

Progressive Importance of the Drivers of Employee Engagement

Rabiya T. S. Sange*

Allana Institute of Management Studies, Mumbai, India; rabiya.jidda@gmail.com

Abstract

Some of the best organizations have realized that it is essential to give customers a complete experience for them to become loyal customers in the future. Organizations also understand that consumer buying behaviour is influenced by pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase experiences. All these experiences are mediated by employee – customer interactions. This makes it important for organizations to tune in their employee behaviour to customer needs. Every job has different requirements from the job incumbent. This also means that different set of professionals would want different things from the company. Sales/marketing is a peculiar yet an important function for the organization since their individual performances put together directly affect the company's profits. Thus, making it all the more important for organizations and managers to understand the impact that different drivers have on engaging their sales/marketing employees. Secondary data sources were used to arrive at a review of the literature. The present study surveyed 500 sales/marketing professionals using the questionnaire developed by the researcher to measure employee engagement. Statistical analysis using SPSS 15 was conducted. Multiple regression analysis revealed the progressive importance of the drivers of employee engagement to sales professionals. A model is proposed which can be used by managers to streamline their initiatives towards creating a more engaged sales force.

Keywords: Company Perception, Development Opportunities, Employee Engagement, Job Assignment, Sales, Work Life Balance

1. Introduction

The cut throat competition and the struggle faced by organizations in building a competitive advantage becomes even more challenging when it is realized by executives that they need to bring about the changes required in the workforce to improve performance at the same time ensure that people are sufficiently engaged.

An organization's success in a changing economy is tied in large measure to the creative and innovative energy from the most significant asset: employees. Engaged employees are passionately involved with what is happening at the company. This influences the way they deal with the customers by improving their service levels, which in turn, helps in increasing customer satisfaction. Thus, organizations who have been able to successfully implement engagement programs build a workplace community

which is far more effective than having employees walk in and out of the organization every single day. Sales personnel are the direct representatives of the company who help the customer in building either a positive or a negative image about the company through their interactions. Thus, making sales as one of the most significant and challenging department of an organization. The role involves lots of challenges to the incumbent – dealing with rejection or the anticipation of rejection; interacting with different types of customers; meeting sales targets and other personal and professional goals¹². Amongst these challenges, it would do well for organizations to understand employee engagement and have a focused approach towards engaging sales / marketing professionals.

2. Literature Review

*Author for correspondence

2.1 Employee Engagement

As a concept it can be understood as an attitude (where employees feel proud and loyal towards the organization), behaviour (wherein they might be an advocate of the company and go the extra mile to accomplish their tasks) and outcomes (namely, rate of accidents, extent of conflicts, productivity rates, attrition levels and absenteeism rate). For a very long time and even today many confuse it with overlapping yet distinct concepts like employee commitment, job satisfaction, job involvement and organizational citizenship behaviour. The term goes much beyond any of these concepts. It is an organizational approach which ensures employees are enthusiastically contributing towards organizational success as well as moving in the direction of their personal goals.

The term has received increasing attention mainly due to the fact that:

a) Statistically significant relationships have been shown between employee engagement and employee outcomes such as productivity/performance, profits, retention and customer satisfaction (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Coffman & Gonzalez-Molina, 2002). This had been absent for related and overlapping constructs¹⁷. (Fisher & Locke, 1992).

b) The factors that are considered to be important for employee engagement include measures which are within the control of the immediate boss or manager¹⁷. Engagement is a two way understanding and fulfilment of promises between the employer and its workforce.

2.2 Company Perception and Employee Engagement

De Mello, Souza, Wildermuth & Pauken⁷ suggest that the interest that top management and senior executives take in the wellbeing of their employees, employee's perceptions of organizational leadership and its managerial processes has a visible impact on employee engagement.

A survey by Wyatt W³⁰ found that employees gave lower scores to the ability of senior management in building employee confidence for long term business success, taking decisions when required without any delay, bringing in changes which will improve business growth and market competitiveness at the same time control costs. Towers Perrin²⁸ found similar results in their survey.

A strong relationship was found between employee perceptions of leadership and their engagement at

DDG Double Digit Growth) companies¹³. Leaders at DDG companies are themselves highly engaged and are in a better position to clarify the link between employee's role in the organization and the business results achieved. This ensures that employees take pride in the company and develop a growing mind set. (Figure 1).

Further, Men¹⁸ in an online survey of 157 employees from a Fortune 500 company found that CEO credibility is positively associated with perceived organizational reputation and employee engagement.

In addition to providing effective leadership, highly effective companies recognize the value of investing in an employer brand. 55% of organizations report having a clear brand as compared with 18 per cent of less effective companies⁸. In an organization with a highly engaged workforce the employer brand is lived at all levels which in turn helps organizations reap multi-fold benefits⁹.

2.3 Communication & Employee Engagement

Large complex organizations are faced with the perennial challenge of communicating effectively with their employees. Communication makes a positive difference in employee engagement. High-engagement employees receive communication from their supervisors and senior management far more frequently than low-engagement employees^{29,30}. Seijts²⁶ noted that providing information about performance frequently proves beneficial in engaging employees. It has also been found that leaders who are able to build an engaged workforce can identify and communicate each employee's contribution towards organizational goals. This when combined with regular feedback and recognition for the good work creates an overall positive effect^{26,29}. In a study by Watson Wyatt it was found that from 1998 to 2002 companies which improved their communication effectiveness also found a 29.5% increase in their market value²².

CIPD⁵ found that highly engaged employees are the ones who have decision making power on issues that affect their work and organizations. They are also the ones who are informed about workplace issues and also consulted for probable solutions. Engagement is affected by the extent of employee involvement as well as communication opportunities. Thus, it can be concluded that communication is an important factor to be considered to develop and engaged workforce which in turn will create engaged customers and greater profits²².

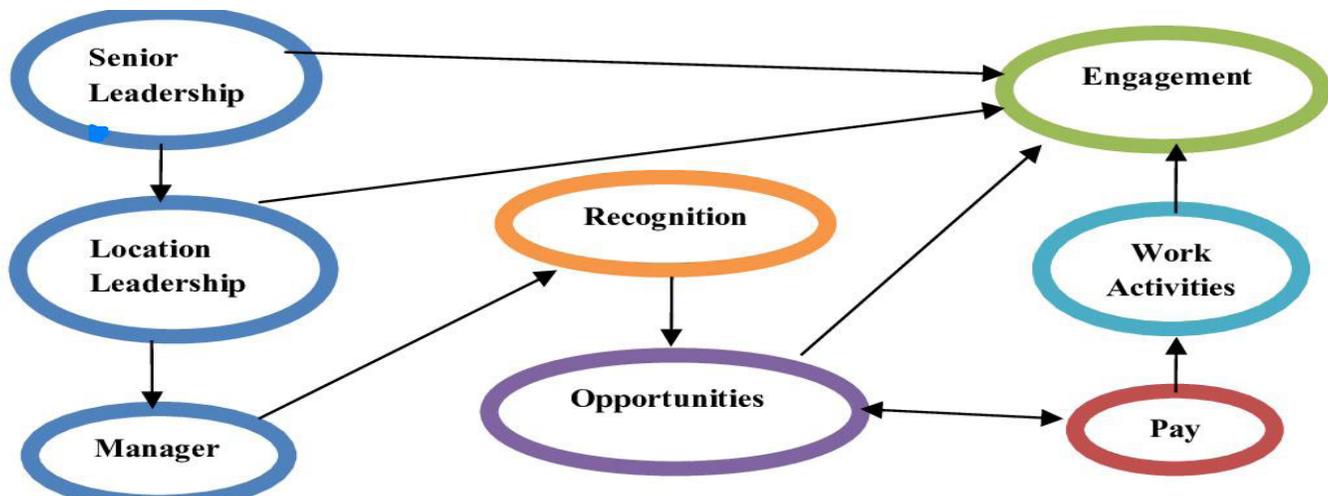


Figure 1. Interrelationships among Engagement Drivers for DDG companies (Source: Hewitt Associates, 2004).

2.4 Compensation/Benefits and Employee Engagement

To have an advantage in attracting and retaining talented employees, organizations will have to understand what their employee's value and invest in those areas accordingly²¹. Compensation / Benefits have been an area of concern with HR managers frequently reporting it as being one of the major factors influencing turnover intentions of employees.

It has been increasingly found that for attracting candidates compensation and reward package becomes important but its importance reduces while retaining them²⁸. Another interesting aspect is that the same if considered inadequate becomes an important reason for employees to quit their jobs. In contrast, when it is seen to be equitable and competitive enough other factors such as advancement, talented co-workers and overall work environment gain more importance in deciding whether employees would want to stay with an organization.

2.5 Development Opportunities & Employee Engagement

In the past few years, employee training, career development and growth opportunities provided by the organization have become one of the prominent factors affecting employee engagement. Employees are keen to know whether their organization provides them with the necessary opportunities for growth and development to

meet their personal aspirations. Results showed that 35 per cent of the employees were happy with the way their organization informed them about career opportunities, whereas, with respect to promoting high performers in the company 31 per cent of the employees were positive²⁸. Employees want their organizations to offer them continuous learning opportunities to keep learning and growing¹⁹. However, this survey was limited to Canadian employees only. It was also found that managers who are actively involved in their employees career planning seem to have more engaged employees (more than 80% of the employees were engaged)²¹. These employees have managers who encourage their participation in relevant training programs. This was also the case at Double Digit Growth companies where managers to a greater degree play a facilitative role which helps employees fulfil their career goals¹³. This also helps in retaining majority of the employees²¹. A research by Berbarly¹ found that when chief learning officers use varied approaches to development, it tends to improve employee engagement levels.

2.6 Work Conditions and Employee Engagement

Work conditions also prove to be of critical importance when it comes to creating engaged or disengaged employees. Incidents such as experiencing harassment or having met with an accident at the workplace seem to have a negative impact on engagement. This is complicated if the manager is also involved in it (IES, 2003)²⁵.

In 2003, a survey conducted by Towers Perrin revealed that 43% of employees surveyed rated the overall quality of supervision by their manager favourably. A survey by Blessing White² showed that managers might not be getting involved in activities that correlate highly with employee engagement. This was concluded as important actions which lead to engagement did not get positive ratings by employees.

Employees who work in teams where there is a high degree of trust and members cooperate and care for each other tend to show higher levels of engagement and better performance. Hence it can be said that trust, cooperation and care seem to have an important effect on employee engagement²⁶.

Power, information, knowledge and rewards are the four interlocking principles as suggested by Konrad¹⁵ which will help in creating a high – involvement work system which will further have a positive effect on engaging employees.

Blessing White³ survey found that building a high performance work environment received least favourable response but it seemed to have one of the strongest correlation with employee engagement which means that organizations might be ignoring the influence that work environment has in building an engaged workforce.

2.7 Job Assignment and Employee Engagement

Employees who are engaged are found to be socially, emotionally and rationally more connected to their work which helps them improvise on the existing solutions.

For many employees the type of work they do is extremely essential. Mercer¹⁹ What's Working survey (2011) found that for Indian workers the type of work they do is the fourth most important factor after training opportunities. Paul²³ surveyed North American employees and found that the characteristics of meaningful work had strong correlations with a number of employee outcomes such as employee engagement, turnover intentions, and burnout. Meaningful work shares some themes with human development such as self – actualization and social impact which provides HR practitioners with an opportunity to positively impact engagement.

2.8 Work Life Balance and Employee Engagement

As employees struggle to balance their work and family, organizations have realized that if they expect better performance from their workforce they will have to include work life balance initiatives as a part of their organizational systems and procedures. Mercer²⁰ found that a flexible work schedule ranks eighth in importance amongst value proposition elements amongst Indian employees. Singh²⁷ found that there exists moderate to lower levels of awareness for work life balance policies amongst software professionals in India. This also highlights that organizations need to take extra initiatives in communicating and creating awareness about their work life balance initiatives.

Table 1. Results of Mercer (2011) survey about perceptions of flexible work schedules

Criteria	Respondents (in percentage)
Very important to have flexible work arrangements	61%
Very Important to have work / life balance	66%
Amount of work asked to do is reasonable	76%
Able to maintain a healthy work life balance	75%

Relatively little research has been done exploring the role of work – life balance initiatives in engaging employees. Further, there are very few researches done in India to investigate work and family from an organizational perspective²⁴. Effective WLB initiatives could prove to be a source of competitive advantage for an organization in the long run which will further have an effect on employer brand and employee engagement³¹.

2.9 Employee Engagement among Sales Professionals

Selling is a way of communicating and bridging the gap between the organization and its customers. It forms the most essential and fundamental part of a business. This is mediated by the nature of relationship between the buyer

buyer and the seller¹⁰. As mentioned earlier in the paper, sales are a tough job and it can imbalances in personal and professional life; inability to achieve goals make them more prone to sales burnout (Cummings 2001). A failure on the part of organization to treat their sales staff appropriately leads to role ambiguity and role conflict complicating matters further. Considering the tricky nature of their job and the stress that they go through, some companies which have expanded employee engagement initiatives to include sales professionals have reaped the benefits of their efforts by enhanced performance, lower attrition and improved bottom line results.

Brooks⁴ reported that a retailer with 30,000 plus employees across stores found that the top 25% stores which reported highest levels of employee engagement also showed more than 14% profits while the bottom 25% of stores missed their profits by 30%. Although important, it takes much more than providing a competitive pay and attractive incentives to engage sales professionals.

Several areas that need to be considered to address engagement problems amongst sales employees include¹⁴:

1. An uncertainty about the vision of organization which might be a result of lack of information sharing and collaboration.
2. Jobs which are monotonous in nature and not directly connected to sales or customers
3. Appropriate and transparent performance appraisal systems which ensures that the right person is rewarded.
4. Sales performance plateaus might be a result of long tenure in the organization followed with no record sales.
5. Increased absenteeism and attrition rates

3. Gap Analysis

Employee engagement is a well-researched area. However, studies on employee engagement amongst sales professionals particularly in India are scarce. Considering the importance of sales to the business, it becomes essential to understand the nature of engagement amongst this professional group.

4. Objectives of the Study

- To review studies related to employee engagement and the various drivers of engagement as considered by the researcher.

- To understand the importance of the drivers of employee engagement to sales/marketing employees.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Sources of Data

- Literature Review included data derived from secondary sources which included reports from various consulting houses like Towers Perrin, Hewitt Associates and Watson Wyatt. Studies were also reviewed from various books and journals which also involved online journals available from research databases.
- As a part of Primary data collection, 500 sales / marketing professionals were surveyed with the help of a questionnaire.

5.2 Questionnaire Description

The questionnaire developed included 21 statements which had to be rated on a 5 point rating scale (1-strongly disagree and 5 – strongly agree). Questionnaire items related to aspects of Company Perception, Information / Communication, Working Conditions, Compensation & Benefits, Job Assignment, Development Opportunities and Work – Life Balance. Using SPSS 15 Cronbach Alpha α reliability was tested and was found to be 0.741 (Refer Table 2). According to George & Mallery³² and Nunnally & Bernstein³³ this above mentioned reliability coefficient falls within the acceptable range.

Table 2. Reliability score for the questionnaire

Cronbach's Alpha coefficient	Cronbach's Alpha coefficient based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.731	.741	21

5.3 Sample

500 sales / marketing professionals from Mumbai and Navi Mumbai region were surveyed using the questionnaire developed by the researcher. The sample is justified as Comfree & Lee⁶ suggest that 500 is a very good sample size and wherever possible researchers need to obtain sample size of 500 or more.

5.3.1 Operational Definition of Variables

- i) *Employee Engagement*: Can be understood as employee attitude towards the organization and towards organizational values. Highly engaged employees work towards achieving business success along with colleagues to achieve improved organizational and individual performance. In turn the organization has to build an effective reciprocal relationship with their employees.
- ii) *Company Perception*: Refers to employee perceptions about their organization as an employer of choice, its leadership and the extent of top management's involvement with their employees.
- iii) *Communication / Information*: Refers to disseminating basic facts as well as providing context, commentary and two-way dialogue. Effective, clear and consistent communication is essential to engage employees and improve productivity.
- iv) *Compensation & Benefits*: Includes financial and non – financial benefits to employees provided by the organization.
- v) *Development Opportunities*: Growth opportunities provided by the organization which help an employee in furthering his / her career goals.
- vi) *Work Conditions*: The support and trust between a manager and employee, cooperation among colleagues, transparency in appraisal and other organizational processes that help in building a climate of mutual trust and positivity.
- vii) *Job Assignment*: Availability of resources essential to do the job effectively, encouragement to take initiatives, managing ambiguity and uncertainty and accountability for one's performance are aspects that help or hinder an employee's work performance.
- viii) *Work – Life Balance*: Organizational policies and programs which help employees in managing the demands raised by their personal and professional lives.

6. Results and Discussion

500 sales / marketing professionals from Mumbai & Navi Mumbai region were surveyed using the questionnaire developed by the researcher.

6.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 3. Frequencies distribution for the variable of gender

	F
female	122
male	378
Total	500

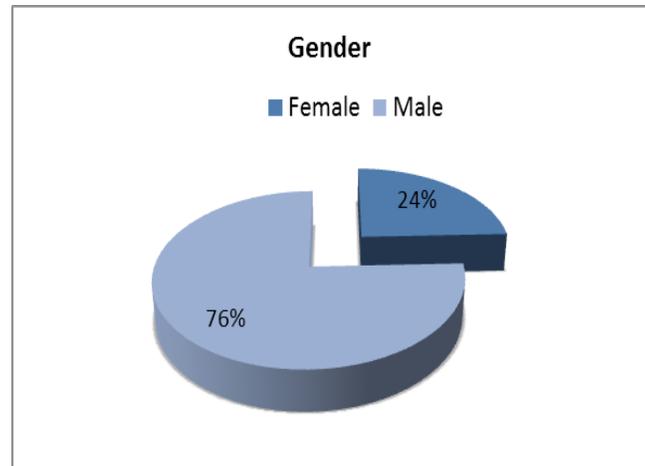


Figure 2. Graphical representation of gender among sales/marketing respondents.

Table 3 and Figure 2 revealed that 76% of the respondents surveyed were male as against 24% of female respondents.

6.2 Work Experience

Table 3 and Figure 2 revealed that 76% of the respondents surveyed were male as against 24% of female respondents.

Table 4. Work experience within the organization

Work Experience within	F
0.1 – 5 yrs	453
5.1 – 10 yrs	25
10.1 – 15 yrs	7
15.1 – 20 yrs	4
20.1 – 25 yrs	3
25.1 – 30 yrs	4
30.1 – 35 yrs	2
35.1 – 40 yrs	2
Total	500

The frequency table (Table 4) and graph (Figure 3) shows that maximum respondents had 0.1 - 5 years of work experience within their present organization. Very few employees surveyed had been with their present organization more than 35 years. Work experience within organization was considered more relevant as the researcher felt it would have a direct effect on the engagement level of the employee.

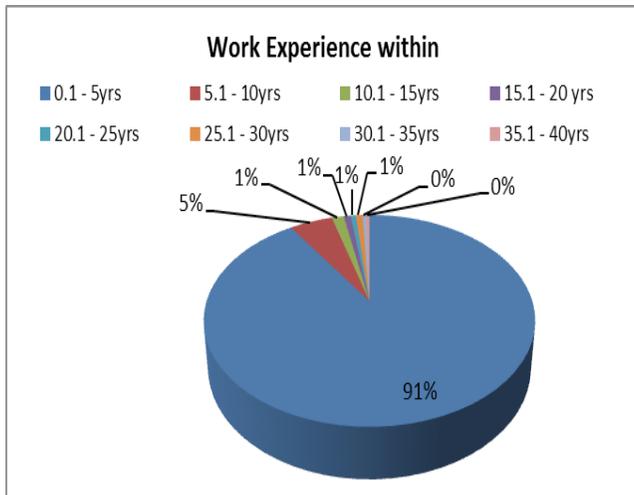


Figure 3. Graphical representation of respondent employees work experience within the present organization

6.3 Factors of Employee Engagement

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for seven factors of employee engagement (N=500)

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Company Perception average	500	1.67	5.00	3.3981	.57803
Communication average	500	1.33	4.67	3.0186	.57790
Work conditions average	500	1.33	5.00	3.3004	.52172
Compensation and Benefits average	500	1.00	5.00	3.3135	.80993
Job assignment average	500	1.00	5.00	3.7946	.61590
Development opportunities average	500	1.00	5.00	3.2398	.72623
Work life balance average	500	1.33	5.00	3.3973	.71699

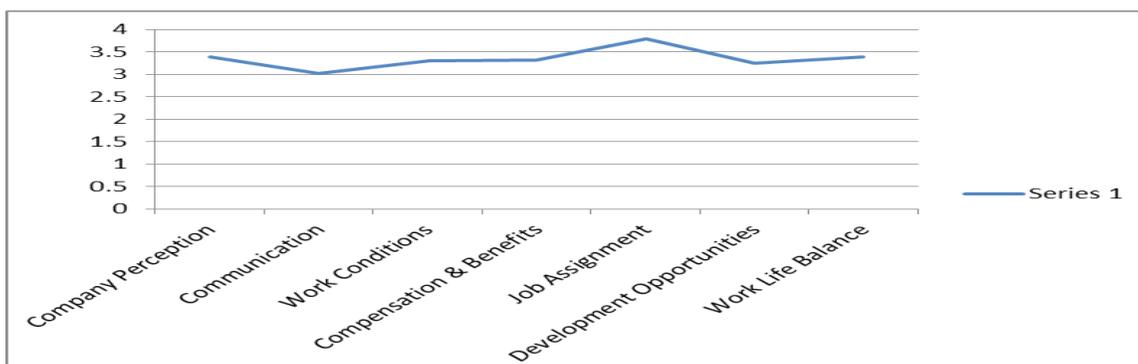


Figure 4. Line graph representing mean scores obtained on the factors of employee engagement.

Table 5 and Figure 4 shows that respondents had the highest mean score for job assignment followed closely by company perception and work life balance. For the dimension of compensation and benefits, the mean score denoted an average level of satisfaction but a high standard deviation indicated that respondents greatly differed in their views as to what would be considered a satisfactory compensation & benefits package.

6.4 Proposed Model for Engaging Sales/Marketing Professionals

To find the progressive importance of the various drivers for sales/marketing professionals, the researcher applied multiple regression analysis on the data set using SPSS 15. Findings from the same can be presented in the form of a mathematical model. The regression equation can be summarized as:

$$Y = a + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + b_3X_3 + b_4X_4 + b_5X_5 + b_6X_6 + b_7X_7$$

Where Y = Predicted value of employee engagement

a = intercept which is constant

b = partial regression coefficients in all cases

X₁ = Development Opportunities

X₂ = Work Conditions

X₃ = Compensation & Benefits

X₄ = Work- Life Balance

X₅ = Company Perception

X₆ = Job Assignment

X₇ = Communication / Information

From the obtained equation, it appears that perception and availability of development opportunities contribute most significantly to the total engagement level of sales / marketing professionals. This is followed by work conditions, compensation and benefits, work – life balance, company perception, job assignment and lastly by communication / information. ISRs (2004) identified career development, leadership, employee empowerment and image of the company in the minds of the employee as well as the general public as global factors essential in managing engagement¹⁶. Thus, once again highlighting the fact that building and nurturing engagement is a two way process. Results of the present study further support this finding amongst sales/marketing professionals too. The India Attrition Study 2008 surveyed nearly 4000 Indian employees across various industries and organizations. Majority of the surveyed employees cited lack of career growth opportunities as the primary reason for leaving their jobs followed by salary and nature of work amongst other reasons identified². A surprising finding was that communication / information emerged as least important of all the variables entered. Sales / marketing employees need to be well informed about new products or services of the company, future business goals; they are also the ones to get first hand customer feedback which is further communicated to the organization for improvement. This present finding only hints at the fact that organizations are moving in the correct direction with respect to the variable and need to continue their efforts.

7. Recommendations

Organizations using this model can collect data on each of the aspect mentioned above and the total engagement score of sales/marketing professionals. This would help them to focus on areas where they are lagging.

1. Development Opportunities
2. Work Conditions
3. Compensation & Benefits
4. Work – Life Balance
5. Company Perception
6. Job Assignment
7. Communication / Information

Figure 5. Diagrammatic Representation of the proposed model of Employee Engagement based on obtained equation.

Further depending on the importance of the variable as a contributing factor for employee engagement, organizations can then decide on the investment in terms of time and finances that they would like to make.

8. Conclusion

There are no one-size-fits all for creating an engaged workforce. Companies invest heavily in creating an engagement culture which values learning and career advancement. Thus, it becomes essential to implement strategies that will have a positive effect on creating an engaged workforce. The study showed that out of the seven drivers of engagement studied by the researcher, development opportunities ranked the highest followed by work conditions and compensation & benefits. It is also essential to note that results of the present study can be generalized to sales / marketing professionals only.

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