

Reframing Employee Engagement in the Digital Era: A Multilevel Review of Its Impact on Organizational Effectiveness

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Abstract

Employee engagement plays a vital role in enhancing organizational effectiveness, yet existing research lacks a unified framework that integrates its multilevel effects, especially under the influence of digital transformation. Fragmented theories and evolving work environments make it difficult to understand how engagement operates across individual, team, and organizational levels. This paper reviews and integrates four key theoretical perspectives—Kahn's Psychological Conditions Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Conservation of Resources Theory—to construct a multilevel model of employee engagement. It further explores how digital technologies reshape engagement through platform tools, algorithmic control, and virtual collaboration. Findings reveal that employee engagement contributes to performance, innovation, and strategic alignment, but digital transformation also introduces risks such as surveillance and emotional fatigue. The review highlights key research gaps, including the need for integrated multilevel models and context-specific digital engagement studies. This study contributes a novel conceptual framework that connects engagement theory with digital-era challenges, offering insights for future research and practical applications in human resource and organizational development.

Keywords

Employee Engagement, Digital Transformation, Psychological Empowerment, Strategic Execution, Participation Systems

Introduction

In the face of global economic uncertainty, accelerating digital transformation, and rising demands for organizational agility, employee engagement has become a pivotal factor in shaping organizational success (Rani et al., 2025). Once regarded as a behavioral outcome or a human resource metric, engagement is now increasingly viewed as a systemic lever—capable of influencing innovation, decision quality, strategic coherence, and collaborative

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performance. As organizations transition from hierarchical structures to more decentralized, technology-enabled systems, the forms and consequences of employee engagement are undergoing profound shifts (Buonocore et al., 2024).

The concept of employee engagement, originally rooted in psychology, has evolved into a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive involvement, emotional connection, and institutional participation (Akingbola et al., 2023). The classic model proposed by Kahn emphasized psychological conditions—meaningfulness, safety, and availability—as drivers of full-person engagement. Later developments, including Self-Determination Theory (Wang et al., 2024), Social Exchange Theory, and COR theory, have further unpacked the motivational, relational, and resource-based antecedents of engagement. Meanwhile, research on organizational effectiveness has also matured, moving from output-based metrics to integrative models focusing on decision-making, innovation, collaboration, and strategic execution (Joshi et al., 2025).

Despite growing scholarly attention, three major challenges remain. First, the literature lacks an integrated multilevel perspective that connects engagement behaviors across individual, team, and organizational levels to specific dimensions of organizational effectiveness. Second, digital transformation is rapidly reshaping how employees engage—through remote collaboration, algorithmic decision tools, and participatory platforms—yet its effects are not well-theorized. Third, there is limited understanding of how cultural and institutional contexts influence engagement mechanisms, particularly in emerging economies like China.

Against this backdrop, this paper presents a comprehensive review that (1) maps the theoretical foundations of employee engagement; (2) synthesizes its effects on organizational effectiveness from a multilevel perspective; (3) analyzes the moderating role of digital transformation; and (4) identifies research gaps and outlines future directions. Rather than testing a specific hypothesis, the paper aims to reframe engagement as a strategic capability embedded within evolving digital ecosystems and to guide future empirical and theoretical work in this area.

Theoretical Foundations of Employee Engagement

Employee engagement has emerged as a complex and multidimensional concept at the intersection of psychology, organizational behavior, and human resource management (Pincus, J. D., 2023). The theoretical underpinnings of engagement have evolved over the past three decades, moving from foundational psychological constructs to more dynamic, relational, and resource-based perspectives. This section reviews four key theoretical foundations that collectively inform the conceptualization of employee engagement: Kahn's Psychological Conditions Theory, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Social Exchange Theory (SET), and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory.

Kahn's Psychological Conditions Theory

Kahn's seminal work laid the groundwork for understanding engagement as a state in which individuals bring their full selves—physically, cognitively, and emotionally—to their work roles. According to Kahn, three psychological conditions are necessary for engagement to occur: meaningfulness, safety, and availability (Albrecht et al., 2023).

- Psychological meaningfulness refers to the sense that one's work is worthwhile, valuable, and aligned with personal values. Tasks that offer challenge, autonomy, or social impact tend to enhance this condition.
- Psychological safety involves the perception that expressing oneself at work does not entail negative consequences. It is shaped by interpersonal trust, supportive leadership, and an inclusive work environment.
- Psychological availability denotes the degree to which individuals possess the physical, emotional, and cognitive resources to engage fully in their work. It is influenced by workload, stress, health, and external demands.

Kahn's theory situates engagement at the intersection of role performance and individual experience, emphasizing the dynamic interaction between person and context. It is particularly useful in understanding why individuals choose to engage or withdraw in specific organizational settings. Later empirical work (Baruah et al., 2023) has validated the central role of these conditions in predicting engagement levels, making Kahn's model a cornerstone for both conceptual and applied engagement research.

Self-Determination Theory and Intrinsic Motivation

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), proposed by Deci and Ryan, provides a motivational framework that explains the internal psychological needs driving human behavior. SDT posits that individuals are most motivated—and thus most engaged—when three basic psychological needs are satisfied: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Shank et al., 2024).

- Autonomy refers to the experience of volition and self-direction in work activities.
- Competence involves feeling effective in one's tasks and having opportunities to apply and develop skills.
- Relatedness reflects the desire for meaningful interpersonal connections at work.

When these needs are met, employees are more likely to exhibit intrinsic motivation, which leads to sustained cognitive and emotional engagement. SDT thus complements Kahn's framework by offering a deeper explanation of the motivational mechanisms underlying the psychological conditions for engagement. Importantly, SDT distinguishes between controlled motivation (driven by external rewards or pressure) and autonomous motivation (self-endorsed), with the latter being more conducive to high-quality engagement (Yengkopiong, J. P., 2025).

Social Exchange Theory and Relational Mechanisms

Social Exchange Theory (SET), rooted in the work of Blau, conceptualizes engagement as a reciprocal relationship between the employee and the organization. The core premise is that when employees perceive organizational support, fairness, and trust, they feel an obligation to reciprocate with higher levels of commitment, discretionary effort, and engagement (Liu et al., 2025). Key constructs in this perspective include:

- Perceived Organizational Support (POS): Employees' beliefs that the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Umbara et al., 2024).
- Leader-Member Exchange (LMX): The quality of dyadic relationships between employees and supervisors, which influences the flow of resources, information, and support (Martin et al., 2023).
- Psychological contract fulfillment: The perceived realization of implicit or explicit promises between employee and employer (Sunarta et al., 2025).

Under the SET lens, engagement is not merely an internal disposition but also a relational and contingent behavior shaped by social norms of exchange, trust, and reciprocity. Empirical studies (Liu et al., 2025) have shown that high-quality exchanges foster stronger emotional and institutional commitment, which translate into higher engagement.

In digitally mediated workplaces, the nature of these exchanges may evolve—becoming more transactional or platform-mediated—raising new questions about trust formation, perceived fairness, and the durability of engagement in virtual contexts.

Conservation of Resources Theory

Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory has been widely applied in recent studies to explain the relationship between employee engagement and resource dynamics. The theory posits that individuals strive to acquire, retain, and protect resources such as time, energy, knowledge, and social capital, which are crucial for coping with work demands and maintaining well-being. Recent studies further indicate that psychological safety, job crafting, and positive emotions can serve as key mediating resources, helping employees maintain high levels of engagement and work performance in high-demand environments (Kwon et al., 2024), under this theory, is seen as a function of resource availability and recovery:

- When individuals perceive a gain spiral (e.g., support, autonomy, recognition), they are more likely to invest their resources in work roles, leading to sustained engagement.
- Conversely, resource depletion (e.g., excessive workload, lack of control) can lead to disengagement, burnout, and withdrawal.

COR theory is particularly relevant in explaining the boundary conditions of engagement—why certain employees disengage despite high motivation or positive relational climates. It also informs organizational interventions: initiatives that replenish resources (e.g., flexible scheduling, psychological safety practices) can mitigate burnout and enhance engagement sustainability.

In the digital era, COR theory becomes increasingly salient as employees face new forms of resource strain—digital overload, algorithmic surveillance, and role ambiguity in virtual teams. These challenges necessitate resource-sensitive design of engagement systems and technology-mediated work environments.

Multilevel Impact of Employee Engagement on Organizational Effectiveness

Employee engagement does not operate in isolation at the individual level; rather, it cascades across team dynamics and organizational systems, ultimately shaping organizational effectiveness. This section synthesizes empirical and theoretical literature to explore how engagement behaviors—categorized into cognitive, emotional, and institutional forms—impact key outcomes across three levels: individual, team, and organizational. Each layer of influence is embedded in different mechanisms and manifests in specific performance indicators.



Figure 1. A Multilevel Conceptual Framework of Employee Engagement and Its Impact on Organizational Effectiveness

This figure illustrates the multilevel theoretical model showing how employee engagement, shaped by psychological and motivational theories, drives organizational effectiveness through various forms of participation. The framework also highlights the moderating role of digital transformation.

Individual Level: Knowledge Contribution and Task Performance

At the individual level, employee engagement serves as a motivational and cognitive driver of knowledge contribution and task performance. Employees who are cognitively engaged tend to demonstrate higher attentiveness, proactive problem-solving, and creative thinking, with research showing that engagement enhances both innovation and performance outcomes through mechanisms such as knowledge sharing and an innovation-supportive culture (Manzoor et al., 2025). Emotional engagement fosters intrinsic commitment to one's role and plays a significant role in reducing both absenteeism and presenteeism, as high emotional connection to work has been shown to buffer against non-attendance behaviors and sustain productivity (Seo et al., 2023). Institutional engagement—such as participation in formal feedback systems or process improvement committees—further enhances employees' sense of ownership and perceived influence over organizational processes.

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a robust framework for explaining how intrinsic motivation—rooted in autonomy, competence, and relatedness—drives employees to apply knowledge more effectively and engage in innovative behaviors. When employees feel empowered, skilled, and valued, they tend to exceed formal job expectations by actively contributing suggestions, proposing solutions, and initiating improvements (Cahyaningrum, 2023). Similarly, the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory highlights how psychological availability (e.g., energy, resilience) directly conditions an individual's ability to sustain engagement and productivity.

Empirical studies consistently link high engagement to improved performance outcomes. For instance, recent research found significant positive correlations between engagement and individual-level productivity, customer ratings, and reduced turnover (Olakh et al., 2025). In knowledge-based industries, engagement also correlates with the frequency and quality of knowledge-sharing behaviors, an increasingly critical metric in the digital era.

In digital contexts, cognitive engagement is particularly relevant. Technologies such as internal wikis, feedback apps, and low-code process tools amplify the opportunities for individual contribution, while simultaneously placing new demands on attention and cognitive bandwidth. Thus, managing engagement at this level requires attention to both motivational triggers and digital fatigue risks.

Team Level: Trust, Collaboration, and Innovation

At the team level, employee engagement strengthens collaboration quality, trust-building, and collective innovation. Teams with high emotional and institutional engagement tend to share knowledge, provide mutual support, and actively participate in decision-making processes. Such engagement enhances “team psychological safety”—a shared belief that members can

voice differing opinions, suggest unconventional ideas, and challenge norms without fear of negative consequences, which in turn fosters creativity, innovation, and sustained performance (Jin et al., 2024).

The Social Exchange Theory (SET) offers a relational explanation for this dynamic. In high-quality exchange environments—characterized by trust, fairness, and mutual respect—employees are more willing to contribute beyond role expectations. This includes mentoring others, offering constructive feedback, and participating in cross-functional collaborations. Emotional engagement acts as a lubricant for these exchanges, while institutional participation ensures that team collaboration is structured and inclusive.

Cognitive diversity, when paired with high engagement, becomes a key resource for innovation. Participatory behaviors such as open brainstorming, feedback loops, and team retrospectives significantly enhance the originality and applicability of solutions (Elamin et al., 2024). Empirical studies also show that teams with strong collective engagement are more agile, resilient in the face of ambiguity, and effective in implementing innovation initiatives (Panda et al., 2024).

In digitally enabled teams, engagement takes on new forms. Remote work environments demand intentional cultivation of emotional and cognitive participation. Platforms like Slack, MS Teams, or virtual whiteboards facilitate asynchronous collaboration, but may weaken informal bonding. Therefore, digital collaboration must be supported with deliberate mechanisms to sustain engagement—such as rotating team facilitators, virtual “rituals,” and recognition of participation in virtual spaces.

Organizational Level: Strategic Alignment and Resource Adaptation

At the organizational level, engagement influences strategic execution, goal alignment, and resource allocation efficiency. Engaged employees contribute to clearer understanding and internalization of strategic goals, thus reducing cognitive dissonance and goal ambiguity across departments. This vertical alignment enables more coherent action and reduces friction in execution.

Institutional participation is particularly relevant at this level. Recent studies indicate that when employees are actively engaged in co-creating strategies through structured mechanisms—such as suggestion systems, strategy workshops, or innovation task forces—they are more likely to adopt, champion, and effectively implement those strategies. This participatory approach not only enhances commitment but also enables management to capture valuable bottom-up insights for adapting strategic directions in real time (Mosleh et al., 2025). Engaged employees also act as sensors for environmental changes, providing early warning signals that help recalibrate organizational priorities.

From a COR perspective, engagement at this level reflects the organization’s ability to harness and renew its internal resources. High engagement translates into reduced wastage, more effective cross-functional communication, and faster knowledge dissemination.

Furthermore, institutional engagement fosters a culture of accountability and contribution, where performance feedback loops and process improvements are embedded into daily routines.

Studies show that organizations with high aggregate employee engagement outperform their peers in profitability, productivity, and innovation metrics (Tampubolon et al., 2025). Particularly in digitally transforming organizations, engagement determines the success of system adoption, workflow redesign, and cross-departmental integration. Digital tools can enhance strategic alignment—for example, OKR (Objectives and Key Results) platforms clarify individual contributions to organizational goals. However, without authentic engagement, such tools may produce only symbolic compliance.

In summary, employee engagement enables organizations to move from static, hierarchical models to adaptive, participatory ecosystems. At the macro level, the organization's ability to build and sustain engagement determines its dynamic capability—the capacity to sense, seize, and transform in response to external and internal shifts.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite the growing literature on employee engagement and its organizational outcomes, several important conceptual and empirical gaps remain. The multidimensional and multilevel nature of engagement—particularly in the context of digital transformation—demands more integrative and future-oriented inquiry. This section outlines key directions for advancing the field.

Toward an Integrated Multilevel Model

While many studies have explored engagement at the individual or team level, relatively few have articulated a comprehensive multilevel framework that connects engagement forms (cognitive, emotional, institutional) with performance outcomes at the individual, team, and organizational levels. Existing models often overlook the cross-level interactions (e.g., how team engagement norms affect individual behavior), or how emergent group dynamics shape strategic effectiveness. There is a need to construct dynamic, multilevel models that:

- Trace the flow of engagement across levels
- Account for reciprocal feedback loops (e.g., bottom-up vs. top-down engagement diffusion)
- Link micro-level behaviors with macro-level effectiveness metrics (e.g., agility, innovation, retention)

Future research should apply multilevel structural equation modeling (MSEM) or hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to capture these relationships empirically.

Digital Participation Behaviors and Technological Fit

A second gap lies in the insufficient understanding of how digital environments reshape engagement behaviors. While numerous studies have acknowledged the role of digital platforms in enabling employee participation, few have examined the qualitative nature of such participation—its drivers, depth, or sustainability. Key questions remain unaddressed: What types of digital tools enhance versus hinder authentic engagement? How do employees of different personality profiles or professional roles respond to specific platform affordances? What constitutes a good “fit” between digital technologies and engagement needs?

This suggests a need for a taxonomy of digital engagement behaviors that distinguishes between surface-level participation (e.g., likes, quick feedback) and deep involvement (e.g., innovation suggestion, peer mentoring). Moreover, theoretical lenses such as Technological-Person Fit (TPF) and Task-Technology Fit (TTF) should be mobilized to explain how digital environments interact with personal engagement styles. Empirical research employing experience sampling methods (ESM), clickstream data, or digital ethnography could provide real-time, contextualized insights into how engagement unfolds across platforms and situations.

Cultural and Institutional Contingencies

The engagement literature has been predominantly developed within Western, corporate, and private-sector contexts, often overlooking the powerful influence of cultural norms, institutional arrangements, and sectoral specificities. In high power-distance cultures, for example, institutional engagement may be constrained by hierarchical authority structures that discourage upward feedback or initiative-taking. In contrast, collectivist societies may emphasize team-based and relational forms of engagement over individual performance incentives. Similarly, organizations such as state-owned enterprises or public institutions may possess distinct engagement logics shaped by bureaucratic procedures or political accountability.

There is a pressing need for comparative research that explores how engagement is constructed, enacted, and interpreted across varying cultural and institutional terrains. Such work should pay attention not only to behavioral expressions of engagement but also to its symbolic and discursive dimensions. Researchers might consider employing configurational methods such as Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), institutional logics theory, or cross-national surveys to unpack these embedded contingencies and generate contextualized theory.

Research Agenda and Methodological Suggestions

To advance employee engagement research in light of the gaps identified above, scholars should embrace greater conceptual integration, methodological diversity, and contextual sensitivity. First, future studies should prioritize longitudinal designs to capture how engagement evolves over time, especially in response to organizational change, leadership turnover, or technological disruption. Static, cross-sectional snapshots are inadequate for theorizing engagement as a dynamic and adaptive process.

Second, researchers should consider incorporating multi-source data, including employee surveys, digital trace data (e.g., participation metrics on platforms), and qualitative interviews or diaries. Such triangulation can enhance both construct validity and contextual depth. Digital tools also enable innovative data collection strategies, such as real-time feedback loops, micro-surveys, or social network analysis to map engagement diffusion within teams.

Third, more attention should be paid to underrepresented sectors and groups, including blue-collar workers, platform-based gig workers, and employees in developing economies. These contexts present distinct challenges and affordances for engagement that remain largely invisible in the mainstream literature.

Lastly, future research should build bridges between theory and practice by translating empirical insights into design principles for organizational engagement systems. This could include guidelines for digital engagement architecture, leadership interventions, or participatory governance structures.

Table 1. Summary of Future Research Directions in Employee Engagement

Research Gap	Recommended Method	Target Contribution
Lack of multilevel integration	Multilevel SEM, cross-level mediation/moderation	Build dynamic conceptual frameworks
Digital behavior variation	Experience Sampling, Platform Analytics	Identify patterns of tech-enabled engagement
Cultural contingencies	Cross-national comparative design, QCA	Theorize contextualized engagement models
Algorithmic control	Mixed methods (survey + interviews)	Explore perceived fairness, autonomy impacts
Emotional engagement online	Digital ethnography, sentiment analysis	Capture lived experience in hybrid teams

Conclusion

This review has synthesized the evolving theoretical, empirical, and practical understandings of employee engagement, with a particular focus on its multilevel impact on organizational effectiveness and the disruptive role of digital transformation. Drawing upon foundational theories—including Kahn’s psychological conditions, Self-Determination Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Conservation of Resources Theory—we established a conceptual

platform for understanding engagement as a dynamic, context-sensitive, and structurally embedded phenomenon.

We proposed a multilevel engagement impact model that connects individual, team, and organizational-level outcomes, highlighting the vertical and horizontal interdependencies through which engagement generates value. This framework underscores the need to move beyond unidimensional or siloed approaches and calls for a systems-oriented view of engagement that considers reciprocal feedback loops, emergent behaviors, and cross-level alignment.

Moreover, we argued that digital transformation fundamentally reshapes the terrain of engagement by introducing new tools, control mechanisms, and emotional tensions. From platform-enabled collaboration to algorithmic surveillance, the digital workplace both enables and constrains engagement. Researchers and practitioners must therefore reconsider traditional engagement models in light of changing technological affordances and risks. In identifying research gaps, we emphasized the necessity of:

- Developing integrated multilevel models that capture engagement dynamics across time and hierarchy;
- Investigating technology-employee fit and the behavioral realities of digital participation;
- Accounting for cultural and institutional contingencies that shape engagement forms and meanings;
- Diversifying methodological approaches to include digital, longitudinal, and cross-context designs.

Ultimately, this review calls for a paradigm shift—from studying engagement as a static psychological state to theorizing it as a strategic, socio-technical, and multilevel process that is co-constructed by individuals, technologies, and institutions. As organizations navigate uncertainty, hybrid work, and global complexity, employee engagement remains a critical—yet evolving—lever for sustainable performance, innovation, and resilience.

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