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From Moderate to High: Bridging the Employee Engagement Gap in Contemporary Organizations

Dr. Saloni Singhal Garg

Associate Professor, Faculty of Commerce and Management Studies, Ras Bihari Bose Subharti University, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India

Abstract-- Employee engagement remains one of the most critical determinants of organizational performance, yet contemporary research reveals a striking paradox: the vast majority of the global workforce occupies a zone of moderate engagement — neither fully committed nor actively disengaged. This paper addresses the underexplored gap between moderate and high employee engagement, examining why so few employees reach peak engagement levels (only 2% score 10/10) and what organizations can do to close this gap. Drawing on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), and AMO (Ability-Motivation-Opportunity) framework, this study synthesizes current HRM literature, empirical data from Gallup (2024), HR.com (2025), and Mercer (2024–2025), and proposes a strategic engagement escalation framework. Findings suggest that structural HRM interventions — including personalized development pathways, recognition architecture, and leadership capability building — are key levers for moving employees from satisfactory to exceptional engagement. Implications for HR practitioners and organizational leadership are discussed, alongside an agenda for future longitudinal research.

Keywords-- Employee Engagement, Motivation, HRM Practices, Organizational Performance Workforce Optimization, Engagement Antecedents, JD-R Model

I. INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement has emerged as one of the most extensively researched constructs in human resource management (HRM), organizational psychology, and leadership studies. Organizations worldwide have invested significantly in understanding what drives employees to bring their full selves — emotionally, cognitively, and behaviourally — to their work. Yet despite decades of research and significant organizational investment, a troubling reality persists: most employees worldwide remain only moderately engaged.

According to HR.com's State of Employee Productivity and Engagement (2025), just 2% of employees are rated at peak engagement (a score of 10 on a 10-point scale), while 27% cluster around 7 — a zone that signals moderate engagement without genuine thriving. This distribution reveals not simply a problem of disengagement, which is comparatively well-studied, but a distinct and underexplored challenge: the gap between being moderately engaged and being highly engaged.

This paper argues that this moderate-to-high engagement gap represents one of the most consequential and under addressed phenomena in contemporary HRM. Organizations that successfully move employees from average to exceptional engagement unlock disproportionate gains in productivity, retention, innovation, and customer satisfaction. Yet the mechanisms for achieving this transition remain poorly understood in both the academic literature and in practitioner contexts.

This study aims to: (1) define and conceptualize the moderate-to-high engagement gap; (2) identify its organizational antecedents and individual drivers; (3) examine existing theoretical frameworks that explain engagement trajectories; and (4) propose an evidence-based model for HRM practitioners to catalyse upward engagement mobility. The paper contributes to the growing body of engagement research by shifting the analytical focus from preventing disengagement to enabling peak engagement — a distinction with significant theoretical and practical implications.

1.1 Significance of the Research

The business case for high engagement is well-established. Gallup (2024) reports that organizations with highly engaged employees achieve 23% higher profitability and experience up to 43% lower turnover in low-turnover environments. Beyond financial outcomes, high engagement is associated with enhanced creativity, better customer service delivery, and stronger organizational resilience. However, if only 2% of employees are operating at peak engagement, organizations are leaving immense value unrealized — not because their workforce is disengaged, but because moderate engagement has become an accepted norm.

Critically, moderate engagement may be more insidious than disengagement: moderately engaged employees appear productive, display low turnover signals, and generate relatively little managerial concern. Yet their untapped discretionary effort represents the greatest unrealized resource in the modern organization. Identifying the barriers that constrain moderate employees from reaching high engagement — and the levers that unlock upward engagement mobility — is therefore a priority for both HRM scholarship and practice.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Defining Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is a multidimensional construct that has been conceptualized in various ways across the literature. Kahn (1990), widely credited with introducing the concept to organizational research, defined engagement as the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles, involving physical, cognitive, and emotional expression. Schaufeli et al. (2002) operationalized engagement through three dimensions: vigour (high energy and mental resilience), dedication (strong involvement and enthusiasm), and absorption (full concentration and engrossment in work).

For the purposes of this paper, we adopt HR.com's (2025) operational definition: employee engagement as employees' willingness to give their best at work and their emotional commitment to the organization and its goals. This definition captures both behavioural (discretionary effort) and attitudinal (emotional investment) dimensions and is aligned with practitioner measurement frameworks.

2.2 The Engagement Spectrum: From Disengaged to Highly Engaged

The engagement literature has traditionally been structured around a tripartite classification: engaged, not engaged, and actively disengaged (Gallup, 2024). This framework, while useful for macro-level diagnostics, obscures the important heterogeneity within each category. Employees who are "not engaged" — Gallup's largest category at 62% globally — span a wide range of motivation, commitment, and performance levels.

Recent measurement advances have enabled more granular analysis. HR.com's 10-point engagement scale reveals a distribution heavily concentrated between 6 and 8, with only 2% at the apex (10/10). This distribution suggests a non-linear engagement curve, where the returns from engagement investments may be asymmetric: interventions targeting employees near the bottom of the scale may have different mechanisms and costs than those targeting employees already near the top.

This paper focuses specifically on the upper portion of this spectrum — the transition from moderate engagement (scoring 6–8) to high engagement (scoring 9–10) — a zone that has received scant academic attention despite its significant organizational consequences.

2.3 Theoretical Frameworks

2.3.1 The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model

The JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) provides perhaps the most comprehensive framework for understanding engagement antecedents. The model posits that work characteristics can be broadly classified into job demands (aspects requiring sustained effort) and job resources (physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects that support goal achievement). Job resources are hypothesized to buffer the impact of demands on strain and to foster engagement through a motivational process.

Critically, the JD-R model predicts a non-linear relationship between resources and engagement: resources produce diminishing marginal returns on engagement as resource levels increase. This implies that for moderately engaged employees (who already possess adequate baseline resources), engagement escalation requires qualitatively different resources — such as autonomy, mastery, and growth opportunities — rather than simply more of the same.

2.3.2 Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) provides complementary insight into the psychological mechanisms underlying the moderate-to-high engagement gap. SDT posits that intrinsic motivation — and consequently engagement — is sustained and deepened when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy (sense of volition), competence (sense of effectiveness), and relatedness (sense of connection).

SDT offers an explanation for why moderate engagement persists as a ceiling for many employees: organizations frequently satisfy hygiene-level needs (adequate pay, job security, reasonable workload) without addressing higher-order psychological needs. Employees who feel competent at their jobs, connected to colleagues, but lack genuine autonomy — or who perceive limited opportunities for mastery and growth — will tend to stabilize at moderate engagement levels rather than progressing toward high engagement.

2.3.3 The AMO Framework

The Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) framework (Appelbaum et al., 2000) provides a practitioner-friendly model for HRM system design.

AMO theory posits that employee performance (and by extension, engagement) is a function of employees' ability (skills and knowledge), motivation (desire to perform), and opportunity (structural conditions enabling performance). HRM practices that enhance all three dimensions simultaneously are most likely to produce high engagement outcomes.

Applied to the moderate-to-high engagement gap, AMO theory suggests that moderately engaged employees often possess sufficient ability and adequate motivation but lack sufficient opportunity — either because organizational

structures limit their autonomy, their contributions are insufficiently recognized, or career pathways are unclear. Targeted HRM interventions that expand opportunity are therefore critical engagement escalation levers.

2.4 Antecedents of High Engagement: What the Evidence Shows

The existing literature identifies several robust antecedents of high engagement. Table 1 summarizes key drivers identified in recent empirical research.

Table 1: Key Antecedents of High Employee Engagement (2022–2025)

Engagement Driver	Evidence Source	Effect on Engagement	Gap Relevance
Meaningful feedback (weekly)	Gallup, 2024	Significant positive	Only 23% receive meaningful weekly feedback
Manager recognition	Gallup, 2024	Strong positive; reduces quit intent by 50%	One-third of workers receive regular recognition
Flexible/structured autonomy	ContactMonkey, 2025	Significant positive	Unstructured flexibility leads to burnout
Career growth opportunity	HR.com, 2025	Positive (36% of workers cite as key driver)	Often absent beyond manager-level roles
Organizational culture & trust	Mercer/Deloitte, 2024	Strong positive	Trust and equity are top unmet priorities
Manager emotional intelligence	Inflection HR, 2025	Significant positive	Most managers lack formal EQ training
Sustainable HRM practices	Peretz, 2024; Emerald, 2026	Moderates productivity positively	Understudied in non-Western contexts

III. THE MODERATE-TO-HIGH ENGAGEMENT GAP CONCEPTUALIZATION AND EVIDENCE

3.1 Defining the Gap

We define the moderate-to-high engagement gap as the persistent failure of organizations to move employees who demonstrate satisfactory levels of commitment, motivation, and performance to peak levels of emotional investment, discretionary effort, and organizational identification. This gap is empirically evidenced by the highly skewed distribution of engagement scores, wherein only 2% of employees achieve maximum engagement while the majority cluster in the 6–8 range (HR.com, 2025).

This gap is distinct from the widely-studied problem of disengagement (scores 1–4) and merits separate theoretical and practical attention.

The mechanisms, interventions, and barriers relevant to disengagement recovery differ substantially from those relevant to engagement escalation.

3.2 Why Moderate Engagement Persists

Several organizational and individual factors explain why moderate engagement becomes a stable equilibrium for many employees:

- *Absence of stretch goals and mastery challenges:* Employees who have mastered their roles may achieve competence satisfaction without reaching the higher-order engagement states associated with flow and purpose.

- *Recognition deficits:* Moderately engaged employees often receive adequate but not exceptional recognition — enough to prevent disengagement but insufficient to trigger emotional commitment escalation.
- *Structural opportunity constraints:* Mid-level employees frequently encounter glass ceilings in autonomy and decision-making authority, limiting the sense of ownership that drives peak engagement.
- *Generic rather than personalized engagement strategies:* Most organizational engagement initiatives are one-size-fits-all, failing to address the diverse motivational profiles of a heterogeneous workforce.
- *Manager capability gaps:* HR.com (2025) identifies manager skills in fostering engagement as a critical gap in organizational practice, with only 11% of organizations rating their managers as highly effective engagement enablers.

3.3 The Cost of the Gap

While moderately engaged employees do not exhibit the overt productivity losses and turnover signals associated with actively disengaged employees, the opportunity cost of the gap is substantial:

- *Discretionary effort differential:* High-engagement employees voluntarily contribute significantly more effort, innovation, and organizational citizenship behaviours than moderate-engagement counterparts.
- *Advocacy and referral deficits:* The Survey Initiative (2024) reports advocacy dropped from 81.79% to 77.02% between 2023 and 2024 — a direct consequence of insufficient engagement escalation. Moderately engaged employees are unlikely to actively promote their organization as an employer of choice.
- *Innovation suppression:* Engaged employees are more creative and agile (ContactMonkey, 2025); moderate engagement constrains the risk-taking and initiative-taking behaviours that fuel organizational innovation.
- *Competitive vulnerability:* Organizations that accept moderate engagement as sufficient expose themselves to talent poaching by organizations that invest in engagement escalation as a strategic differentiator.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This paper adopts a systematic literature review and synthesis methodology, drawing on published empirical studies, longitudinal surveys, and practitioner reports to construct a grounded conceptual framework.

Secondary data from Gallup (2024), HR.com (2025), Mercer (2024–2025), Deloitte (2024), and peer-reviewed journals indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar are analyzed and integrated.

The review encompasses literature published between 2019 and 2026, with particular emphasis on post-pandemic engagement research (2021–2026). Search terms included: employee engagement escalation, moderate engagement ceiling, high engagement antecedents, engagement peak performance, HRM engagement interventions, and motivation optimization.

4.2 Conceptual Framework Development

The study integrates three complementary theoretical lenses — JD-R, SDT, and AMO — to construct a multi-level framework for understanding and addressing the moderate-to-high engagement gap. This multi-theoretical approach is consistent with calls in the literature (Schaufeli, 2017; Bakker & Albrecht, 2018) for integrative models that capture the complexity of engagement dynamics.

4.3 Limitations

As a conceptual and synthesis paper, this study does not present primary empirical data. The proposed framework therefore requires empirical validation through longitudinal, multi-site research designs. Additionally, the majority of engagement data drawn upon derives from Western, English-speaking organizational contexts, limiting generalizability. Future research should test the proposed model in diverse cultural and sector contexts.

V. THE ENGAGEMENT ESCALATION FRAMEWORK: A STRATEGIC HRM MODEL

Drawing on the theoretical foundations and empirical evidence reviewed above, this paper proposes the Engagement Escalation Framework (EEF) — a strategic HRM model designed to move employees from moderate to high engagement through targeted, multi-level interventions.

Figure 1: The Engagement Escalation Framework (EEF) — conceptual representation

5.1 Level 1: Foundation — Ensuring Engagement Hygiene Factors

Before escalation is possible, organizations must ensure the baseline conditions that prevent disengagement are solidly established.

These include fair compensation, psychological safety, adequate workload management, and respectful leadership. These are necessary but insufficient conditions for high engagement.

Critically, many organizations misidentify hygiene satisfaction as engagement success. Employees can score 6–7 on engagement scales while all hygiene factors are met — they are comfortable but not inspired. Recognition of this distinction is the first strategic step.

5.2 Level 2: Personalization — Tailoring the Engagement Experience

The single most important lever for escalating moderate engagement is personalization. Research consistently demonstrates that generic engagement programmes fail to move employees from satisfactory to exceptional engagement because they do not address individual motivational profiles (Inflection HR, 2025).

Key personalization strategies include:

- *Individual Development Plans (IDPs)* aligned with employees' personal ambitions and organizational needs — not generic career ladders.
- *Motivational profiling:* Identifying whether employees are driven by mastery, purpose, autonomy, social connection, or achievement, and calibrating management approaches accordingly.
- *Flexible role design:* Creating stretch assignments, project leadership opportunities, and cross-functional collaborations that address individual need for growth and challenge.

5.3 Level 3: Recognition Architecture — Moving Beyond Acknowledgement

Standard recognition practices — annual performance reviews, spot bonuses, employee-of-the-month schemes — are insufficient to drive peak engagement because they are retrospective, generic, and often delayed. High engagement is associated with a qualitatively different recognition experience.

Gallup (2024) reports that only one in three U.S. workers strongly agreed they received meaningful recognition in the past seven days. The EEF recommends:

- *Real-time, specific recognition:* Immediate acknowledgement of discrete contributions, tied to organizational values and strategic outcomes.
- *Peer recognition infrastructure:* Platforms and cultural norms that enable colleagues to recognize each other, expanding the recognition network beyond direct managers.

- *Meaning-making recognition:* Helping employees understand how their individual contributions connect to team outcomes, organizational mission, and societal impact.

5.4 Level 4: Leadership Capability — Building Engagement-Enabling Managers

Manager quality is the single most powerful contextual predictor of engagement escalation. HR.com (2025) identifies manager skills in fostering engagement as the most critical and underinvested capability gap in organizational HRM. The EEF recommends targeted investment in:

- *Coaching and conversational skills:* Training managers to conduct high-quality, strength-based conversations that identify and remove individual engagement barriers.
- *Emotional intelligence development:* Equipping managers to recognize and respond to diverse emotional and motivational states in their teams.
- *Engagement-focused performance management:* Shifting manager accountability from output metrics alone to include engagement outcomes as a measure of leadership effectiveness.

5.5 Level 5: Structural Opportunity Expansion

The AMO framework highlights opportunity as a critical and frequently under-leveraged engagement escalation lever. High engagement requires that employees have genuine opportunities to apply their abilities and motivation in ways that matter. Structural interventions include:

- *Decision-making authority delegation:* Extending meaningful autonomy to employees at all levels, not just senior roles.
- *Innovation time and spaces:* Allocating dedicated resources for employees to pursue ideas, experiment, and contribute beyond their formal job description.
- *Cross-functional visibility:* Creating opportunities for employees to contribute to and be recognized by leaders and peers outside their immediate team.

VI. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 The Gap is Real, Measurable, and Costly

The evidence synthesized in this paper confirms that the moderate-to-high engagement gap is not a statistical artefact but a genuine organizational phenomenon with significant performance and talent implications.



The concentration of engagement scores in the 6–8 range, with only 2% at the apex (HR.com, 2025), suggests that current HRM practices are effective at preventing the worst outcomes of disengagement but largely ineffective at enabling peak performance states.

The decline in motivation scores from 81.55% to 75.13% between 2023 and 2024 (The Survey Initiative, 2024) indicates that the gap may be widening, not closing, under existing approaches. This trend warrants urgent strategic attention from HRM leaders.

6.2 The Theoretical Integration Yields New Insights

Integrating JD-R, SDT, and AMO frameworks reveals complementary explanations for the persistence of the moderate engagement ceiling. JD-R highlights that moderately engaged employees may possess adequate resources but require qualitatively different, higher-order resources (autonomy, mastery challenges, growth opportunities) to progress further. SDT explains why adequate hygiene satisfaction does not translate to high engagement: without the fulfilment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness at elevated levels, intrinsic motivation remains constrained. AMO theory pinpoints opportunity expansion as the most frequently neglected HRM lever.

6.3 Implications for HRM Practice

The EEF proposed in this paper has several practical implications:

- Engagement measurement must become more granular: Tripartite (engaged/not engaged/disengaged) metrics mask the critical heterogeneity in the middle of the distribution. Organizations should adopt 10-point scales and track the proportion of employees in the 9–10 range as a KPI.

- HRM strategy must explicitly target the moderate-to-high transition: Current engagement strategies are predominantly designed to address disengagement. A parallel strategic track focused on escalating moderate engagement requires separate design, resources, and accountability.
- Manager development is non-negotiable: The evidence clearly identifies manager quality as the most powerful proximal driver of engagement escalation. Investment in manager coaching capability, emotional intelligence, and engagement-focused performance management is essential.
- Personalization at scale requires technology investment: AI-powered HR platforms that enable personalized development pathways, real-time recognition, and motivational profiling at scale are increasingly important infrastructure for engagement escalation strategies.

6.4 Workforce Segment Heterogeneity

An important nuance in the evidence concerns differential engagement patterns across workforce segments. Hourly workers show significantly lower engagement and declining motivation trends compared to salaried peers (Mercer, 2024–2025), suggesting the moderate-to-high gap may be wider and more intractable in frontline workforce contexts. The EEF must be adapted to account for structural constraints (shift work, limited manager contact, restricted autonomy) that are more prevalent in hourly work environments.

VII. RESEARCH AGENDA AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This paper identifies a number of critical research gaps that should inform the next generation of employee engagement scholarship:

Table 2: Proposed Research Agenda for the Moderate-to-High Engagement Gap

Research Priority	Research Question	Recommended Method
Engagement trajectory modelling	What individual and organizational factors predict upward vs. plateau engagement trajectories over time?	Longitudinal panel study (3–5 years)
EEF empirical validation	Do the five EEF levels operate as a sequence or in parallel? Which levels have greatest escalation impact?	Randomized controlled trial / quasi-experimental
Hourly worker escalation	What modified engagement escalation strategies are effective in frontline, hourly workforce contexts?	Multi-site field study
Cultural moderators	How do national culture, power distance, and collectivism moderate the moderate-to-high engagement transition?	Cross-national comparative study
Digital HRM and engagement	How do AI-powered HRM systems affect the quality and personalization of engagement escalation interventions?	Mixed methods (survey + case study)
SME engagement escalation	Do the mechanisms and barriers of engagement escalation differ in small and medium enterprises vs. large organizations?	Comparative case study design
ROI of escalation investments	What is the financial return on investment of targeted moderate-to-high engagement escalation programmes?	Longitudinal financial performance analysis

VIII. CONCLUSION

The question of why most employees are moderately engaged — and what prevents them from reaching peak engagement — is one of the most consequential and underexplored problems in contemporary HRM. This paper has argued that the moderate-to-high engagement gap is distinct from the disengagement problem that has historically dominated engagement research, and that it requires dedicated theoretical attention and strategic HRM investment.

Drawing on JD-R theory, Self-Determination Theory, and the AMO framework, and synthesizing empirical evidence from leading engagement research bodies, this paper has proposed the Engagement Escalation Framework (EEF): a five-level strategic model that addresses foundation conditions, personalization, recognition architecture, leadership capability, and structural opportunity expansion.

The practical implications are clear: organizations that measure engagement only in terms of disengagement prevention, invest only in generic engagement programmes, and fail to develop manager capability as engagement escalation agents will continue to leave their most valuable potential resource — the discretionary effort of their moderately engaged workforce — largely unrealized.

The theoretical and empirical groundwork laid in this paper provides a platform for a new research agenda. Longitudinal studies, randomized interventions, and cross-cultural comparative designs are needed to validate, refine, and extend the EEF across diverse organizational contexts. The goal is clear: to move from a world where 2% of employees operate at peak engagement to one where high engagement is the norm rather than the rare exception.



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