

Effect of Recognition Practices on Employee Engagement in Fairtrade Horticultural Firms In Kenya

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Abstract

While most people understand that engaged employees are often happier and more satisfied in their job, the main reason that engagement is now a focal point is because it leads to real business results. Emotional states are hard to understand and measure. Employees are becoming key business drivers for any organization. The objective of the study was to determine the effect of recognition practices on employee engagement in Fairtrade horticultural firms in Kenya. The study was guided by expectancy theory and social exchange theory. A cross-sectional descriptive survey research design was adopted. The study targeted 41 Fairtrade horticultural firms as unit of analysis and 5,600 employees as the unit of observation. The sample size was 373 respondents drawn from low level, middle level, and top-level management. The study relied mainly on primary data. The study adopted stratified and simple random sampling techniques. After the stratification of the respondents into strata, simple random sampling was adopted to pick up the respondents. The researcher used questionnaire as the research instrument. Descriptive and inferential analysis were computed using SPSS version 26. In order to analyze the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable the study used regression analysis at 5% level of significance. Specifically, simple linear regression analysis. The findings indicated that recognition practice has a positive and significant effect on employee engagement in Fairtrade horticultural firms in Kenya. The study concluded that recognition practice contributes significantly to the employee engagement in Fairtrade horticultural firms in Kenya. From the results, the study recommends that top management horticultural firm should come up with well-defined structure that will regularly recognize employees with exemplary performance in various categories. This kind of recognition by the management as well as their supervisors would make employees feel appreciated for their input and therefore, help the organization to achieve their goals.

Keywords: *Recognition Practices, Employee Engagement, Extrinsic Rewards, Fairtrade Horticultural Firms*

1.1 Introduction

Budriene and Diskiene (2020) observed that employee engagement has emerged as a popular organizational concept in recent years. It has generated a great deal of attention among many human resource practitioners. In the present society, where there is large-scale competition in the market, it is necessary for the organization to have engaged workforce for the survival and smooth functioning of the organization. For Lockwood (2016) the process of fostering an environment of employee engagement is critical to organizational success and will thus help to retain talent, create customer loyalty, and lead to improved

company performance and shareholder value. Aspects of employee engagement include being engaged, those who are unengaged, and those who are actively disengaged.

In the ISO 9001–2015 standard, the Principle “Employee engagement” is formulated implies the emergence of motivation, active participation and involvement of workers in all production processes, which should favorably influence the growth of labor efficiency. People begin to work effectively only if they are passionate about work. To achieve this, it is necessary to create conditions for the maximum interest of employees in their work. It is believed that employee satisfaction with his work gives rise to his loyalty to the employer, loyalty forms engagement, which, in turn, allows improve the quality of products (Kamanja, Ogolla & Gichunge, 2019).

In this regard every organization view human resources as very important (Khan, Zarif & Khan, 2018). The employees that work in an organization determine the failure or success of the organization. For an organization to function smoothly and survive in the era of globalization and great competition, they should ensure that the workforce they engage in the organization is reliable. According to Kikoito (2017), the engagement and motivation of employees need to be boosted by organizations so that organizations can improve their performance.

Kimunge (2016) argued that employee engagement encompasses high levels of employee commitment and involvement towards the achievement of the organizational goals. Engaged employees’ value, enjoy, and have pride in their work. There have been wide reports on how organizational outcomes which include; performance increase, effectiveness in the organization, the satisfaction of customers, the satisfaction of employees, productivity, and staff turnover that is reduced have a positive relationship with engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2016).

Ghuman (2016) recognized employee engagement in performance terms i.e. employee engagement is employee’s willingness and ability to contribute to company success by freely giving the extra effort on an ongoing basis. Lawler (2016) pointed out that knowing the level of employees’ engagement within the organization is the foundation for change and its success. The internal efficiencies and savings of organizations are a result of the positive relationship that coexists between engagement and performance.

However, employee engagement cannot succeed without incentives. Incentives are external motivational approaches used by organizations to reward employees who work with high spirits to assist the organization achieve its goals. Motivation is important because it encourages workers to be noticed and rewarded for their contributions. Workers need to be motivated by an incentive structure to perform at a high level (Palmer, 2017). Recognition is thankfulness shown with an expression of appreciation. When those in charge show gratitude for the job workers do, they feel motivated to work even more. In the organizational climate, status indicates a classification of roles, privileges, and responsibilities. Many individuals place an enormous amount of importance on their position in society. In order for this to happen, the system must be based on people's talents and hopes as shown by their position (Wambugu & Ombui, 2016)

Promising workers are very difficult to find, and it is much more difficult to retain them. An effective company is keenly aware of the need to establish a system of recognition and reward in order to celebrate and reward employee achievements. Employee incentive programs may be either formal (with material rewards) or informal (offering positive feedback). Behavior that is positively reinforced is more likely to be repeated. Conceptual recognition of positive Employee engagement practices has been proven to have a positive impact on staff productivity and retention (Sutherland, 2016).

Most companies are wary of using recognition and incentive programs because of their high costs and little returns. Although it has been shown that recognition (verbal praise and non-cash incentives) is a useful technique for raising morale, lowering stress, and reducing absenteeism, workers' turnover is not negatively affected. To provide a benefit to workers while simultaneously helping the business, these initiatives help reduce the costs of employee turnover and turnover-related expenses (Tahir & Awan, 2017).

However, people love recognition and companies should discover what is most important to their workers and provide them with rewards and accolades that express that importance (Samuel & Chipunza, 2015). It is important that employers avoid identifying errors, such as getting information incorrect and confusing two different people. Recognition should be for excellence, not form. Acknowledgment should also be linked to

particular activities that provide workers with explicit proof of their good work. Appreciating workers, as a regular practice, has a major effect on employee engagement. When people are known, they are more comfortable and therefore more productive. According to Gallup research, businesses with engaged workers had much better retention than companies with disengaged employees (Poulston, 2018). Recognition that is appreciated and recognized by the workers results in higher retention, since employees are motivated to remain by seeing their efforts appreciated and acknowledged.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The management of the Horticultural sector in Kenya has established incentive programs; these include promotion, training, career development, and work flexibility in search of improving employee work motivation to guarantee prompt and excellent service. However, employee work motivation is still low despite the existence of incentive programs (Chepoghisho, 2019). The horticultural industry has witnessed negative publicity on poor human resource management practices, working conditions resulting in a disgruntled labor force (Opondo, 2019). This brings out an aspect of disengaged employees, which has far-reaching consequences in an industry that is labor-intensive compromising the benefits an organization could reap through labor efficiencies (Al Zeer, Ajouz & Salahat, 2023).

According to ILO (2022), agricultural labor productivity in Kenya has been on the decline for the last three decades due to disengaged employees among other factors. A study by the Fairtrade Foundation reported an average absenteeism rate of 10% in Kenyan flower farms. This is a potential indicator of disengagement (Fairtrade Flower Report, 2023). National statistics indicate a high employee turnover rate of 20.7% among horticultural firms in Kenya. This suggests potential disengagement issues across various flower firms in Kenya. (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). According to a report by Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) (2020), the cut flower industry has been accused of overworking workers beyond the mandatory eight hours per day. Employees are required to work for 46 hours per five-day week, which is eight hours from Monday to Friday and five hours on Saturday (GoK, 2023). Yet, Kaaria (2022) carried out in Kenya, observes that workers in the cut flower industry were engaged even for more than ten hours per day sometimes going for shifts of up to 15 hours a day without a break, especially during the annual peak seasons such as valentine day and mothers' day. In July 2010 more than 1,500 workers from Aquilla and Karuturi farms went on strike over poor working conditions and meagre wages, the strike being the third in less than two weeks (Muindi, 2020). Accordingly, the study endeavor to establish just whether or not workers in the cut flower industry are engaged in the farm within the legislated eight hours per day as per the Constitution of Kenya (2010).

Employee engagement has been extensively studied. For instance, in a study conducted by Hussain, Khaliq, Nisar, Kamboh, and Ali (2019), it was observed that workers performed better when they were compensated and recognized, and when their employers were supportive of their well-being, especially in managing job-related stress. Using reward and performance data from five Litoral manufacturing firms, Ngwa et al. (2019) found that profit-sharing in manufacturing companies had a substantial good influence on employee commitment, whereas flat-rate systems had a major negative effect, and collective bargaining incentive systems had a significant beneficial impact on staff cohesion in manufacturing firms. Employee performance was the main concern in the research, but employee engagement was not.

A case study was conducted among commercial banks in Noakhali Region, Bangladesh on employee performance and the results found out that employee performance is influenced by reward (Jeni, Mutsuddi & Das, 2020). Further, the study revealed that cash bonus does not affect employee performance. From the studies, it is evident that compensation systems contribute immensely to employee motivation, performance, productivity, and commitment. This study thus sought to better understand the effect of recognition practices on employee engagement in Fairtrade horticultural firms in Kenya by testing the following null hypothesis:

H₀₁ There is no significant effect of recognition practices on employee engagement in Fairtrade horticultural firms in Kenya.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Social exchange as formulated by Blau (1964) is based on the prism that an employee's perceived organizational support creates a sense of indebtedness and an obligation within an individual to repay the organization. Positive beneficial acts to an employee by the organization create a high exchange relationship that serves to develop an aversive sense of indebtedness to the organization which can only be reduced by reciprocation (Setton et al., 2016). Social exchange reciprocity occurs at all levels of the organization and also with immediate supervisors (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

Reciprocity to the organization is noted in-role behaviors, citizenship behavior and organization commitment (Shore, Coyle-Shapiro & Chang, 2018). Social exchange leads to the trust of the employee towards the organization that it will fulfill its exchange obligations. Commitment to the organization through the social exchange can be either affective commitment or continuance commitment. Setton et al. (2016) describes the leader-member exchange to be a cordial relationship between the employee and the supervisor arising out of the perception the supervisor represents the organization to which the employee is indebted. Leader-member exchange is more associated with role behavior with employees developing personal obligation to undertake extra duties, put in more time, and minimize conflicts with the supervisors.

The social exchange theory (SET) is a theory that is famously related to employee engagement. The social exchange theory (SET) indicated that a person is responsible for how they interact with other parties and create an environment of interdependence. The expectations, trust and mutual commitments are used to determine the efforts that both parties will make to ensure that a certain goal is achieved. The first party will require the other party to play some roles which they need to have mutual agreements and mutual roles. This theory explained the recognition practice variables in the study.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

The researcher's framework helps them organize their study, and it is a collection of concepts (Mensah, Agyemang, Acquah, Babah & Dontoh, 2020). The hypothesized relationship between independent variable and dependent variable is summarized in figure 1.

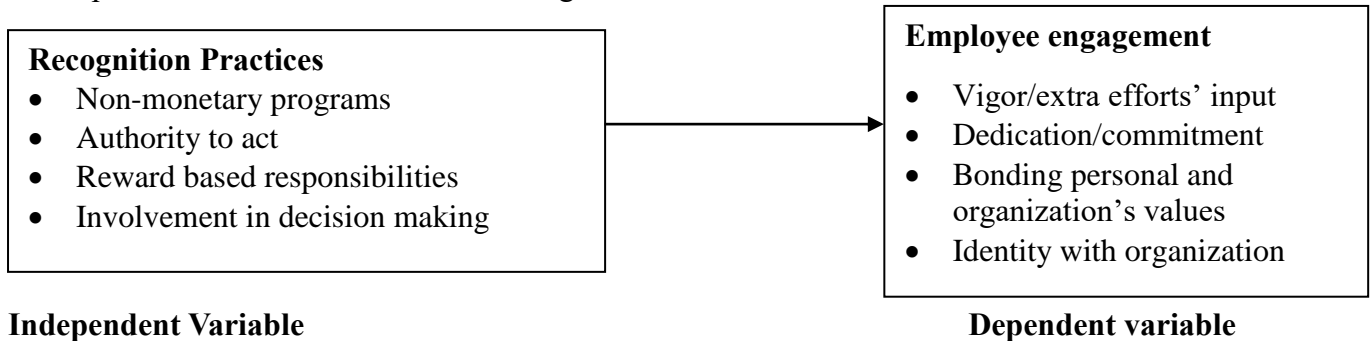


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

2.3 Empirical Literature

Proctor, (2016) did a study on effective employee recognition affects attitude, happiness, and job satisfaction. The research design used was survey questionnaire. The findings of this study were deduced from 156 responses at Walter Sisulu University (WSU) Chiselhurst campus out of the intended 500 respondents. It was determined that the attitude and dedication of the management to a good environment and employee job satisfaction played a key role in creating the workplace culture. Dedication to working with people: Managers with this level of commitment are sharing information and seeking feedback from the people who work for them. Tessema et al. (2017) carried out a study on the effects of employee recognition, pay, and benefits on job satisfaction. In this cross-sectional study, survey responses from university students in the US, Malaysia and Vietnam were analyzed. Employee recognition was found to have a significant impact on job satisfaction, regardless of home country income level (high, middle or low income) and culture (collectivist or individualist). However, the effect of employee recognition on job

satisfaction was significantly more important for US respondents than for respondents from Malaysia and Vietnam.

A new research found that workers with recognition-based incentives are more efficient and productive (Khan et al., 2016). Supervisory recognition was tested using chi² inferential tests to see whether it had an impact on workers. The research showed that incentive programs which base recognition on employee efficiency and effectiveness have been shown to motivate workers. Qasim et al. (2019) studied on the impact of employees' recognition, rewards and job stress on job performance in perceived organizational support in the call centers located in Lahore, Pakistan. Data was gathered through the survey method of the questionnaire. A simple random sampling technique is used for this study. Results showed that employee rewards and recognition have a significant and positive effect on employee performance whereas job stress has a significant and negative effect on performance.

Saunderson (2014) study on employee recognition asserted that employees not only want compensation but also need to be valued by their supervisors. It will increase the employees' morale, thus, employees will be well motivated if they are recognized by the supervisors. Deci and Ryan (2016) study also reiterated the need for employee recognition using both monetary as well as non-monetary programs. The researcher gave an example of employee recognition like writing their names in the company's newsletter, letters of commendation, extra time off and verbal appreciation. This is a form of caring and appraising the employees. The non-monetary awards are more motivating than the financial award, thus, in this way, the employees think that they are being valued.

Mota (2014) also studied on employee recognition in the UK and found that employees who are recognized in their organizations are well motivated and perform well. This is because motivated employees perform well which makes one's intent towards certain behavior. In this way, organizations achieve their goals. That is, it is the result of motivation and ability at the job that leads to high performance, hence, employee recognition boosts employee morale which results in the overall productivity of the firm. Shah (2016) concluded that employee recognition is a leadership tool that conveys leadership's priorities and values to workers. Employee recognition may have monetary value similar to the cost of luncheon, as well as presents. There is, however, no one who hands out money as a kind of appreciation, to say nothing of pay or bonuses. Employees' motivations for recognition are very diverse, and thus management must stay adaptable in their ways of acknowledgment.

Christiane et al. (2014) examined on the relationship between employee recognition and performance using a controlled field experiment designed to investigate the causal effect unannounced, public recognition on employee performance in Tinbergen Institute Amsterdam. The study found that recognition increases subsequent performance substantially, and particularly so when recognition is exclusively provided to the best performers. Remarkably, workers who did not receive recognition were mainly responsible for the performance decrease. With respect to employee performance at public educational institutions, Ndung'u (2017) studied the impact of incentives and recognition on employee performance at Kenyatta University. Reward and recognition affect Kenyatta University staff performance, thus a descriptive research method was employed for the study. Employee performance was shown to be correlated with financial compensation, as well as praise and recognition above (extrinsic rewards, intrinsic rewards and financial rewards, recognition rewards, working environment and leadership styles).

Ndung'u (2017) stated that the study's findings on human resource practices, such as giving employees greater job and responsibility responsibilities, fostering more workplace autonomy, and enabling greater employee involvement, have implications for management and government officials at Kenyatta University. Based on an in-depth analysis of the study done by Ngugi (2016), below is an example of a work design study examining the correlation between job characteristics and employee performance. According to the findings of the research, job design was linked to workers' perceptions of their own performance. In order to ensure improved employee performance, banks should implement effective job identity, autonomy, and feedback.

Onguso (2017) investigated the effects of job design on employee satisfaction at the Kenya bureau of standards, Nairobi County; Kenya. The study involved all employees in the organization except those in the

management positions. The researcher used a descriptive study approach to collect the data. Research questions were included into questionnaires and administered according to specific classifications. The study reviewed that job compensation affects satisfaction; worker-supervisor is crucial in day to day business of the institutions and therefore affect job satisfaction. Career advancement on the other hand influences career growth and job, satisfaction. The study therefore recommends that Kenya bureau of standards (KEBS) management should formulate proper policies aimed at promoting job satisfaction through compensation, good working environment.

Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design:

In this study, a cross-sectional survey research design was adopted. This was founded on the basis that the study involves various horticultural firms in Kenya. More so, cross-sectional studies are carried out at a specific point in time or over a short period of time. This research adopted pragmatism research philosophy which is premised on a reasonable and logical way of doing things or of thinking about problems that is based on dealing with specific situations instead of on ideas and theories.

3.2 Population and Sampling Techniques

The population for this study was all cadres of employees (21,030 employees) of the Horticultural firms in Kenya registered with Fairtrade Africa (41 Fairtrade horticultural firms). The target population of this study was the low –level, middle level, and top-level management staff. To scientifically calculate the sample size, A representative sample size with 95% confidence and risk levels were selected, based on the work of Yamane (1967) formula. The formula used is illustrated below.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where

n = sample size; N = Target population; e = Proportion of the study

The 5,600 is the target population and therefore, (N = 5,600). A 95% confidence level is deemed acceptable and thus statistically z = 2. Placing information in the above formula at a 95% confidence level and an error limit of 5% results in:

$$n = \frac{5,600}{1 + 5,600 (0.050)^2}$$

= 373 respondents

Therefore, 373 respondents were the lowest acceptable number of responses to maintain a 95% confidence level and a 5% error level. A proportionate sample size of approximate 373 respondents was the unit of observation which is 5% precision of the population was selected using a stratified sampling technique from the identified study sample size of the population. After the stratification of the respondents in the cadres (low level, middle level and top management) and simple random sampling techniques was adopted to pick up the respondents. This is as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Size

S/NO	Category	Target Population	Sample size
1	Low-level Management	3,200	213
2	Middle level Management	1,480	99
3	Top level Management	920	61
	Total	5,600	373

Source: Fair Trade (2020)

3.3 Instrumentation

The study relied mainly on primary data. The researcher used questionnaire as the research instrument. The research also undertook a desk review of existing information about the study areas and collected qualitative data through in-depth interviews from respondents who were conversant with the subject through various interactions or experiences. A self-administered structured questionnaire was dropped to each respondent

and picked later. The questionnaire consisted of both open ended and closed ended questions and were divided into two parts. The first part covered the independent variable (Recognition practices) while the second part covered the dependent variable (employee engagement). The closed ended statements were based on five likert scale from 1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-Undecided, 4-agree and 5-strongly agree. Out of 373 administered questionnaires, 315 questionnaires were successfully filled and handed back to the researcher which gives 84.4% response rate.

The pilot testing involved administering the structured questionnaires on a few respondents working with Desire Flora horticultural firm in Kajiado County. The participants in this study were 10% of the sample size, that is, 37 respondents. The filled questionnaires underwent both reliability and validity tests. Instrument's reliability was tested through Cronbach's Alpha (α). The Cronbach alpha ranged from 0.919 for employee engagement to 0.8989 recognition practices. The content validity was achieved through ensuring that each item was appropriate for a particular variable construct through determination calculation of the content validity index. The construct validity was maintained through restricting the items to the conceptualization of the variables and ensuring that the indicator of a particular variable is within the same construct. All the items were retained based on the general rule of thumb for acceptable factor loading of 40%.

3.4 Data Analysis and Presentation

To provide information, the data was processed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques in the context of SPSS 26. Content analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data whereas multiple regression analysis was utilized to analyze the quantitative data by aide of SPSS Software version 26. Analyzed data was presented in form of tables, charts and graphs for ease of comparison and inference. By using Regression analysis at the 5% significance level, the research evaluated the connection between the independent factors and the dependent variable. Specifically, used simple linear regression analysis.

3.4.1 Diagnostic Tests

Before data analysis is done the following diagnostic tests was undertaken. To check for normality, that is, whether data is normally distributed, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality was used to meet this assumption (Asar, Ilk & Dag, 2017). In this research, heteroskedasticity was tested using the Likelihood Ratio (LR) test (Wiggins & Poi, 2015) and controlled by ensuring that the error variance is constant.

4.0 Findings and Discussions

4.1 Descriptive Statistics of Variables in the Study

To determine the influence of Recognition Practices on Employee engagement in Fairtrade horticultural firms in Kenya, the study sought to establish employee engagement in fairtrade horticultural firms in Kenya. The results are as shown in Table 1.0.

Table 1.0: Employee Engagement

5- Strongly agree; 4-Agree; 3-Neutral; 2- disagree;1- strongly disagree, S.D-Standard Deviation, N-Sample Size

Employee engagement	5	4	3	2	1	Mean	S.D
1. There is a feeling of vigor in accomplishing job tasks.	45.1%	21.3%	6.7%	16.5%	10.5%	3.74	1.435
2. There is enthusiasm about looking for opportunities to improve the organization's performance	34.9%	32.7%	4.8%	17.5%	10.2%	3.65	1.375
3. There is a strong connection between personal values and organization values	36.5%	27.9%	9.8%	13.3%	12.4%	3.63	1.407
4. There is strong identification with the organization's success and failures	36.2%	30.8%	5.4%	17.5%	10.2%	3.65	1.384

5. There is pride associated with working for the organization	26%	33.3%	20.6%	13%	7%	3.58	1.203
6. Employees keep up to date with any development within their job area/field	31.4%	28.3%	19%	15.2%	6%	3.64	1.237
7. Employees always volunteer to do extra work outside their job tasks to contribute to the organization's success	39.4%	27%	9.5%	15.9%	8.3%	3.73	1.342
Average level of Employee Engagement	N	Minimum	Maximum	Grand Mean	Std. Dev.		
	315	1.14	5.00	3.66	1.21		

As shown in table 1.0, 45.1% of the respondents strongly agreed that at their job, they feel strong and vigorous in accomplishing job tasks while 21.3% agreed on the same assertion. On the other hand, 6.7% of the respondents were neutral on the statement that at their job, they feel strong and vigorous in accomplishing job tasks while 16.5% disagreed and 10.5% strongly disagreed. With a mean of 3.74 indicated that the respondents agreed that at their job, they feel strong and vigorous in accomplishing job tasks and a standard deviation of 1.435, indicating a high variation in the responses.

Regarding enthusiasm about looking for opportunities to improve this organization's performance, 34.9% of the respondents strongly agreed and 32.7% agreed on the same statement. Conversely, 4.8% of the respondents were neutral on the statement, while 17.5% disagreed and 10.2% strongly disagreed. With a mean of 3.65, revealed that the respondents agreed on the statement that there is enthusiasm about looking for opportunities to improve the organization's performance and a standard deviation of 1.375, indicating a high variation in the responses.

The results also revealed that 36.5% of the respondents strongly agreed that there is a strong connection between personal values and the organization values, while 27.9% agreed on the same assertion. However, 9.8% of the respondents were neutral on the statement, while 13.3% disagreed and 12.4% strongly disagreed. With a mean of 3.63 indicated that the respondents agreed that there is a strong connection between personal values and the organization values and a standard deviation of 1.407, indicating a high variation in the responses.

Further, the results revealed that 36.2% of the respondents strongly identify with this organization's success and failures while 30.8% of the respondents agreed on the same assertion. On the other hand, 5.4 % of the respondents were neutral, 17.5% disagreed while 10.2% strongly disagreed that they strongly identify with this organization's success and failures. With a mean of 3.65, the participants agreed that there is strong identification with the organization's success and failures and a standard deviation of 1.384, indicating a high variation in the responses.

However, 26% of the respondents strongly agreed that there is pride associated with working for the organization and another 33.3% agreed. On the other hand, 20.6% of the total respondents were neutral on the statement, while 13% disagreed and 7% strongly disagreed. With a mean of 3.58, the respondents agreed that there is pride associated with working for the organization and a standard deviation of 1.203, indicating a high variation in the responses.

Moreover, 31.4% of the respondents strongly agreed that employees keep up to date with any development within their job area/field and 28.3% agreed on the same assertion. In addition, 19% of the respondents were neutral on the statement that employees keep up to date with any development within their job area/field, while 15.2% disagreed and 6% strongly disagreed on the same. With a mean of 3.64, the respondents agreed that employees keep up to date with any development within their job area/field and a standard deviation of 1.237, indicating a high variation in the responses.

Lastly, the results revealed that 39.4% of the respondents strongly agreed that employees always volunteer to do extra work outside their job tasks to contribute to the organization's success, while 27% agreed on the same statement. Moreover, 9.5% of the respondents were neutral on the statement that employees always volunteer to do extra work outside their job tasks to contribute to the organization's success, 15.9% disagreed while, 8.3% strongly disagreed that employees always volunteer to do extra work outside their job tasks to contribute to the organization's success. With a mean of 3.73 the participants agreed that employees

always volunteer to do extra work outside their job tasks to contribute to the organization's success and a standard deviation of 1.342 indicating a high variation in the responses.

Apparently, the average level of employee engagement (Grand mean) according to the sampled respondents was at 3.66 with a standard deviation of 1.21. This implies that majority of the respondents agreed with most of the statements that were used to measure employee engagement. However, significant standard deviation shows they were some variations implying that this rate of engagement is not uniform amongst the sampled firms.

Table 2: Recognition practices

5- Strongly agree; 4-Agree; 3-Neutral; 2- disagree; 1- strongly disagree

Statements on recognition practices	5	4	3	2	1	Mean	S.D
1. Employer/immediate supervisor offers appreciation for the job well done	38.4%	29.5%	7.6%	11.1%	13.3%	3.69	1.419
2. Employer involves staff in decision making	19.4%	42.9%	18.4%	15.6%	3.8%	3.58	1.083
3. Employee recognition comes with increase in responsibility	33%	32.4%	7.6%	18.7%	8.3%	3.63	1.330
4. Employer provides opportunities to grow to high positions	23.2%	37.8%	14.6%	18.1%	6.3%	3.53	1.208
5. Employee recognition is accompanied with some rewards	17.5%	38.4%	22.9%	17.5%	3.8%	3.48	1.086
6. Exemplary employees have their names written in the company's newsletter, and given letters of commendation	15.9%	30.2%	34.3%	15.6%	4.1%	3.38	1.056
7. Most hardworking employees who timely meet their job targets are normally given time off	17.1%	37.5%	23.8%	17.5%	4.1%	3.46	1.092
8. Allocation of office vehicles, parking lots and office space are well designed and fairly effected by the top management	21.3%	37.1%	14.9%	21.6%	5.1%	3.48	1.190
9. Generally, the non-monetary awards are more motivating to employees than the financial awards.	18.7%	39%	15.6%	21%	5.7%	3.44	1.178
Average level of Recognition practices	N	Minimum	Maximum	Grand Mean		Std. Dev.	
	315	1.00	5.00	3.52		0.99	

As shown in table 2, 38.4% of the respondents strongly agreed that their employer/immediate supervisor offers appreciation for the job well done, while 29.5% agreed on the same assertion. On the other hand, 7.6% of the respondents were neutral on the statement that their employer/immediate supervisor offers appreciation for the job well done while 11.1% disagreed and 13.3% strongly disagreed. With a mean of 3.69 indicated that the respondents agreed that their employer/immediate supervisor offers appreciation for the job well done and a standard deviation of 1.419, indicating a high variation in the responses.

Regarding their employer involving them in decision making, 19.4% of the respondents strongly agreed and 42.9 % agreed on the same statement. Conversely, 18.4% of the respondents were neutral on the statement that their employer involves them in decision making, while 15.6% disagreed and 3.8% strongly disagreed. With a mean of 3.58, revealed that the respondents agreed on the statement that their employer involves them in decision making and a standard deviation of 1.083, indicating a high variation in the responses.

The results also revealed that 33% of the respondents strongly agreed that employee recognition comes with an increase in responsibility, while 32.4% agreed on the same assertion. However, 7.6% of the respondents

were neutral on the statement that employee recognition comes with an increase in responsibility, while 18.7% disagreed and 8.3% strongly disagreed. With a mean of 3.63, indicated that the respondents agreed that employee recognition comes with increase in responsibility and a standard deviation of 1.330, indicating a high variation in the responses.

Further, the results revealed that 23.2% of the respondents strongly agreed that their employer provides opportunities to grow to high positions, while 37.8% of the respondents agreed on the same assertion. On the other hand, 14.6% of the respondents were neutral, 18.1% disagreed, while 6.3% strongly disagreed that their employer provides opportunities to grow to high positions. With a mean of 3.53, the participants agreed that their employer provides opportunities to grow to high positions and a standard deviation of 1.208, indicating a high variation in the responses.

However, 17.5% of the respondents strongly agreed that employee recognition is accompanied with some rewards and another 38.4% agreed. On the other hand, 22.9% of the total respondents were neutral on the statement that employee recognition is accompanied with some rewards, while 17.5% disagreed and 3.8% strongly disagreed. With a mean of 3.48, the respondents fairly agreed that employee recognition is accompanied with some rewards and a standard deviation of 1.086, indicating a high variation in the responses.

Moreover, 15.9% of the respondents strongly agreed that exemplary employees have their names written in the company's newsletter and given letters of commendation and 30.2% agreed on the same assertion. In addition, 34.3% of the respondents were neutral on the statement that exemplary employees have their names written in the company's newsletter and given letters of commendation while 15.6% disagreed and 4.1% strongly disagreed on the same. With a mean of 3.38, the respondents were more of neutral that exemplary employees have their names written in the company's newsletter and given letters of commendation and a standard deviation of 1.056, indicating a high variation in the responses.

According to the findings, 17.1% of the respondents strongly agreed that most hardworking employees who timely meet their job targets are normally given time off, while 37.5% agreed on the same. On the other hand, 23.8% of the respondents were neutral on the statement that most hardworking employees who timely meet their job targets are normally given time off, while 17.5% disagreed and 4.1 strongly disagreed. With a mean of 3.46, the respondents fairly agreed that most hardworking employees who timely meet their job targets are normally given time off and a standard deviation of 1.092, indicating a high variation in the responses.

However, 21.3% of the respondents strongly agreed that allocation of office vehicles, parking lots and office space are well designed and fairly effected by the top management while 37.1% agreed on the same. Moreover, 14.9% of the respondents were neutral on the statement that allocation of office vehicles, parking lots and office space are well designed and fairly effected by the top management while 21.6% of the respondents disagreed and 5.1 strongly disagreed. With a mean of 3.48, the participants fairly agreed that allocation of office vehicles, parking lots and office space are well designed and fairly effected by the top management. A standard deviation of 1.190, indicating a high variation in the responses.

Lastly, the results revealed that 18.7% of the respondents strongly agreed that generally, the non-monetary awards are more motivating to employees than the financial awards while 39% agreed on the same statement. Moreover, 15.6% of the respondents were neutral on the statement that generally, the non-monetary awards are more motivating to employees than the financial awards, 21% disagreed, while 5.7% strongly disagreed that generally, the non-monetary awards are more motivating to employees than the financial awards. With a mean of 3.44 the participants were more on neutral that generally, the non-monetary awards are more motivating to employees than the financial awards and a standard deviation of 1.178, indicating a high variation in the responses.

The average level of recognition practices (Grand mean) according to the sampled respondents was at 3.52 with a standard deviation of 0.99. This implies that most of the respondents were in agreement with most of the statements that were used to measure recognition practices. Nevertheless, significant standard deviation shows there were some variations implying that the recognition practices is not uniform amongst all the sampled firms. Achua and Lussier (2014) argued that employees who are much valued in organization tend to improve their performance and at the same time reduce turnover which positively affects organization performance. Otieno, Waiganjo and Njeru (2015) concurs with the above statement by stating that, in order to increase employee performance one of the significant factor that should be considered and which falls under the non-financial rewards is recognition. Bradler, Dur, Neckermann, and Non (2016) found that

recognition increases subsequent performance substantially, and particularly when recognition is exclusively provided to the best performers. Remarkably, workers who receive recognition are mainly responsible for this performance increase.

4.2 Linear Regression between Recognition Practices and Employee Engagement

The null hypothesis of the study sought to examine the significance of the causal and effect relationship between Recognition practices and employee engagement in Fairtrade horticultural firms in Kenya. The model (Recognition practices) was able to explain 20.3% of the variation in the Employee engagement in Fairtrade horticultural firms in Kenya as indicated by the R Square = 0.203 as shown in the model summary of Table 3. The ANOVA test results from table 4.30 were $F(1, 313) = 79.748, P = 0.000 < 0.05$; an indication that the Simple Linear Regression model was a good fit to our dataset.

The regression Coefficient results showed that $\beta = 0.692, t = 8.930, p = 0.000 < 0.05$; hence recognition practices had a statistically significant influence on the Employee engagement in Fairtrade horticultural firms in Kenya. Recognition practices had a positive standardized beta coefficient = 0.692 as shown in the coefficients results of Table 4.30; The findings presented show that Employee engagement is predicated to improve by 0.692 when the Recognition practices variable goes up by one unit. To predict the Employee engagement in Fairtrade horticultural firms in Kenya when given the level of Recognition practices, the study suggests the use of the following model;

$$\text{Employee engagement} = 1.249 + 0.692 \text{ Recognition practices}$$

Table 3: Linear Regression Analysis between Recognition practices and Employee engagement

Model Summary						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
1	.451 ^a	.203	.201	.88511		
a. Predictors: (Constant), Recognition practices						
b. Dependent Variable: Employee engagement						
ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	62.476	1	62.476	79.748	.000 ^b
	Residual	245.212	313	.783		
	Total	307.689	314			
a. Dependent Variable: Employee engagement						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Recognition practices						
Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		β	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.249	.307		4.065	.000
	Recognition practices	.692	.078	.451	8.930	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Employee engagement						

The above findings demonstrate that Employee engagement is positively influenced by Recognition practices. The findings corroborate with Ileri (2015) found that public recognition and appreciation for a job well done as factors that influence organizational performance. Other employees will be motivated by commendation letters, a lunch treat by the office or even having the employee of the month tag. Nyarwa (2017) ascertained that recognition motivates tea factory employees in Kenya to perform. According to the authors, employees are highly motivated when recognized with physical reward which led to performance improvement.

Although Luchivisi, Egessa and Muchilwa (2020) had similar results where he found out that a clear employee rewards policy enhances employee performance and cultivates a motivated work force, this was

not with the case of Bradler *et al.* (2016). The study found that recognition increases subsequent performance substantially, and particularly so when recognition is exclusively provided to the best performers. This implies that, workers who are not rewarded are demotivated to perform better as compared to those who were recognized and rewarded.

Tessema *et al.* (2015) found that not all employee recognition practices lead to organizational performance improvement. In their study, they found that compared to United States of America, recognition of employees in Malaysia and Vietnam does not result to improvement in organizational performance. This was mainly influenced by organizational culture of the organization specifically the process of selecting who to reward and the perception of employees toward the physical rewards. The study concluded that rewards may increase individual employee performance but not overall organization performance.

4.3 Discussion of the Results

The study found that most respondents agreed their employers or supervisors appreciated them for a job well done. This type of recognition is vital in enhancing employee engagement as it provides validation and acknowledgment of employees' efforts. According to Anitha and Begum (2022), regular appreciation contributes to an environment where employees feel valued and respected, which increases their overall job satisfaction and engagement. The findings are supported by Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, which suggests that recognition acts as a strong motivator by fulfilling employees' higher-level psychological needs. This, in turn, boosts their morale and encourages them to go above and beyond in their roles.

Employee involvement in decision-making was highlighted as a critical aspect of recognition in the study. When employees are included in decisions that affect their work, they feel a greater sense of control and influence, which strengthens their commitment to the organization. Kaur (2024) emphasized that decision-making involvement fosters a sense of empowerment, which is crucial for enhancing intrinsic motivation and engagement. This finding aligns with the principles of participative leadership, where leaders seek input from employees, thereby increasing their sense of ownership and responsibility towards organizational outcomes. In the context of Fairtrade horticultural firms, such practices can lead to more innovative solutions and higher productivity as employees feel their voices are heard and valued.

The study also indicated that recognition in the form of increased responsibility significantly impacts employee engagement. This finding is consistent with Deci and Ryan's (2021) Self-Determination Theory, which posits that opportunities for growth and the ability to tackle challenging tasks satisfy employees' psychological needs for competence and autonomy. When recognition is coupled with increased responsibilities, it signals trust and confidence in the employee's abilities, fostering a deeper sense of commitment and engagement. It also provides employees with the opportunity to develop new skills and advance in their careers, which can further boost their engagement and loyalty to the organization.

The provision of opportunities for higher positions as part of recognition practices was another significant finding of the study. Career development opportunities are a powerful motivator and can significantly influence employee engagement. Messah and Kariuki (2018) found that when employees perceive clear pathways for advancement, they are more likely to remain committed and engaged. Such opportunities not only reward past performance but also set the stage for future achievements, motivating employees to invest more effort into their work. In the competitive horticultural sector, where skilled labor is essential, offering advancement opportunities can help attract and retain top talent, thereby enhancing organizational performance.

The study confirmed a direct relationship between recognition practices and employee engagement, implying that effective recognition practices can significantly boost engagement levels. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.203$, $p = 0.000$) indicates that 20.3% of the variation in employee engagement can be explained by recognition practices. This is a substantial proportion, highlighting the importance of recognition in influencing engagement. However, the remaining 79.7% suggests that other factors, such as leadership style, work-life balance, and job security, also play crucial roles in shaping engagement levels. This finding is consistent with research by Tessema *et al.* (2021), which shows that while recognition is a key driver of engagement, a holistic approach that includes various factors is necessary to fully engage employees.

The study found that a unit increase in recognition practices leads to a significant increase in employee engagement by 0.692 units ($\beta_1 = 0.692$, $p = 0.001$). This implies that even small improvements in recognition practices can lead to meaningful enhancements in employee engagement. For instance, introducing regular performance reviews where positive feedback is provided, or establishing employee of the month programs, could result in noticeable improvements in engagement levels. This finding is particularly relevant for organizations with limited resources, as it demonstrates that even low-cost recognition initiatives can have a substantial impact on employee motivation and performance.

The study establishes recognition practices as significant predictors of employee engagement. This is crucial for Fairtrade horticultural firms, where labor conditions and employee welfare are central to the organization's values and operational standards. By focusing on recognition, these firms can align their management practices with Fairtrade principles, which emphasize fair treatment and support for workers. Effective recognition practices not only enhance employee satisfaction but also contribute to better organizational outcomes such as higher productivity, reduced absenteeism, and improved quality of products and services. This alignment between employee engagement and organizational goals is essential for the sustainability and growth of Fairtrade firms.

The study's findings have important implications for the strategic management of Fairtrade horticultural firms. By implementing structured recognition programs that are aligned with employees' preferences and organizational goals, firms can create a more positive work environment that fosters engagement and productivity. For instance, recognition programs that acknowledge team achievements can promote collaboration and improve team dynamics. Additionally, offering professional development opportunities as a form of recognition can help build a more skilled and committed workforce, thereby enhancing the firm's competitiveness in the global market.

Overall, the study demonstrates that recognition practices significantly influence employee engagement in Fairtrade horticultural firms in Kenya. Each of the specific aspects of recognition discussed—appreciation for good work, involvement in decision-making, increased responsibilities, and opportunities for advancement—contributes uniquely to enhancing engagement. By adopting a comprehensive approach to recognition, which includes both formal and informal methods, Fairtrade horticultural firms can foster a motivated and engaged workforce, ultimately leading to better organizational performance and employee satisfaction.

5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concluded that recognition practices significantly influence employee engagement in Fairtrade horticultural firms in Kenya. The rejection of the null hypothesis confirmed that effective recognition practices are essential in promoting higher levels of employee engagement, as evidenced by increased vigor, dedication, and alignment between personal and organizational values. These findings highlight the importance of implementing structured recognition programs, both monetary and non-monetary, to foster a motivated and engaged workforce.

The study revealed that various forms of recognition positively impact employee engagement. Monetary and non-monetary recognition programs, such as bonuses, awards, public acknowledgment, and certificates of appreciation, were shown to boost employee morale and encourage additional effort in their roles. Moreover, the delegation of power, allowing employees to take on leadership roles and participate in decision-making processes, contributed to a sense of ownership and responsibility, which further enhanced their engagement and commitment to the organization. Similarly, reward-based responsibilities and involvement in decision-making processes were found to strengthen employees' connection to the organization's goals and values, cultivating a deeper sense of loyalty and identification with the organization. This increased level of engagement not only benefits employees but also contributes to the overall success and sustainability of Fairtrade horticultural firms by aligning employees' efforts with organizational objectives.

Based on these findings, the study recommends several strategies to enhance employee engagement through effective recognition practices. Firstly, top management in horticultural firms should establish a comprehensive recognition framework that defines clear criteria and categories for recognizing outstanding

performance. This framework should encompass both monetary rewards, such as bonuses and salary increments, and non-monetary rewards, such as certificates of appreciation, employee of the month awards, and public acknowledgments. Recognition programs should be regular and personalized to cater to the diverse preferences of employees, making them more meaningful and effective. For instance, while some employees may value public recognition, others may prefer private acknowledgment or opportunities for professional development.

To ensure effective implementation, supervisors and middle managers should be equipped with the necessary tools and training to recognize employees appropriately. This includes training on providing constructive feedback, celebrating small wins, and recognizing contributions in a timely manner. Empowering supervisors to recognize their team members can strengthen team dynamics and foster a positive work environment. Additionally, recognition should be embedded into the organizational culture rather than being seen as a one-time event. Encouraging a culture where employees regularly appreciate each other's efforts can create a more supportive and cohesive workplace. Initiatives such as peer recognition programs, team celebrations, and shout-outs during meetings can facilitate this culture of recognition.

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