



A quantitative analysis of the impact of a company's sustainability strategy on employee engagement

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the MSc in International Management, Strategy and Consulting, at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa,

1st of June 2023

Abstract English

This dissertation “A quantitative analysis of the impact of a company’s sustainability strategy on employee engagement” has been written by Alina Burghard in the Responsible Business seminar and explores the effects a sustainability strategy can have on employee engagement. Drawing upon literature from various disciplines, including corporate sustainability, employee engagement, organisational behaviour, and the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals, the study analyses the relationship between a company's sustainability initiatives and the level of engagement of its employees. The research employs a quantitative questionnaire with 412 survey respondents across industries and various age groups. The results indicated that a well-executed corporate sustainability strategy, a sense of purpose and meaningful work, positively impact employee engagement. Sustainability and sustainable business practices are by far the most appreciated commitments valued by employees. In addition to that, employees who are involved in sustainability-related activities and initiatives tend to feel more engaged and fulfilled at their work, which in turn are important prerequisites for greater job satisfaction, motivation, and productivity. The study also highlights a positive correlation between job fulfilment and a company’s positive impact on nature and society. Lastly, the thesis emphasises the importance of a well implemented sustainability strategy and a leading-by-example management style to maximise employee engagement. By providing practical insights and recommendations for managers, the findings may help organisations seeking to implement or improve sustainability practices and enhance employee engagement. Acknowledging that an effective sustainability strategy is crucial to ensure long-term company’s success.

Keywords

Sustainable Development Goals, Sustainability Strategy, Employee Engagement, Employee Fulfilment, Job Satisfaction, Responsible Business, Sustainable Business Practices, Purpose at Work, Impact-driven Company Strategy

Português Abstracto

Esta dissertação, intitulada "Uma análise quantitativa dos impactos da estratégia de sustentabilidade de uma empresa no envolvimento dos trabalhadores", foi escrita por Alina Burghard no seminário Responsible Business e explora os efeitos de uma estratégia de sustentabilidade no envolvimento dos trabalhadores. Com base na literatura de diversas disciplinas e dos Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável das Nações Unidas, o estudo analisa a relação entre as iniciativas de sustentabilidade de uma empresa e o nível de envolvimento dos seus trabalhadores. A investigação utiliza uma amostra de 412 inquiridos. Os resultados indicam que uma estratégia de sustentabilidade empresarial bem executada e com um propósito definido têm um impacto positivo no empenho dos trabalhadores. A sustentabilidade e as práticas empresariais sustentáveis são os compromissos mais apreciados pelos trabalhadores. Além disso, os funcionários envolvidos em iniciativas relacionadas com a sustentabilidade tendem a sentir-se mais empenhados e realizados, o que constitui um pré-requisito importante para uma maior satisfação no trabalho, motivação e produtividade. O estudo também destaca uma correlação positiva entre a realização profissional e o impacto positivo de uma empresa na natureza e sociedade. Por fim, a tese enfatiza a importância de uma estratégia de sustentabilidade bem implementada e de uma gestão que dê o exemplo para maximizar o envolvimento dos funcionários. Ao disponibilizar percepções e recomendações práticas para os gestores, os resultados podem ajudar organizações a melhorar as práticas de sustentabilidade e aumentar o envolvimento dos funcionários. Reconhecendo que uma estratégia eficaz de sustentabilidade é crucial para garantir o sucesso da empresa a longo prazo.

Palavras-chave

Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável, Estratégia de Sustentabilidade, Envolvimento dos Colaboradores, Satisfação dos Colaboradores, Satisfação no Trabalho, Negócio Responsável, Práticas Empresariais Sustentáveis, Propósito no Trabalho, Estratégia de Empresa Orientada para o Impacto

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest appreciation and gratitude towards the following individuals whose support and contributions have helped me achieve the successful completion of my Master's thesis.

First, I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Nuno Moreira da Cruz, whose guidance, support, and valuable feedback have been instrumental throughout my Thesis journey. My professor's constructive criticism and timely assistance were very helpful in shaping my study design and methodology.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Karina Besold and Nico Burchhardt, for their valuable guidance and suggestions that have greatly enhanced the quality of my research work. I am happy to be a part of Plenty2Share and to contribute my research findings to the project.

In addition, I would like to thank the 412 participants of my study whose time and effort made this research project possible.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family and friends, whose love and unwavering support have helped me overcome numerous obstacles and achieve this academic accomplishment.

Thank you all for your contributions, support, and for supporting me in this Dissertation's process.



Alina Burghard, 01st of June 2023

1. Introduction

The current climate crisis is having a severe impact on our daily lives and is a serious threat for long-term humane existence on earth. Major shifts in climate and in society push companies and organizations to rethink their role they play in society as well as their impact on society, natural resources, and the environment. Businesses are increasingly being held accountable for their impact on society and the environment and employees' expectations on sustainable business practices grow. Deloitte's study from 2021 found out the employee generations Millennials¹ and Gen Zs² are "value-driven and deeply concerned about environmental and social issues". While Millennials and Gen Zs are positive about their commitment to protect the environment, they are concerned about the influences companies and business leaders have on climate and society. However, there are various possibilities and opportunities for companies to drive meaningful change on problems that matter most to stakeholder, such as racial justice, inequality, and climate change.

Employees are a company's most critical innovator and brand ambassador. They care about where they work and about their employer's sustainability efforts. Organisations need to respond to their employee's needs to drive the company's long-term growth and success. The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet and can be used as a guide for companies and organisations to develop more sustainable business practices and values (UN 2023). In 2015, the UN General Assembly presented the "2030 Agenda for sustainable development", which consists of 17 sustainable development goals and 169 targets. The 17 goals can be divided in economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.



Figure 1: The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals

¹ The generation Millennials is born between 1981 and 1995.

² The Gen Z is born between 1995 and 2012.

This master's thesis is a quantitative analysis, focusing on the impacts of a corporate's sustainability strategy on employee engagement. The questionnaire of this thesis mentions the SDGs as an indicator for a company's sustainability engagement. The objectives of the thesis are to find out if a company's focus on SDGs means higher employee fulfilment and engagement, which is covered by the first research question. The second research question aims to explore most effective methods and reasons for engaging employees in a company's commitment to achieving SDGs. The literature review reveals that higher employee engagement has positive effects on both the workforce and the company. The most important prerequisites on employee level are passion and value-driven work, as well as identification with the employer's values. On a company's level people-oriented management, genuine interest in employee's well-being, trust and safety, and meaningful work are most important. These antecedents lead to employee satisfaction and excellence, an increase in efficiency and creativity as well as positive behaviour, better health, and less employee turnover. Thus, a company's efficiency and productivity increase, and ensures a competitive advantage and long-term business success.

The main part of the thesis represents a quantitative questionnaire of 412 survey respondents from various industries. Through the questionnaire most important prerequisites for employees are analysed to ensure a high employee fulfilment and engagement. The study also explores a positive correlation between employees' fulfilment at work and the work's impact on nature and society. Further, the study results emphasise transparency on the impacts of the business processes and strategies on society and nature for being able to improve and enhance business processes. Organisations should cooperate with employees and create solutions together to tackle the world's most pressing challenges. Industries should be reimaged to create value for all stakeholders including society and our planet earth. Including SDGs in a company's strategy are not about better branding for a company, it is about our existential continuity. Implementing SDGs demonstrates how the company measures up to others in the realms of environmental protection and social engagement. Both employees and companies can and should be active and open to change and adapt. A shift towards more sustainable business practices starts with conscious employees, a shared knowledge, and motivation for a higher purpose among the workforce.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Employee engagement definition and attributes

Companies are constantly striving to increase their performance. Managers and business owners are challenged to put their companies ahead of competitors and tackle current trends and challenges at the same time. Besides suggested business techniques and concepts, using technology to advance operations and products, “the attention of managers is shifting towards the employee’s side of organisations” (Markos 89). That is because employee engagement and commitment are supposed to be a prerequisite to a company’s efficiency and productivity, as well as contributing to a competitive gain (Markos 89). Employee engagement not only increases productivity and overall performance, it also “creates a productive work environment, reduces non-attendance and employees leaving” (Baran 4). It is known to serve as a predictor of a company’s ability to cope effectively with difficult situations and pertains to build an emotional relationship between an employee and an organisation (Baran 4). According to Baran, “more engaged employees are more efficient, creative, and more likely to provide constructive criticism”, which all enhances a company’s performance and long-term success. Any initiatives for improvement taken by the management and business leaders cannot be successful without the genuine involvement and engagement of employees. People-oriented management and active participation are strong, positive, and significant predictors of work engagement (Baran 3). Employee engagement is defined as follows:

“A positive attitude held by the employee towards the organization and its value. An engaged employee is aware of business context and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organization. The organization must work to develop and nurture engagement, which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee.”

The definition shows that employee engagement is a two-way relationship that implies actions need to be done on both sides to ensure a company’s long-term success and performance. While employee satisfaction with the employment arrangement is not enough to retain and attract talent, an employee’s passion and commitment add up to employee engagement. It is “the willingness to invest oneself and expand one’s discretionary effort to help the employer succeed” that is crucial and the strongest predictor of organisational performance (Markos 90). Other important attributes of employee engagement are positive attachment and willingness to

devote energy to the success of the company, being a proud member of the company's workforce and identifying oneself with it. High employee engagement translates into taking innovative, proactive initiatives and seeking opportunities to contribute an employee's best efforts and going the extra mile beyond the employment contract (Markos 91).

In 2005, the Development Dimensions International states five main actions a company can engage in to create a highly engaged workforce, which is to align efforts with the company's strategy, empower employees, promote and encourage teamwork and collaboration, help people grow and develop and provide support and recognition where appropriate (Markos 91). In addition to that, a Talent Report from 2003, identified workplace attributes, like the senior management's interest in employees' well-being, challenging work, and decision-making authority, to be drivers for employee engagement. Newer research confirms the relevance of safety, availability, meaningfulness, and purposefulness of work as important psychological antecedents to ensure employee engagement (Baran 4).

Concluding it is to say that employees will be engaged most in work if an organisation treats employees as partners, pays attention to cooperation and teamwork, and places trust in employees. In addition to that, managers should show respect towards their employees while cultivating their willingness to act, make decisions, and take responsibility. At the same time an organisation needs to act ethically (Baran 11). On the contrary, treating employees as only a source of profit, supervising and micromanaging them leads to a considerably smaller level of engagement.

2.2 Theoretical frameworks on employee engagement

Kahn's Needs-Satisfaction framework concentrates on the already above-mentioned prerequisites of meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Meaningfulness in this context means a sense of return on investments of self in role performance and is influenced by the nature of the job, its tasks, roles and work interactions. Safety is meant in the sense of being able to show and employ self without fear of negative consequences for oneself, one's status or career. Furthermore, psychological safety is mainly influenced by the social environment, intergroup dynamics, management styles, and organisational norms (Sun 68). Lastly, Kahn's framework defines availability in the sense of having the physical, emotional, and psychological resources

necessary for investing oneself in role performances. Further, it depends on the personal resources employees can contribute to their performances, such as physical or emotional energies, insecurity, and one's social life.

Another framework used to explain employee engagement is the Job Demands-Resources Model, which believes that the working environments can always be classified as either job demands or job resources, even though different organisations may be confronted with different working environments (Sun 68). Physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of a job that require sustained physical and/ or psychological cognitive or emotional effort refer to job demands. High work pressure, role overload, poor environmental conditions, and reorganisational problems are examples of job demands. Job resources, on the other hand, refer to physical, psychological, social, or organisational aspects of the job that are either (1) functional in achieving work goals; (2) reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological effort; (3) stimulate personal growth and development (Sun 69). Therefore, the Job Demands-Resources model explains the assumption of a possible higher employee engagement by providing more job-related resources to an employee.

Lastly, the social-exchange theory is another, more theoretical rationale for explaining employee engagement. This theory states that the relationship between the employee and the employer is based on reciprocity, in which a request for return will lead to beneficial results for both parties (Sun 69). One party, the employee, is contributing or providing a service to the other party, the company, and expects a return in the future. At the same time, the employer produces a sense of responsibility returning to the employee that actively engages the employee to gain more benefits in the future. "Employees are loyal to the organisation and work hard in exchange for economic benefits, social rewards, establishing the organisation-employee relationship" (Sun 69). Consequently, employees choose their level of engagement in response to the returns they receive from their employer.

Summarising the different frameworks, employee engagement can be categorised in organisational, job, and individual factors. Organisational factors are leadership, superior support, job resources or fairness, whereas job factors are defined by the work environment, job participation, or job enrichment. Individual factors can be summed up as extraversion, resilience, or self-consciousness. Typical high employee engagement attributes would be enthusiasm, excellence, satisfaction, and devotion, having a positive impact on organisational

performance, like productivity, profitability, and customer or employee loyalty (Sun 70). Further, specified outcomes of employee engagement are more overtime, less willingness to leave, positive behaviour, better health, out-of-role performance, less employee turnover, or higher return to shareholders (Sun 74).

2.3 SDG achievement and linkage to employee engagement

“Climate change ranks as a top priority for C-level executives in Deloitte’s latest survey, with 75% reporting that their organisations increased sustainability investments over the past year in spite of economic and geopolitical uncertainties.” (Ocuzoglu 2023)

In addition to financial profits, organisations set themselves new goals, focusing on individual, communal, and environmental-friendly performance, and development. The awareness and importance of social, ethical, and ecological objectives rise, and it is becoming difficult for companies to ignore these trends. Companies already start implementing the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, turning towards sustainable business practices and products, supporting a greener, more sustainable future. Employee engagement and sustainable human resource management (HRM) play a key role in developing a sustainable work environment and in facilitating the accomplishment of the SDGs (Chams 109).

Concerning the exponential growth of human economic expansion, which has a devastating effect on both the environment and the world’s natural resources, studies have drawn attention to the impact of the human factor on sustainable development and resource preservation. According to Chams, a successful HRM can contribute most to the fulfilment of the SDGs both at an institutional and corporate level. The 2030 Agenda describes itself as “an Agenda of the people, by the people, and for the people – and this will ensure its success”. Accordingly, there can be drawn a clear link between the human element as both the initiator and the beneficiary of the implementation of the SDGs. “Human resource management and the SDGs are interconnected through the common component of the human factor since people’s attitudes, behaviours, and resource consumption have a direct impact on social and ecological practices” (Chams 111). There are specific examples of how a company’s employees together with the functional areas can be re-conceptualised to meet the global goals.

A study from Deloitte in 2021 about Millennials³ and Gen Zs⁴, which are the new employee generation, entering and influencing a company's workforce, are described as "value-driven and deeply concerned about environmental and social issues". It is said, they take action to drive the change they want to see in the world. Millennials and Gen Zs tend to believe in their power to make a difference but also demand businesses to do their part in helping to build a better future. As they are a large and increasingly influential cohort, employers should take their concerns and drive into account when aiming to increase employee engagement and their company's performance.

The Sustainable Development Goals require appropriate institutional support to integrate them effectively into companies and practices (Bernstein 2). In addition to that, it is crucial to coordinate activities, secure interlinkages, mobilise resources for implementation, and monitor progress for successful and sustained implementation (Bernstein 3). Advantages through interlinkages can be gained across sectors and actors such as local authorities, government agencies, the private sector, and civil society (Stafford-Smith 911).

Multi-stakeholder partnerships in combination with a coherent policy and institutional collaboration link sectors and actors through strong global and national integrated development plans. The linkage can be enabled by encouraging widespread adoption of the SDGs as a legitimate common standard approach (Stafford-Smith 915). As multi-stakeholder partnerships voluntary associations between different actors, such as civil society organisations, the private sector, philanthropic organisations, and international organisations are targeted. "Increasing emphasis is being placed on these partnerships to participate in developing and implementing policies for sustainable development." However, there is growing evidence that their success in developing and implementing various policies is highly dependent on engaging the right set of stakeholders, as well as sustained funding, and organisational learning (Pattberg 45). This chapter further evaluates the right engagement of the very important stakeholder: employees.

In general, there are operational and managerial functions that can be incorporated by firms to enhance and promote sustainable practices. Operational functions consist of strategic process comprising policy-making, planning, implementation, auditing, action-correction, and performance assessment all regarding sustainability (Chams 113). Further topics such as

³ The generation Millennials is born between 1981 and 1995.

⁴ The generation Z is born between 1995 and 2012.

compliance with regulations, sustainability protocols, consistent reporting of environmental and social issues, transparent disclosure, and monitoring and evaluating the sustainable practices need to be considered. In addition to that, resources should be used, and processes developed in a manner that does not harm society or the environment.

In more detail, it is crucial to create a shared understanding of how progress towards sustainability goals enhance value for both the company, and for society and nature. A clear and transparent communication of the business case and how it can complement progress towards other business goals plays a significant role (SDG Compass 2023). To ensure the most effectivity, a company's sustainability goals "should be an integral part of its full set of financial, strategic, and operational goals, alongside goals for areas such as sales and productivity. Ultimately, the sustainability ambitions will also be reflected in the vision, mission, and purpose statements of the company, thereby fundamentally and prominently tying the company's future success to sustainable development" (SDG Compass 2023).

"Governance challenges that are central to implementing SDGs are: (i) cultivating collective action by creating inclusive decision spaces for stakeholder interaction across multiple sectors and scales; (ii) making difficult trade-offs, focusing on equity, justice, and fairness; and (iii) ensuring mechanisms exist to hold societal actors to account regarding decision-making, investment, action, and outcomes. These three areas are particularly important because they "reflect integrative governance capabilities needed to make progress beyond business-as-usual approaches" (Bowen 2017).

Concerning the managerial functions, HRM "must secure support from top-level management, boost employees' empowerment, provide continuous training, implement an efficient system of remuneration, and build cross-functional teamwork" (Chams 114). Especially training, interactive skills, team building, benchmarking, and brainstorming contribute to emphasise the importance of addressing social and environmental issues within a company. In addition to that, managers should provide autonomy and empowerment to the employees to enhance a participative working environment. Lastly, according to Chams, human resource management should form cross-functional groups to facilitate the collaboration and coordination between various organisational divisions. The impact HRM has on the SDGs is directly targeted to (3) health and wellbeing, (5) gender equality, (8) decent work and economic growth, (10) reduction of inequality, (12) responsible consumption and production, and (17) implementation and

revitalisation of global partnerships (Chams 115). Nurturing the human aspect of a workforce leads to a better understanding of sustainable human resource management and increases the potential to encourage sustainable performance in the workforce and consequentially for the organisation.

However, an employee's attitude and behaviour in the workplace in relation to social and environmental concerns is always dependent on their personal views and priorities. A lack of knowledge and awareness, or resources could also make it difficult for an employee to adopt sustainable behaviours at the workplace. That is why an informative, supportive workplace culture, as well as top-down support are crucial prerequisites to developing sustainable actions and to achieving SDGs as a company. Concluding, sustainability transformations start with the right engagement of employees and are necessary on a global scale to drive sustainable growth strategies and ensure a thriving humane future on planet Earth.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Explanation of the quantitative approach

The objective of the study was to examine the relationship between the existence and achievement of Sustainable Development Goals in a company and effects on employee engagement. The first research question targets to answer if SDGs are present in a company's policies and targets, what are the effects on employee engagement? While the second research question tries to understand how to best encourage employees to act towards achieving the SDGs.

RQ1: What is the impact of a company's sustainability strategy on employee fulfilment and engagement?

RQ2: What are the most effective methods and reasons for engaging employees in a company's commitment to achieving Sustainable Development Goals?

From the end of March to the end of April 2023, for 25 days, a questionnaire-based quantitative study⁵ was carried out on a group of 412 people. The respondents were selected through random sampling as the survey was posted through several media, like LinkedIn or WhatsApp, and addressed to a network of multiple people. As with the questionnaire, employees in general are addressed and across different sectors, no restrictions on the recipients were needed.

The first part of the questionnaire (Q1-3) is used to find out the demographic attributes of the respondents, such as the age, the gender, and industry in which the respondents work in. While the second part (Q4-6) is aimed to explore the respondents' fulfilment at work, the most important factors to be motivated at work and which impact the respondents' work has on nature and society. To answer question 4 "Do you feel fulfilled at work?" and question 6 "How would you describe your impact on nature and society with your work?" a semantic differential scale from -2 (not at all or negative impact) to +2 (very much or positive impact) was used to indicate the survey participant's rating. Further, the questionnaire is focused on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and is targeted to find out if and why the respondents personally engage in sustainable projects or actions (Q7-8). Lastly, questions 9-14 are chosen to explore the employer's SDG engagement and its effects on the employee. A semantic differential scale from -2 to +2 was again used for question 9 "How much is your employer engaged in SDGs?" and question 10 "How important is it for you that your employer engages in environmental or societal positive actions?". The scale ranged from "not at all" to "very much" for these questions. Question 13 was the only qualitative question of the survey to get an understanding of what motivates employees most to act and work towards sustainable goals. From the qualitative answers it was possible to derive specific examples and suggestions an employer can focus on.

The differentiation on age has been made with regards to the segmentation into Generation Z (25 and younger), Millennials (26-34), and Generation X and above, including more senior employees until the retirement age (35-56). The last segmentation is to consider retired or soon-to-be retired employees (57 and older). In total, 412 employees participated (211 women and 201 men), of whom 19% (79) are aged 25 and younger, and 50% (206) are aged between 26-34. 25% (103) are in the age group of 35-56 years old and over the age of 57 formed a minority in the sample with only 6% (24) of all respondents.

⁵ The questionnaire can be examined in appendice B

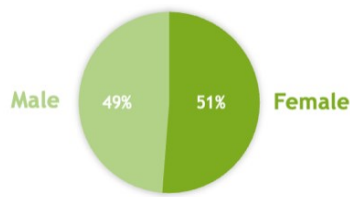


Figure 3: The survey respondents gender distribution

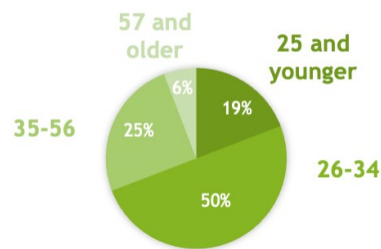


Figure 2: The survey respondents age distribution

The most represented industries of the survey respondents can be found in Figure 4 below. Finance and Banking is the most represented industry, followed by Technology and Consulting. 56 respondents indicated “Other” industry and mentioned Administration or Government, Marketing, Science and Research, Agriculture, Logistics, Non-profit, HR, Tourism, or Energy Supply. Administration and Government build the largest share among “Other” with 20 participants working in the Public Sector.

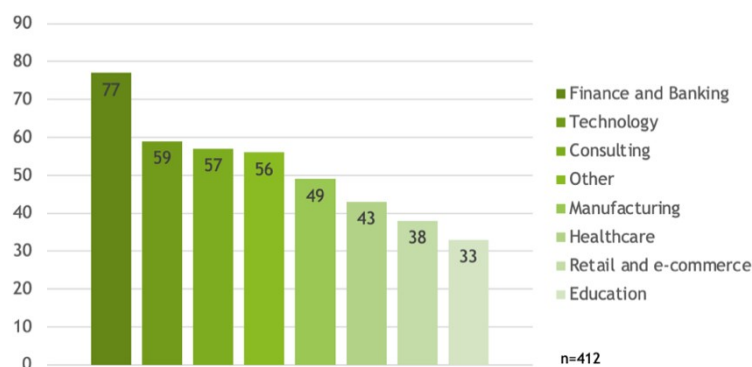


Figure 4: Most represented industries of the survey respondents (n answers given)

3.2 Limitations and constraints

This thesis attempts to research and study the effects of an SDG strategy on employee engagement but could not capture all the studies in areas related to employee engagement because of limited time and resources. Further, too many research findings about the definitions, theoretical frameworks, antecedents, or outcomes of employee engagement led to the review of only some studies according to the author’s propensity. Thus, bias and incompleteness of the review are unpreventable. Results are dependent on an individual’s perception and views, including emotions and different behaviours at the workplace as well as personality traits.

Employee fulfilment and engagement both have an impact on employee demographics and cultural differences, which could not be considered due to restricted time and resources. Further, employee engagement refers to individual engagement, not involving the team and organisational engagement which further impacts employee engagement. Additionally, the quantitative study sample size or the validity and reliability of the measurements may have impacted the results and influenced the findings.

4. Empirical Results

4.1 Employee engagement and fulfilment at work

Chapter 4 builds the main part and heart of the thesis as it analyses in detail the quantitative questionnaire results. As the overarching topic focuses on employee engagement, all attributes that are indicated to enjoy work and to be motivated at work will be analysed first. Secondly, fulfilment at work is further examined and the interlinkage of employee engagement and the impact an employee has on nature or society through work is inspected.

In general and across all industries and age groups, the most important attributes to enjoy work and to be motivated at work, which are a prerequisite to enhance employee engagement, are a positive and supportive working environment. Secondly follows recognition and appreciation, which is closely followed by a sense of purpose and meaningful work. The respondents were allowed to indicate up to three answers, which is why the total answers exceed the total number of participants. These findings support Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where after basic physiological and safety needs, psychological needs, such as belongingness and feeling of accomplishment follow (McLeod 1). Psychological needs can be extended to a positive and supportive working environment, and recognition and appreciation. Only if those needs are satisfied, individuals can focus on other attributes, like meaningful work and a sense of purpose which can be interpreted as self-fulfilment needs.



Figure 5: Most important attributes to enjoy and to be motivated at work (n answers given)

Maslow's lower-level needs are often referred to as deficiency needs, whereas the top-level self-fulfilment needs are also known as growth needs. Interesting to mention is that once a deficit need has been satisfied it will go away. "However, growth needs continue to be felt and may even become stronger once they have been engaged" (McLeod 3). Growth needs do not arise from a lack of something, but rather from the desire to develop and grow as a person. In combination with the study findings, the conclusion for a company can be drawn to pick up a sense of purpose and meaningful work not only to have a positive impact on nature and society but also to use environmental and social engagement to fulfil the employee's growth needs.

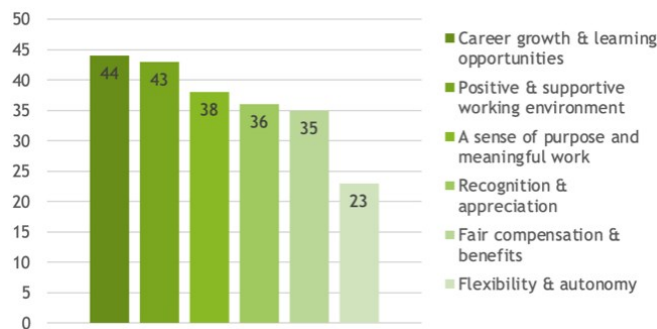


Figure 6: Most important attributes to enjoy and to be motivated at work for Generation Z (n answers given)

Looking at the most important attributes to enjoy work for the different age groups in Figure 6, Generation Z (25 and younger) value career growth and learning opportunities as the most important, closely followed by a positive and supportive working environment. Only in the third place, Gen Zs indicated the importance of purpose and meaningful work. These results may indicate Gen Zs seems to be only concerned about their own advantage before they think about meaningful work. However, meaningful work and a sense of purpose at work can equally result in both positive emotions and outcomes for employees as well as valuable growth and learning possibilities. Minseo emphasised in her study from 2018 that "perceptions of meaningful work resulted in lower levels of emotional exhaustion and higher levels of life

satisfaction”. Just because Generation Z did not actively indicate a sense of purpose as a priority, it has the potential to accelerate the accomplishment of career growth and learning opportunities.

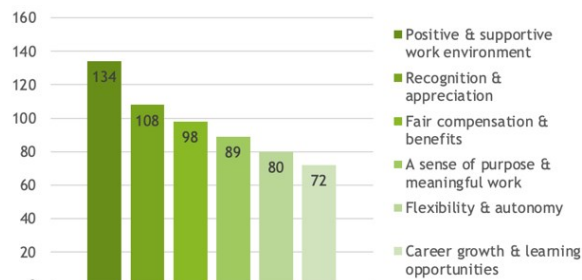


Figure 7: Most important attributes to enjoy and to be motivated at work for Millennials (n answers given)

For Millennials (26-34 years old), on the other hand, career growth and learning opportunities were valued least. A positive and supportive working environment, and recognition and appreciation were the most important prerequisite for this age group to enjoy work and to be motivated.

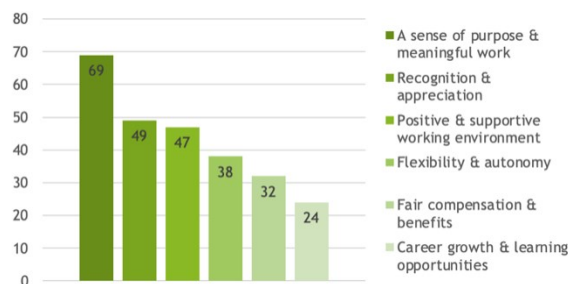


Figure 8: Most important attributes to enjoy and to be motivated at work for Generation X and above (n answers given)

Analysing the age group of Generation X and above (35-56 years old), a sense of purpose and meaningful work is by far the most important. Then, recognition and appreciation, and a positive and supportive working environment follow next. Looking at the group of retired and soon-to-be-retired employees, a sense of purpose and meaningful work get less important to enjoy work. Recognition and appreciation, but also flexibility and autonomy are highly valued attributes.

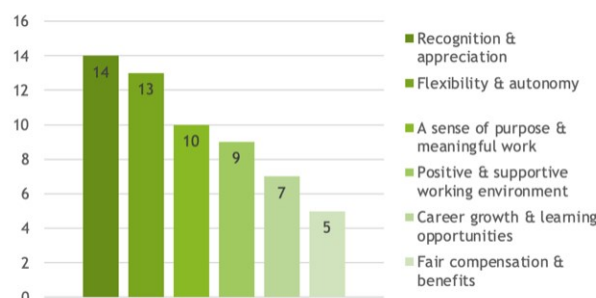


Figure 9: Most important attributes to enjoy and to be motivated at work for (soon-to-be) retired employees (n answers given)

Interpreting the study results of the various age groups, the youngest age group, which are typically career starters or students are eager to learn, grow and develop themselves professionally and personally through the job (Figure 6). This career stage is also known as exploration, which refers to the stage before gaining permanent employment. A sense of purpose and meaningful work seems to be less important at this stage because Gen Zs know they are exploring and likely will not work at their current employer for a long time. The focus is more on discovering interests and developing basic skills. More experienced young professionals value a positive, motivating work environment and a desire to be acknowledged and appreciated at work (Figure 7). They are in the establishment stage which includes applying for a job and accepting the first long-term position. The main objectives of that career stage are learning, developing, and improving the own skillset. Additionally, gaining acceptance from peers and enjoying work are needs of the Millennials' workforce. The age group focusing on 35-56 years old refers to the mid- and late-career stages. Typical characterisations range from career stability or progression to teaching younger employees or successors. In the mid-career stage, employees particularly evaluate their job satisfaction, where the sense of purpose and meaningful work gain a significantly more important role than other mentioned attributes (Figure 8). This role seems to get less important towards the end of the career and with the start of the retirement age. Employees tend to enjoy the break from working, spending more time with family and friends, and travelling, which is one option to explain the rise in valuing autonomy and flexibility at work. In addition to that, prior research has documented a negative association between retirement and the sense of purpose in life, suggesting that retirement could lead people to feel aimless and lost (Yemiscigil 1856). However, a nationally representative panel of 8.113 American adults showed a sizable increase in purpose in life as an outcome of retirement. These improvements were primarily driven by individuals retiring from dissatisfying jobs and with lower socioeconomic status. The panel findings suggest that retirement may provide an opportunity to experience a renewed sense of purpose, especially among socioeconomically disadvantaged populations (Yemiscigil 1856). The sense of purpose and meaningful work can be taken up and transferred to the next stage in life after retirement for this age group. The prerequisites, however, are guiding structures and opportunities offered by the employer. Structures that support meaningful work and voluntary engagement need to be created to ensure an employee's recognition and appreciation at work that goes beyond the employment relationship. These structures may ensure security and satisfaction for employees after their official retirement.

Exploring now the fulfilment at work, which is closely linked to employee engagement (Bolden-Barrett, 1). Figure 10 shows, on average and across all industries and age groups, the fulfilment of the respondents at work is at 0,94 on a semantic scale from -2 (not at all) to +2 (very much). That indication is interpreted as being somehow fulfilled at work, however, there is room for improvement. A more detailed analysis follows regarding different influences and prerequisites on work fulfilment. Further, linkages and interdependencies of employee engagement with the impact an employee has on nature or society through work are examined.

The survey data shows a clear correlation and dependency between the perceived fulfilment at work and the impact of work. The average fulfilment of 0,94 changes and is positively correlated with a positive impact on nature and society through work. For all respondents, who answered their work impact on nature or society is positive at +1, their fulfilment increases above average to 0,97. The fulfilment increases even more to 1,12 if the survey respondents who indicated a “very positive” impact of +2 are considered. According to these findings, the fulfilment at work decreases with a negative impact on nature and society. If the respondents indicated a negative impact of -1 or -2, the fulfilment reduces below average to 0,54.

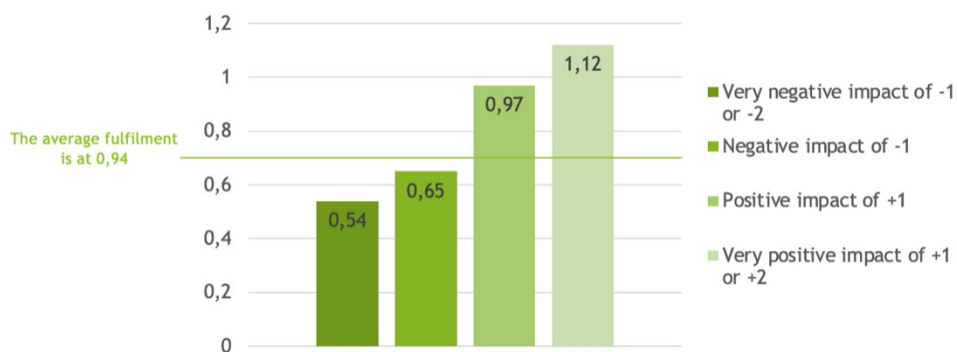


Figure 10: The fulfilment at work positively correlates with the impact on nature or society

Looking at the differences among age groups in combination with the impact on nature or society with work, the fulfilment at work is above average if the impact of work is also above average (as seen in Figure 11). Both graphs validate that employee fulfilment, which results in higher employee engagement, is dependent on the work’s impact on nature and society. As a result, it can be assumed, the more an employer engages in sustainable actions and sustainable business practices, the higher the employee’s fulfilment at work, which in turn results in a higher employee engagement.

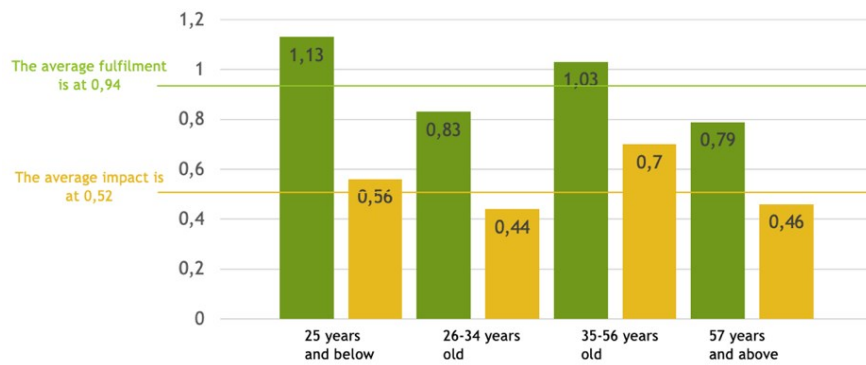


Figure 11: The fulfilment at work and the impact on nature or society across age groups

On average and across all age groups and industries, the respondents specified their impact on nature and society as 0,52, which means a slightly positive impact. However, the indication of the works' impact relates to a psychological constraint which can be mentioned here. The impact figure either explains on average a genuinely positive impact on nature and society of the respondent's work or that the respondents do not perceive their work impact on nature and society as bad or neutral as it may be. The Dunning-Kruger Effect is a phenomenon that describes the scope of people's ignorance which is often invisible to them. An individual's lack of expertise and knowledge, the unknown unknowns, is disguised by false beliefs to conclude a legitimate answer for oneself (Dunning 247). In this case, the respondents might either not know about their work's negative impact on nature and society or do not want to believe the negative impacts. These deficits prevent individuals from acknowledging their false beliefs and from making wiser decisions. Thus, companies should be fully transparent about the impacts of their business processes and strategies on society and nature. It is crucial for the owners, leaders, and employees to understand the consequences of business practices for being able to improve and enhance them. Lastly, important structures and guidelines within the company accelerate employee engagement and fulfilment at work which in turn results in positive outcomes for the employer.

4.2 Employees' voluntary engagement in sustainable actions

Across all age groups and industries, 44% (183) of all respondents engage in socially or environmentally sustainable actions or projects which relate to at least one SDG. The distribution among genders is rather even and consists of 52% women and 48% men. The following survey data focuses on answering the second research question for the most effective reasons to engage employees in sustainable actions or projects. On average and across all age groups, the feeling of fulfilment and satisfaction was mentioned the most often as the main reason for voluntary engagement in sustainable actions or projects. That answer also mentioned the sincere interest in strengthening the common good and "giving back". This result already

gives a promising reason for companies to engage in a sustainability strategy, as the employees feel fulfilment and satisfaction after participating in sustainable actions. Moral and ethical responsibility was the second most indicated reason.

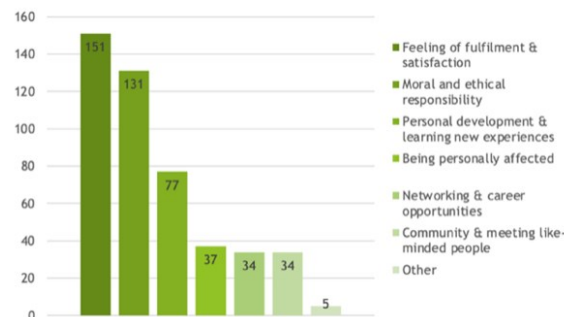


Figure 12: Reasons for voluntary engagement in sustainable actions or projects (n answers given)

The differences can only be found in the less important reasons. For example, Generation X and above feel personally more affected compared to all other age groups. Soon-to-be or retired employees, on the other hand, do not see being personally affected as a reason to engage in sustainable actions. For “Other” reasons, one respondent in the age group of 25 and younger answered:

“I cannot think of any reason why I should not protect our beautiful planet, not only for my own future but also for all next generations”.

Millennials gave other answers like “To make life better and reduce sorrow for other people and animals”, “Personal interest in energy production”, or even see a “Business opportunity” as a reason for engaging in sustainable projects. Generation X indicated the “Contribution for future generations” as an important reason to voluntarily engage in sustainable projects. These findings indicate the possibility for companies to pick up both moral and ethical responsibility, as well as personal development options to motivate employees to engage in sustainability strategies the employer committed to. The highly valued feeling of fulfilment and satisfaction, as well as giving back to society and nature, likely lead to repetitive commitment to sustainable actions and projects and thus to a higher employee engagement.

Among all voluntary engaged individuals, the age group of 35-56 years old is the most engaged one with an engagement rate of 54%, followed by the youngest group of 25 years old and younger with a rate of 45%. 26-34 years old have an engagement rate below average at 41% and 57 and above years old of only 29% (shown in Figure 13).

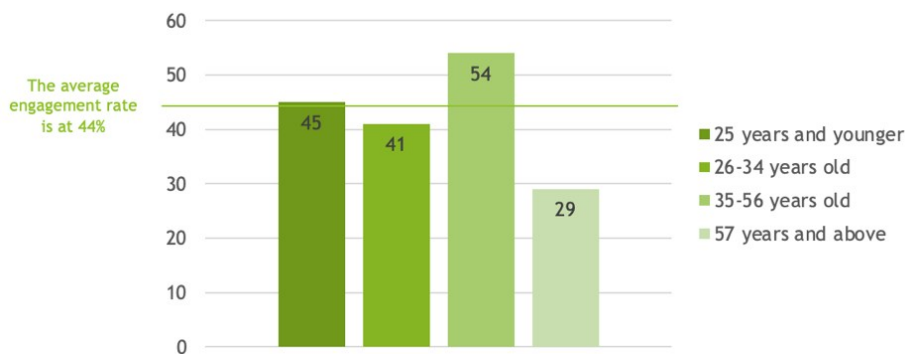


Figure 13: Engagement rate across all age groups (in %)

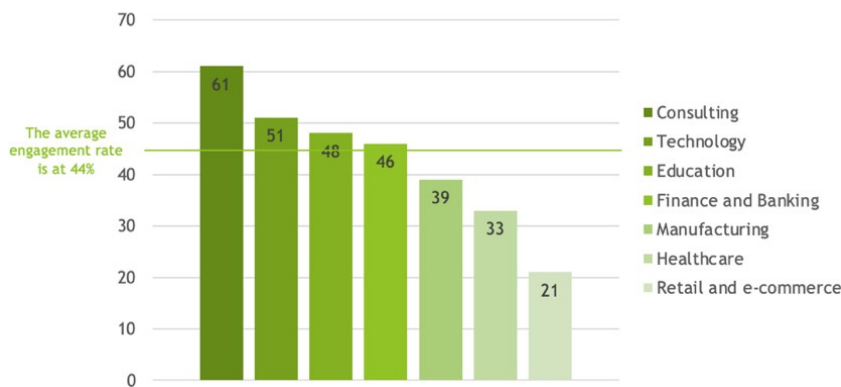


Figure 14: Most engaged employees across industries (engagement rate in %)

When analysing the industry specifics and finding out if employees engage more or less than average in sustainable actions or projects, depending on the industry they work in, the relative frequency has been used to avoid biases with regard to the most represented industries. Figure 14 shows an above-average engagement rate of employees working in Consulting, Technology, Education, and Finance. The engagement rate is independent of the employer’s engagement in SDG projects. Above or below-average engagement can be linked to the employer’s engagement in sustainable actions and if the employer enables the employee to work towards sustainable goals. Below-average engagement could be an indication that the employer does not support voluntary engagement of the workforce. The following graph 15 shows the above-mentioned industries and the percentage of how many employees do have the freedom to work towards SDGs at work. Indeed, employees working in Technology, Consulting, and Education

do have more freedom to work towards the SDGs than employees from the Retail and e-commerce or Healthcare industry.

Both graphs emphasise that employees' voluntary engagement in sustainable projects is higher if the employee offers the opportunity for their workforce.

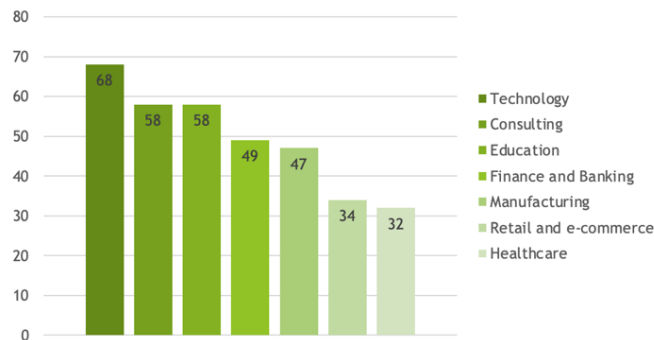


Figure 15: Employees having the opportunity to work towards SDGs at work - industry specifics (shown in n numbers of employees)

4.3 The employer and its SDG engagement

In general, employees rate the importance of environmental or social positive actions higher than the actual engagement of the employer in SDGs. The survey respondents were again able to indicate the rate on a semantic scale from -2 to +2, from not at all to very much. Across all industries, the engagement of the survey respondent's employer on SDGs is at 0,49. This means, the employer is somehow engaged, but not a lot. However, the respondents stated the importance of their employer's engagement in environmental or societal positive actions at 0,96, which indicates a clear importance (Figure 16). This can be interpreted as an explicit appeal to companies to increase their SDG engagement because their employees value it and the current engagement seems not enough. The result gets even clearer when taking job fulfilment into account. The graphic below shows a rise in fulfilment at work if the employer's engagement in SDGs is above average. For example, analysing employees that have indicated a low SDG engagement rate at -0,13, are on average not fulfilled at their job (indication of -1 or -2). These data show a clear indication of increased fulfilment at work once the employer engages in any kind of Sustainable Development Goals. Implementing SDGs into a company's core strategy can be a good opportunity to increase employee fulfilment and thus engagement at work.

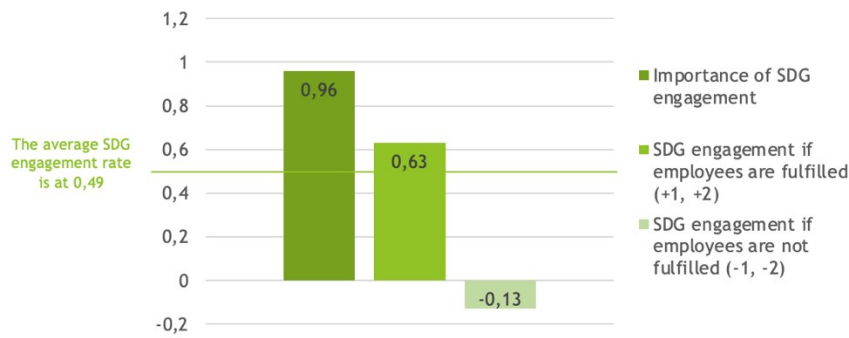


Figure 16: Employee fulfilment if employer engages in SDGs

Observing the importance of the employer's engagement in SDGs across age groups, employees in their middle and late career value their employer's engagement highest at 1,2. For all other age groups, the importance is only indicated at 0,88. In the survey, question 11 aims to find out which kind of engagements are most appreciated and valued by the employees. Each survey respondent was able to indicate up to four answer possibilities. The following graph 17 shows what kind of employer's sustainable engagement the respondents appreciate and value most. Sustainability and sustainable business practices are by far most valued across all age groups. With regards to the enablement of employees to participate in the mentioned engagements, the SDG Compass refers to employees as stakeholders, who "can also provide relevant information and inspiration for exploring business opportunities related to the SDGs". That indicates opportunities companies should make use of, which is listening to their employee's voices and offering opportunities for active engagement. Another interesting observation is that money donation itself is very low valued by employees and seems to be not enough engagement a company should solely focus on.

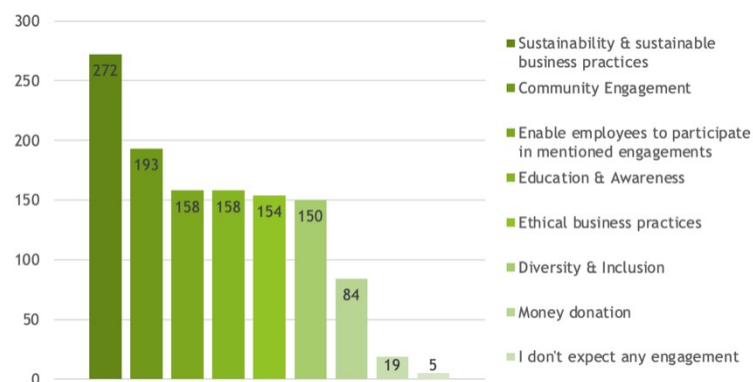


Figure 17: Most appreciated engagement types an employee values (n answers given)

When considering the different age groups, sustainable business practices and community engagement are always the top two reasons. Among the Millennial respondents, four other actions were mentioned as a valued reason. “Switching to sustainability as a business success measure”, “Running SDG programs under CSR”, or “Sticking to business ethics throughout the value and supply chain” are three of them. Out of 103 employees in the age group from 35 to 56 years old, only 4% indicated, they do not expect any engagement. This age group is also the one who indicated the importance of employer engagement as the highest.

Question 12 intends to find out how many employees even get the freedom and support from the employer to work towards the SDGs even if that only indirectly affects the company’s success. 51% do not have the possibility to work towards the SDGs at work.

Among the 49%, who do have the freedom to work towards the SDGs at work, with question 13 “What motivates you to take sustainable action?” the respondents were given the chance to give a qualitative, free-text answer. This question targets to answer the second research question of the most effective methods for engaging employees in a company’s commitment to achieve SDGs. Most times, the answer is related to a higher purpose, contributing to something meaningful, and experiencing happiness and fulfilment through giving back to society or nature. Many times, also the own children and future generations are mentioned as a motivator to engage in social or environmental actions. Also, taking responsibility and the desire to contribute to improve conditions on earth were mentioned often. Another remarkable answer targets the consciousness about the privileged situation the respondent is in and the derived responsibility coming with it because many other people simply are in less fortunate situations or do not have the means to contribute positively. Further, some respondents are convinced that many small actions add up, every action matters, and that companies have a big lever, and thus can have a big impact. One person answered, “Even if my personal actions and impacts are small, it's still important to lead by example.” Another answer was “To make our community, our company, and our planet a better place for the benefit of all.” However, some respondents also admitted having the chance from their employer to work towards the sustainability goals, but do not take part.

Other respondents interpreted the question as “Which conditions or circumstances motivate you to take action?” and indicated team-building events or workshops, focused on sustainability, or working with sustainable companies as clients and suppliers. Many answers are related to

corporate citizenship and meaningful initiatives. Further, enabling employee engagement, leadership support, additional vacation days for social or environmental engagement, tying compensation to sustainability results, or creating a mindset change was mentioned. Lastly, being together with like-minded people that encourage one another is also seen as an effective prerequisite to engaging in sustainable actions.

51% (209) of the survey respondents indicated not having the freedom to work towards SDGs at work. Out of these respondents, the kind of impact on employee engagement and differences among the age groups are analysed in question 14 and showcased in Figure 18. For this last question, the respondents were able to mention up to three impacts. In general, 65% of all employees, who have no possibility to include SDGs into their work state that this has no impact on their job satisfaction.

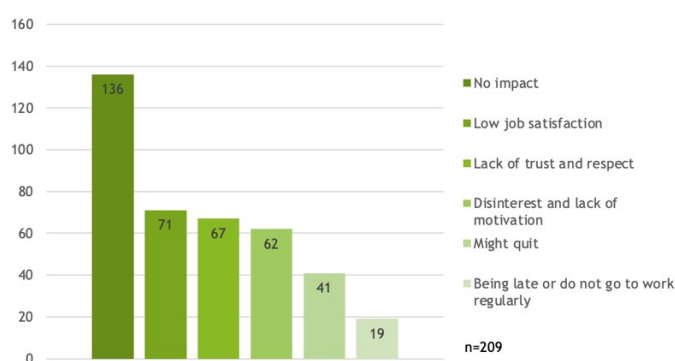


Figure 18: Impacts at work if employees do not have the possibility to work towards the SDGs (n answers given)

More than half of all respondents of the Generation Z, Millennials, and soon-to-be-retired employees indicated no impact on their work engagement if the employer does not offer the possibility to work towards the SDG goals at work. However, only 40% of Generation X and above (35-56 years old) stated no impact. 38% of all respondents when not having the freedom to work at SDGs indicated low job satisfaction. The conclusion can be drawn that especially for employees in their mid and late career stage, having the freedom to include work at SDGs in their daily job is crucial to enjoy work and to be motivated. 24% even think of quitting their job and changing the employer. Those findings are again in line with the importance of meaningful work and the sense of purpose at work that is most important for employees in their mid and late-career stage.

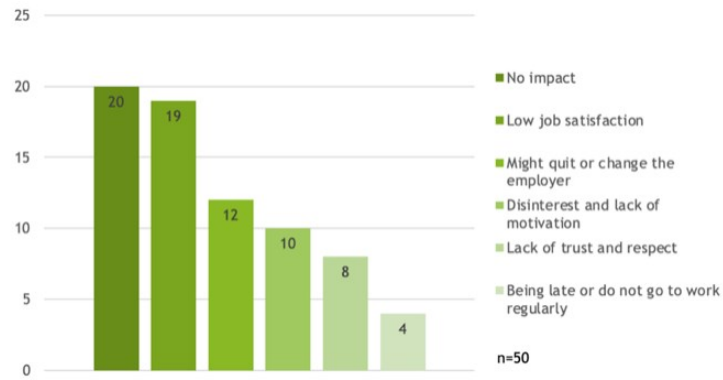


Figure 19: Impacts of not having the possibility to work towards the SDGs at work for Generation X and above (n answers given)

Lastly, the question, if employees are more fulfilled at work if they get the chance to work towards the Sustainable Development Goals at work, was analysed. The results are shown in Figure 20. In chapter 4.1., the average fulfilment at work across industries was indicated at 0,94. However, among all employees who do have the possibility to work towards the SDGs and implement the SDGs in their daily job, the average fulfilment is higher at 1,17. The opposite is true for not having the possibility to work towards the SDGs. The survey findings indicate and support the hypothesis of increased employee fulfilment and thus engagement if the employer enables employees to work towards the SDGs.

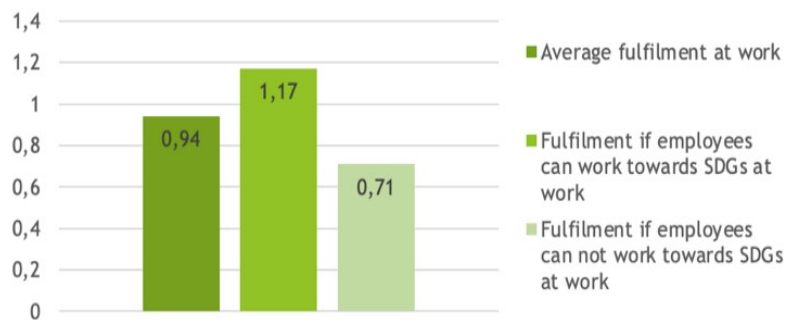


Figure 20: Fulfilment at work if the employees have the possibility to work towards the SDGs

5. Conclusion and Future Advancements

This research study aims to understand the impact of a company's sustainability strategy on employee engagement and fulfilment and the most effective methods and reasons for engaging employees in a company's commitment to achieving SDGs. The research study questionnaire of 412 respondents was used to analyse and explore the study targets. The interpretation of the study results highlights the following:

1) After the fulfilment of psychological needs, which are identified as a positive and supportive working environment, and recognition and appreciation, a sense of purpose and meaningful work are the most important attributes to enjoy work and to be motivated across age groups. Particularly employees in their mid and late-career stage value a sense of purpose and meaningful work as most important. Thus, a sense of purpose and meaningful work are both attributes a company can include in their business practices to not only have a positive impact on nature and society but also to use environmental and social engagement to fulfil the employee's growth needs and to ultimately increase employee engagement.

Secondly, the study also found 2) a positive correlation between employees' fulfilment at work and the work's impact on nature and society. The fulfilment at work decreases with a negative impact on nature and society and is above average if the respondents indicated a positive impact on nature and society with their work. In line with these results, employees feel more fulfilled at work when the employer engages in SDGs. Thus, implementing SDGs into a company's core strategy can be a good opportunity to increase employee fulfilment and engagement at work.

The third and fourth study highlights relate to the second research question. 3) The feeling of fulfilment and satisfaction as well as moral and ethical responsibility are the most important reasons for engaging in sustainability actions and projects for employees. Those reasons are promising for companies as the highly valued feelings as well as the will to give back to society and nature likely lead to repetitive engagement in sustainable actions by employees.

4) The last finding highlights sustainability and sustainable business practices as by far the most appreciated engagement types an employee values. Other reasons employees mentioned with the highest quantity are a higher purpose, contributing to something meaningful with work, and the wellbeing of own children and future generations. Also, experiencing happiness, fulfilment

through giving back to society or nature, and the desire to contribute its own share to improve conditions on earth were stated often. Further, employees emphasised the enablement of employee engagement and leadership support as effective methods, as well as team-building events or workshops focused on sustainability. In addition to these findings, research also stresses that the employer should connect job duties with the possibility of voluntarily engaging in sustainability actions and incentivise the employee to support the company's sustainability ambitions (Solomon 93).

In addition to that and according to the research study findings, employee engagement “requires dedicated heart, action-oriented service from top management and leading by example” (Solomon 93). The leadership needs to believe in the company's clear mission, vision, and values, needs to own it, and passes it down to managers and employees to enhance leadership and employee engagement. Employees need to have a say on issues that matter to their job and life (Solomon 93). Managers can even share power through participative decision making which gives employees a sense of belongingness, which in turn increases engagement. Here, opportunities can be offered for employees to address their ideas and wishes with regard to sustainability practices and engagement. This goes in hand with opportunities for development and advancement, which also increases employee engagement. Independent thinking and autonomy at work are examples.

Further, the above-mentioned strategies, regular and diverse training opportunities or workshops help employees increase their knowledge and skills, which in turn increases their confidence and builds self-efficacy and commitment (Solomon 93). The employer should provide training with regard to the company's sustainability practices and goals to increase the understanding and acceptance among the workforce. Through transparent communication and a respectful work environment, employees can be incentivised to improve current processes and to support the achievement of their employer's goals. The SDG Compass emphasises in 2023 to “integrate sustainability goals into performance reviews and remuneration schemes across the organisation, with additional incentives reflecting the specific role that a function or individual has in achieving relevant goals”.

While the above-mentioned study findings highlights are backed by analysed research, and regardless of all the efforts implemented when structuring this analysis, it is crucial to consider potential shortcomings and future advancements. While an SDG strategy is crucial to have

regarding higher engaged and fulfilled employees, a successful SDG strategy and implementation needs to be ensured first. In future studies, the scope of the analysis can be widened by including sustainability strategy implementation guidelines. For companies, it is important to know where to start an SDG implementation. Which goals fit best with your business model? What are the most important steps? What are possible challenges? How to overcome them? How to keep track of progress and adjust the implementation steps? The goal should always be to produce sustainable, long-term oriented solutions that are financially stable for companies and ensure a sustainable profit. Both economic and social profitability are key to ensuring a company's long-term success.

Another future advancement can be focused on in-depth specifics of employee engagement. Employee engagement and fulfilment are highly dependent on the employees' characteristics, thus diverse and interconnected with the employee's cultural background. As an employer, it is crucial to understand your employee's expectations, requirements, wishes, and goals. It is encouraged to do an in-depth analysis of your stakeholders, for example through stakeholder interviews. Future studies can extend the scope of analysis by including more countries and trying to seek differences in employee engagement relating to cultural differences.

Concluding, it can be highlighted that both employees and employee engagement strategies as well as companies and their sustainability strategies are very different and unique. Each company needs to define its own value proposition, employee engagement, and sustainability strategy as a differentiating factor and to ensure long-term success and employee fulfilment. This dissertation presented several prerequisites to accomplish to support successful employee engagement. The overarching aim of implementing and achieving Sustainable Development Goals is the way to go because our future depends on today's actions. Nations and companies, employees, and business leaders need to work together to drive change. There are changes and trends happening in society and the workforce. Leaders must readjust and can take advantage of the opportunities these trends create for their businesses. There is value in social and environmental needs. Satisfying those needs can create a competitive advantage for companies. And always, sustainability and profitability should go hand in hand to build a resilient, sustainable, and long-term profitable business, ensuring the social and environmental sustainability we all should aspire to.

Appendices

Appendice A: Sustainable Development Goals



Appendice B: Questionnaire

SDGs & Employee Engagement

Thank you so much for taking the time supporting me with my Master's dissertation.

I am Alina Burghard and did this survey as part of my Master's degree in International Management, Strategy & Consulting at Catolica Lisbon School of Business & Economics. is about the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in companies and the effects on employee engagement. If you have any questions or comments, please contact me at s-aburghard@ucp.pt.

The questionnaire takes 3-5 minutes to complete.

[START SURVEY NOW](#)

1. How old are you?*

Select one answer

25 and younger

26-34

35-56

57 and older

2. What describes best your gender?*

Select one answer

female

male

non-binary/ queer/ other

3. In which industry do you work?*

Select one answer

Technology

Healthcare

Finance and Banking

Consulting

Retail and e-commerce

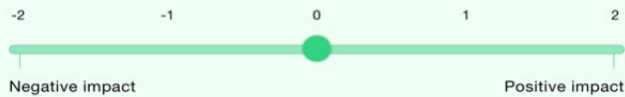
Education

Manufacturing

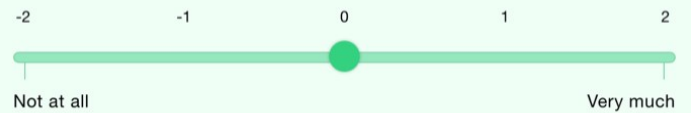
Other



6. How would you describe your impact on nature and society with your work?



4. Do you feel fulfilled at work?



5. What is most important for you to enjoy work and to be motivated?*

Choose 1-3 answers

Recognition and appreciation

Career growth & learning opportunities

Positive and supportive working environment

Fair compensation and benefits

A sense of purpose and meaningful work

Flexibility and/ or autonomy at work

Other...



Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 global goals that aim to eradicate poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all.

The goals provide a universal framework for sustainable development that guides countries, businesses, and individuals towards a more sustainable future.

<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

7. Do you voluntarily engage in social or environmental sustainable actions (relating to at least one SDG)?*



Select one answer

Yes

No

8. If you voluntarily engage in sustainable actions or projects (Q7), what are your reasons for doing so? (If you don't, please skip)

Only answer if you answered the previous question (Q7) with "yes". Please choose your most important 1-4 answers.

Sincere interest in strengthening the common good & "giving back". Feeling of fulfilment & satisfaction

Moral and ethical responsibility

Personal development & learning new experiences

Networking & career opportunities

Being personally affected

Community & meeting like-minded people

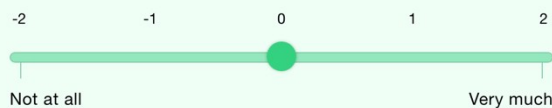
Other...



9. How much is your employer engaged in SDGs?



If you don't know, please indicate "0"



12. Does your employer give you the freedom to work towards the SDGs that only indirectly affect the company's success?*



Select one answer

Yes

No

14. If your employer does NOT give you the freedom to work towards the SDGs, what impact does that have on your engagement at work?

Please only answer this question when you indicated "no" for question 12. Choose 1-3 answers.

No impact

Disinterest and lack of motivation

Low job satisfaction

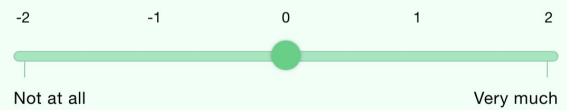
Lack of trust and respect

Being late or don't go to work regularly

Might quit/ change my employer

Other...

10. How important is it for you that your employer engages in environmental or societal positive actions (in one or more SDGs)?



11. What kind of engagement of your employer would you appreciate and value?*

Choose 1-4 answers

Money donation

Community engagement

Sustainability and implement sustainable business practices

Diversity & Inclusion

Education & Awareness

Ethical business practices

Enable employees to participate in above mentioned engagements

I don't expect any engagement

Other...

13. If your employer gives you the freedom to work towards sustainable goals, what motivates you to take action?

If you answered the previous question with "no", please skip

Type one or a few words...

500

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