fact that these changes stemmed from grassroots initiatives suggests that engagement is both a driver and product of organizational effectiveness, creating a virtuous cycle of contribution and reinforcement.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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