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Employee engagement practices during COVID-19 lockdown

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In the present business situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, employee engagement has become one of the utmost prominent primacies for human resource managers and practitioners in organizations due to lockdown. The paper is to determine the engagement of employees by various companies during coronavirus pandemic. Organizations nowadays are constantly developing innovative and effective means to engage the employees during this tough time. This paper is a conceptual paper that is based on various research papers, articles, blogs, online newspapers, and reports of World Health Organization. During this pandemic situation, organizations are evolving many engagement activities like online family engagement practices, virtual learning and development, online team building activities, webinars with industry experts, online conduct weekly alignment sessions, team meet-ups over video conference for lunch, short online game sessions, virtual challenges and competitions, online courses, appreciation sessions, communication exercises, live sessions for new-skill training, online counseling sessions, recognition and acknowledgment session, webinars dealing with anxiety and stress, providing online guidance for exercise and meditation, social interactions in a virtual office, classrooms training modules digitally, e-learning modules, and many more creative learning sessions. Work-from-home regime engagement activities are very fruitful for employees as well as for organizations. Those organizations doing these kinds of engagement activities for their employees are learning new skills and developing themselves. Employees are feeling committed to the organization and stay motivated during this tough time of COVID-19 pandemic.

1 | INTRODUCTION

1.1 | Employee engagement

Today, the business setup is changing in relation to the global pandemic of COVID-19. Human resource managers are persistently evolving innovative, creative, and effective ways to engage the employees in a healthier way during this difficult time. Employee engagement is a workplace attitude that is ensuing all adherents of an organization to give of their excellence every day, committed toward their organization's goals and values. Organizations always remember that employees who are well engaged in an organization will lead to productivity in the place of work, and this generates a higher customer satisfaction and, absolutely, developments in sales and profit in the company.

The major challenge in theoretical literature is when we discuss the term "engagement" because there is a lack of a general definition of employee engagement. (Kahn, 1990) described in his study that engagement indicates physiological and physical existence of executing an organizational role. Psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability are the three constructs that help engagement to develop in an organization. Further study suggests that in engagement, individuals employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally in their role performances. The cognitive facet is associated with beliefs of leaders, employees, and working environments. The emotional facet means employees positive or negative attitude toward the organization and the leaders. Physical facet means

the physical force devoted in order to accomplish an organizational role. Kahn's model is tested by May, Gilson, and Harter (2004) and the result showed that meaningfulness, safety, and availability of psychological condition are positively associated with engagement. Schaufeli, Martinez, Pinto, Salanova, and Bakker (2002) develop the term job engagement and explained job engagement as a positive and a work-related state of mind, and it is considered by strength, dedication, and absorption. This study explained employee engagement as the individual's involvement, satisfaction, and enthusiasm for work (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). This study suggests that engagement is closest to job involvement, well-being, and emotions (May et al., 2004). Employee engagement comprises two important facets, that is, job engagement and organization engagement (Saks, 2006). An engaged employee always does care about their effort, work, and performance, and employees want to feel that their work, efforts, and performance could make a difference. Employee engagement is usually understood as an inner state of mind, that is, physically, emotionally, and mentally, that binds together the commitment, satisfaction, and work effort in an employee.

Engaged employees support the organization to attain its mission, execute its strategy, and generate significant business results. Employee engagement can be enhanced by different HR practices comprising job design, recruitment, selection, compensation, training, and performance management (Vance, 2006). Organizations that support employee engagement, intelligently manage talent, and communicate with employees honestly, accurately, and at the right time will ride the current market turbulence and be successful in the future (Robison, 2009). Organizations and employees are both dependent on each other to fulfill their goals and objectives. Employee engagement should not be a one-time implementation, but it should be integrated into the culture of the company. Career development prospects, encouragement, communication, recognition, the flexibility of employee's hours, fair pay structure, transparent and open work environment, and participation in decision-making are the factors contributing to employee engagement at the workplace (Patro, 2013). To improve the purpose of effective employee engagement, six C's parameters are essential, that is, clarity, confidence, convey, connect, credibility, and career. An engaged employee is attentive about their work and about the performance of the company, and they always desire to feel that their determinations and hard work could make a difference. Engaged employees lead to productivity in the workplace, and this generates higher customer satisfaction and positive rises in sales and also profit in the organizations. Confidence and communication among both employees and organizations are also essential. This unification between the enterprise and the employee is a necessity as both are able to best in performance (Sarangi & Nayak, 2016). Employee engagement is built on belief, reliability, commitment, and communication between an organization and its adherents. Organizations can increase engagement by enhancing employee decision-making, commitment, and transparency from senior leadership. Employee engagement is the level of enthusiasm and commitment an employee feels toward his/her job (Chandani, Mehta, Mall, & Khokhar, 2016). Employee engagement is an approach that proliferates the chances of business achievement, subsidizing to organizational and individual performance, productivity, and well-being of employees.

1.2 | COVID-19 lockdown

The severe respiratory disease recently appeared in Wuhan (Hubei province), China. Epidemiological examinations have suggested that the epidemic was related to a seafood market in Wuhan, China (Fan et al., 2020). COVID-19 is a pandemic that has already reached 5,934,936 confirmed cases globally, with at least 367,166 deaths as reported by the World Health Organization (WHO) as of May 31, 2020. In the European region, the total number of confirmed cases is 2,142,547 and 180,085 deaths reported. In regions of the Americas, confirmed cases are 2,743,793 and 157,702 deaths confirmed. In Eastern Mediterranean region, total number of confirmed cases is 505,001 and 12,353 deaths reported. In the Western Pacific region, it is 181,665 confirmed cases and 7,028 deaths reported. In South-East Asia region, confirmed cases are 260,579, and deaths are reported as 7,431. African region reported 100,610 confirmed cases and 2,554 deaths. World Health Organization risk assessment report states that COVID-19 is very high risk at the global level (World Health Organization, 2020a). Those people who are living with NCDs (non-communicable diseases) are more susceptible to becoming seriously ill or dying from COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2020b).

World Health Organization also provides some recommendations and advice for the public. According to WHO, maximum persons infected with the COVID-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and convalesce without requiring any special treatment. Those people who are old and individuals who have medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, and chronic respiratory disease are more likely to develop severe illness. According to WHO guidelines, individuals should protect themselves and others from COVID-19 infection by washing their hands or using an alcohol-based rub frequently. According to the report of WHO (World Health Organization, 2020c), the COVID-19 virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes. According to the research, there is no effective vaccine or approved drug treatment against COVID-19 developed. In this situation, most of the countries go for lockdown, so that spread of COVID-19 will break soon. Several countries have also closed borders to avoid international travelers from spreading the virus (Ghosh, Brindisi, Shahabi, Mackenzie, & Andrew, 2020). According to Business Insider (Kaplan, Frias, & Mefall-Johnsen, 2020), most of the countries are executing measures to slow the spread of the COVID-19, from national quarantines to school closures.

Most of the countries are applying some form of restriction to the public like lockdown, social distancing, and wearing a face mask when you step out of your home. As per the need of the hour, most of the organizations started working online and initiated a work-from-home (WFH) regime. Due to lockdown, most of the organizations provide the facility to their employees to work from home. But work from home is difficult for employees as they do not feel the organizational

climate at home, as lack of concentration due to frequent invasion of family members; work–life conflict arise due to this. Even they do not have proper equipment and tools (computer, mouse, printers, scanners, headphones, webcam, internet connection, and dedicated workspace—a quiet place to work). Most of the employees feel stressed due to rising cases of COVID-19 in the world. They are not sure about their job security and also about their salary. Due to these problems, employees could not concentrate/focus on their work, so there is a need for employee engagement. The prime responsibility of the organization is to take care of their employees' well-being and engage them properly. Those employees who are engaged well are giving 100% result. Leaders should provide some motivational talk lectures, boost their morale, and provide security and open environment so employees can raise their voice if they are having some issues. Leaders can use multimedia for communication. There should be transparent policy, so employees do not feel stress about their job and engage in their job well mannered.

1.3 | Review of literature

Robison (2009) suggested on how to manage in turbulent times and keep employees focused and engaged in times of change. Some tips are given by the author like tell employees what organization expects from them, make sure employees have the right materials and equipment, give employees the opportunity to do what they do best, do not forget to give recognition, let your employees know you care about them, and always keep encouraging their development. Employee engagement can be used as a mediator to develop the attitudes, intention, and behavior of employees to an improved work performance (Andrew & Sofian, 2012; Saks, 2006). Andrew and Saudah (2012) concluded that employee engagement can be utilized as a mediator to enhance the behavior, intention, and attitudes of employees toward a better work performance. Basquille (2013) recommended that managers should be supported by the executive to provide development assistance, career support, and recognition. These factors enhance employee engagement effectively. Patro (2013) revealed that companies have to provide their employees the freedom to make their work interesting and forming an environment for having an engaged work life. Further study suggests that employee engagement should be a continuous process of learning, improvement, and action. Therefore, organizations today should actively look forward to fulfilling employee's expectations and generate an impact on the performance of the employee, which directly marks the organization's performance.

Bedarkar and Pandita (2014) projected an integrated model of employee engagement. The study result has shown that leadership, communication, and work–life balance are the key drivers of employee engagement. Groups, presence perceived, ease of use, and reputation of Facebook functions are the four factors that significantly contribute towards employee engagement (Abd Latib, Bolong, & Ghazali, 2014). Jalal (2016) study outcomes directed that employee engagement has a significant positive effect on

organizational commitment and also found employee engagement as an important determinant of organizational commitment. The finding of the study suggests that the more employees are engaged in the workplace, high will be their commitment toward the organization or institution. Lee et al. (2016) study outcomes suggest that it is a challenge for HR professionals to keep present employees engaged with their jobs. Results revealed that workers are moderately engaged, meaning some may be detached from their current roles or fearful of losing their jobs. Job satisfaction is a significant driver of work engagement. Garg, Dar, and Mishra (2017) result revealed that there is a positive relationship between job satisfaction and work engagement. Further analysis showed that employee job satisfaction leads to employee engagement. Employee engagement link to financial performance comprising revenue growth, profit margins, shareholder return, and operating income is almost three times greater than organizations with disengaged personnel. It also elaborates that higher employee engagement level results in lower absenteeism and job stress and better well-being and health. Further research shows that employee engagement has an effect on a company's bottom line and is sturdily linked to business performance (Saks, 2017). Engagement of employees results in business profits like cost and time savings if an organization provides a strong corporate culture in which personnel feel important and supported by the organization. Management trusts in employees, slightly flatter hierarchies, and leaders acting as role models increase the level of employee engagement (Sievert & Scholz, 2017). Internal communication satisfaction and employee engagement both are intercorrelated concept and the antecedent. Further study suggests asignificant role of internal communication satisfaction in high employee engagement (Verčič & Vokić, 2017). Engaged employees have emotional association with their work as well as their organization. Engaged employees always trust in the leaders of the organization. Hence, engaged employees are more dedicated and committed toward their work as well as organization.

Engaged personnel are always optimistic, keep good interpersonal rapport with each other, and also show high level of performance in the organization (Jena, Pradhan, & Panigrahy, 2018). Tiwari and Lenka (2019) revealed that functional, economic, and psychological benefits upsurge employees' level of engagement. Results indicate that internal corporate communication, perceived communication satisfaction, knowledge sharing, continuous learning, and intrapreneurship were positively associated with employee engagement. This paper found that if organizations invested in their human resources and building complete human resource management (HRM) system in their organization, it produces an engaged personnel, and, in return, organizations improve their performance (Tensay & Singh, 2020). Employees those dispositional happiness experience at higher level always practice higher levels of employee engagement (Barreiro & Treglown, 2020). Employee engagement is critical for an organization to retain their valued employees. It is very essential for an organization to do effective utilization of human resources in an organization. Without employee engagement, an organization cannot survive for a lengthy period.

1.4 | Rationale of the study

The maximum of the nations is in lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this difficult situation, work-from-home regime is implemented by most of the organizations. But work-from-home regime is challenging for employees as well as for organizations during this difficult situation. Due to this problem, companies need to engage their employees in refined ways with the help of various employee engagement practices. This paper is to determine the various creative and innovative ways of employee engagement, so that employees can easily do work from home and stay committed, satisfied, and motivated during this pandemic situation.

1.5 | Objective of the study

To determine the employee engagement practices during COVID-19 lockdown.

1.6 | Research methodology

This paper is a conceptual paper based on secondary data. Conceptual articles get organized manifold varying streams of content to provide some new understanding (Chermack & Passmore, 2005). The data collected derived from secondary research carried out by various researchers and groups. In the course of investigation, most data present in research papers, articles, blogs, and online newspapers provided insights into the concepts and practices of employee engagement related to COVID-19 and tough times. COVID-19 data are collected from the reports of World Health Organization. A methodical and wide literature review was conducted related to employee engagement literatures. The integrative literature review is a unique form of research that creates new understanding and knowledge about the topic reviewed (Torraco, 2005). Literature reviews purpose is to précis the present form of literature linked to certain phenomenon (Chermack & Passmore, 2005). Employee engagement is very essential for all the organizations during this COVID-19 pandemic situation. In a lockdown, employee engagement practices keep them motivated, committed, satisfied, and contented in this tough time.

1.7 | Employee engagement is important during tough times

According to the American Management Association, engagement levels can be improved, even throughout the tough periods, if companies take care and make the right decisions at the right time. According to the study, higher engagement levels are linked to improved productivity and a healthier bottom line. In good times or bad, worker engagement should be a top priority of organizations (Vickers, 2019). According to *The Guardian*, employee engagement helps to increase strong positive attitudes among people toward their work and their organization in difficult times. Organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship are the factors that play a major role to make up employee engagement. According to the newspaper, when employee engagement is high, organizations do better. To enhance employee engagement in difficult times, organizations should make more efforts toward the employees so that employees feel that their organization is genuinely interested in them (Robertson, 2012). According to Groove Management Blog (Formato, 2014), leadership needs to be more visible in tough times than at any other time. If organizations want their employees be engaged, then leaders should take responsibility and motivate them to achieve your future promise. Effective communication plan influences the employees to engage in their work and accomplish their objectives in difficult times. According to the blog, employee engagement is so critical in difficult times and only leadership can do wonders through employee engagement via an effective communication plan. Personnel wants to get their message through multiple channels, and the best practice is to release the information via multimedia. Deal, Stawiski, and Gentry (2010) revealed that during the tough time, additional benefit packages and fair and comparable pay structures should be given to their employees to keep them engaged and motivated. Organizations also provide employees all the tools and resources so that they can accomplish their job effectively. To keep engagement high among employees, managers should provide effective feedback and direction to their subordinates from time to time. Masson (2009) suggested that leaders should effectively communicate to employees toward their career growth, so that employees trust that development processes are fair and equitable. Supervisors should be transparent and to help employees identify their developmental needs and also enhance their skills during tough times. DVV media HR group limited (2018) article states some actionable tips for employee engagement during tough times. The most important is strengthening employee engagement. Others tips are: leaders have the responsibility for being role models during tough times, integrate employee feedback into your company culture, communicate clearly and consistently, support your managers, and keep motivation high with rewards and recognition.

Jones and Kober (2019) explained some strategies related to how to achieve superior employee engagement in difficult times and higher business results. These strategies are:

1. Stay centered on your core values—it encourages employee engagement in difficult times.
2. Explicitly support your employee—so they remain motivated during tough times.
3. Solicit employee feedback—ask employees to freely share information, both frustrations and ideas for developments in a productive way.
4. Communicate upfront with employees—leaders should communicate openly and honestly, so employees perform more effectively.
5. Commit to your employee's employment—so employees should be committed to your organization.

Matkin (2016) mentioned that vision should be clear and concise and should be properly communicated to the employees, so they can get direction during tough times. In an organization, there should be open-door policies; this kind of platform gives employees a voice. Organizations should be fully transparent with their employees; this kind of transparency builds trust among the employees toward the organization during difficult times. Article published in *Nature* (Fan et al., 2020) stated five tips to help support employees working from home. These are:

1. Create a healthy workspace—encourage workers to create a healthy workspace at home. Encourage employees to work ergonomically from home as best they can and review their work-at-home setup.
2. Maintain a routine—encourage employees to stick to a routine and to maintain boundaries between their "work" time and "home" time.
3. Do not forget to be social—communication with colleagues is a great stress reliever. An organization should set up a session for fun activities that would normally take place in the office.
4. Encourage well-being practices—organizations should care about their employee's well-being; it can help reduce absenteeism, boost engagement, and performance.
5. Invest in technology—communication tools such as instant messaging and video and voice calling platforms can help to keep teams connected. It is important to invest in a recognition platform that allows employees to send and receive recognition.

1.8 | Employee engagement practices during the COVID-19 lockdown

As organizations develop various engagement practices to implement full-time remote work policies due to COVID-19, here are some practices to keep your employees engaged in their jobs work-from-home regime.

According to Sarkar (2020), in employee engagement, new dimension included by the organizations is family engagement, to keep employees' kids engaged for a few hours while their parents work from home during COVID-19 lockdown. Organizations that are doing these practices are Genpact, Accenture, Deloitte, AMD, and Hinduja Global Solutions. Talukar (2020) article suggested five tips for practicing employee engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. These are: build a much stronger communication regime with your remote teams, do not forget to cheer them up with instant appreciation, loosen up and ensure flexibility, create a virtual community with all your employees, and host online team building activities. Goswami (2020) article is about engaging downtime employees during the lockdown period. Manufacturing companies, like CEAT, SAR, and Aditya Birla are elevating the downtime of employees. Through learning and development, companies keep the workforce engaged during the lockdown. Some companies provide TED Talks, webinars with industry experts, books, e-learning, and self-developed contents to

their employees. Some companies also motivate their employees during the pandemic time and try to assuage their fears to ensure they stay positive. CEAT hired fitness trainers to keep the downtime employees and their families motivated through podcasts and live calls. Dutta (2020) article explains about the digital learning programs to upgrade the skills of employees during the lockdown. By developing learning opportunities, providing various resources for incessant professional growth, and keeping employees engaged during this tough period, organizations can empower digital personnel ready for the future. Singh (2020a) mentioned that organizations must focus on employee engagement during COVID-19 outbreak. According to the article, when employees have significant work and organizations continuously provide growth opportunities to them, then they feel motivated and committed toward their organization. Engaging remote employees generate a culture of openness in which employees can get new ideas. Engagement programs raise employees' inquisitiveness and help in bringing out the inventive and creative side of the workforce. So, it becomes necessary for companies to take effective employee engagement measures during tough times.

Goyal, Trivedi, Nandwani, Changulani, and Lokhandwala (2020) suggested and explained various ways to increase employee engagement during the lockdown. These are: conduct weekly alignment session, team meet-ups, entire team gathers over video conference for lunch, short online game session, virtual challenges and competitions, 5 min of informal talk, shared content such as TED Talks, books, online courses, brainstorming focus, aha, apology and appreciation session, communication exercise, ditch a task, map of alignment, and emphasize results over timelines. Singh (2020b) discussed the various issues of employees they are facing during this tough time. This article suggested that businesses must understand the stress levels of personnel during this difficult time; there should be an open environment and proper communication channels where personnel can come forward to discuss the issues they are dealing with. Most of the businesses are organizing contests, challenges, and hackathons for their workforces. Companies are regularly examining the well-being of employees and offering solutions that support a healthy work–life balance. During this time, companies focus on the learning and development of their employees. Most of the organizations are introducing webinars and live sessions for new-skill training to online counseling sessions helping employees to stay safe and healthy at home. Anand (2020) revealed that lockdown has caused huge disruption in the world as billions of people are self-isolating in homes. This article suggested four tips for better employee engagement during the lockdown. Build solid communication channels like messaging platforms, video conferencing, and email. Appreciation, recognition, and acknowledgment of employees are necessary during this tough time. Employees will need to take time off to make meals, play with their kids, and perform household chores, so keep things flexible. Businesses should plan meetings in the virtual world with their employees.

Nair (2020) explored that many employee engagement programs are run by Capgemini during this difficult time. Capgemini introduces structured employee engagement programs like constant communication with employees through video messages from the company's

leadership, creating and maintaining social networks in virtual communities, creating a sense of belonging, arranged counseling service for employees, conducting webinars dealing with anxiety and stress, sharing best practices of maintaining health and hygiene and also provide guidance for exercise and Meditation. Bhardwaj (2020) discussed the steps taken by Cars24 to ensure maximum employee engagement and raise a sense of belongingness with the company. Various activities are conducted by the Cars24 including challenges like sharing a picture with your pet, a selfie with the family, fun awards, and "Know Your Leaders" where the employees were quizzed about their general knowledge of the leaders, mental fitness and meditations online classes, a hidden talent show, virtual karaoke challenge, a virtual campfire challenge, fostering team spirit, video calls, and various online group challenges to boost employee morale and engagement.

Brunswick group (Metts, 2020) mentioned that companies need to develop employee engagement and communication plans to keep morale high and help their people stay connected with each other. Communications to employees should be regular and frequent, allow weekly all-employee video conferences or conference calls, remind colleagues to take extra precautions on potential data breaches and other cyber-security issues, and encourage employees to share work–from-home experience and tips—what do they find challenging and how to stay focused and productive. Fallon (2020) elaborates the team engagement during coronavirus pandemic. Article explains some ways to keep employees engaged like keep people updated through transparent communication, prepare powerful presentations, and get everyone on video. Leaders lead by example with a good remote work setup, avoid micromanaging, maintain friendly social interactions in the virtual office, and get employee feedback on how they are feeling. Hasan (2020) explained the various ways companies are serving employees in response to COVID-19. Amway is on-going with the increments, promotions, and recognition as per previous plans. The company has planned virtual engagement programs like external webinars to learn new skills and also announced employee's medical-claim plans that will cover treatment costs for COVID-19. Hindustan Coca Cola Beverages has launched a virtual employee engagement program that seeks to involve employee's colleagues and their family members online for their physical and mental wellness. McDonald's India has adopted many of its classrooms training modules digitally and introduced e-learning modules, quizzes, master classes by managers, and many more creative learning sessions, which employees can access on their phone while in quarantine at home. ITC Hotels has rolled a number of e-learning courses targeted at specific roles and levels through primary channels of E-learning to provide an opportunity for self-learning which can be accentuated through any-time app-based hosting. Clix Capital is also hosting live e-sessions on its learning platform.

Various companies are doing employee engagement practices in a very innovative and creative manner to keep their employees satisfied and committed toward the organization. It is very essential to do employee engagement practices during this difficult time of the pandemic.

2 | CONCLUSION

Engaging employees has become very essential in today's pandemic situation due to COVID-19. Thinking of seizing the top position devoid of the support of your employees would surely be a dream in this current situation of lockdown. Organizations know very well that engaged employees are the key to success in this tough time. That is why businesses must look forward to keeping their employees satisfied and motivated through the engagement of employees during pandemic circumstances. Under the current situation, establishing employee engagement measures with the help of technology is essential for the growth of the organizations. Many companies nowadays are developing numerous employee engagement practices like virtual team meet-ups, virtual learning and development, conducting weekly alignment online session, webinars with industry experts, and also webinars for anxiety and stress, online team building activities, online family engagement practices, brainstorming, apology, and appreciation online session, shared content such as TED Talks, online books, online courses, live sessions for new-skill training, online communication exercise, online sharing best practices of maintaining health and hygiene, digital classrooms training modules, e-learning modules, online guidance for exercise and meditation, online recognition and acknowledgment of employees, online employee feedback, short online game session, virtual challenges and competitions, 5 minutes of informal talk, entire team gathers over video conference for lunch, online counseling sessions, and social interactions in the virtual office. These kinds of engagement practices boost the morale of the employees and employees feel motivated and committed towards the organization in this pandemic situation due to coronavirus.

2.1 | Further implications

All the organizations should adopt innovative and creative employee engagement practices during this tough time of pandemic COVID-19 to keep employees motivated, stimulated, committed, satisfied, and blissful in this tough time. Work-from-home regime is nowadays very essential; it would be successful only with the help of online practices. Organizations should be implementing an online practice approach to stay in the competition during this difficult time. Virtual relations should be crucial for companies to enhance the engagement of employees. Engaged employees always achieve objectives very smoothly. Management also look into how to engage employees in order to be able to encourage a positive organization culture. Organizations also need to be able to recognize the various facets that motivate and derive employee engagement in organizations.

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