

The Impact of Employee Engagement Strategies on Job Satisfaction in UK Small Businesses

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Contents

Abstract.....	5
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	6
1.1 Introduction	6
1.2 Background of the Study.....	6
1.3 Problem Statement	7
1.4 Research Aim, Objectives, and Questions	7
1.5 Rationale and Significance of the Research.....	8
1.6 Scope of the Study	9
1.7 Limitations of the Study.....	9
1.8 Structure of the Dissertation.....	9
1.9 Summary of Chapter 1	9
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	10
2.1 Introduction to the Literature Review.....	10
2.2 Conceptualising Employee Engagement.....	10
2.3 Theoretical Foundations of Employee Engagement	11
2.3.1 Kahn's Psychological Conditions Model	11
2.3.2 The Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Model.....	11
2.3.3 Self-Determination Theory (SDT)	11
2.3.4 Social Exchange Theory (SET).....	12
2.3.5 Critical Comparison of Engagement Theories.....	12
2.4 Measuring Employee Engagement	12
2.5 Employee Engagement in Small Businesses	12
2.6 Engagement Strategies Relevant to SMEs	13
2.7 Job Satisfaction: Definitions and Drivers	13
2.8 Empirical Links Between Engagement and Job Satisfaction	14
2.9 Identified Gaps in the Literature	14
2.10 Summary of Chapter 2.....	14
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGIES.....	15
3.1 Chapter Introduction	15

3.2 Philosophical Foundations of the Research	15
3.3 Research Paradigm and Its Justification	15
3.4 Research Approach and Reasons for Its Selection	15
3.5 Methodological Position and Its Suitability.....	16
3.6 Research Strategy and Design Choices.....	16
3.7 Study Population and Sampling Technique	16
3.8 Methods of Data Collection and Data Analysis	17
3.9 Ethical Considerations for the Study	17
3.10 Research timeline	17
3.11 Summary of the Methodological Chapter.....	17
CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS	18
4.1 Introduction.....	18
4.2 Data Analysis	18
4.2.1 Descriptive Statistics	18
4.2.2 Engagement Practice Results	19
4.2.3 Job Satisfaction Results	21
4.2.4 Statistical Model Used: Correlation Analysis	21
4.3 Discussion of Findings	22
4.3.1 Interpretation of Results	22
4.3.2 Comparison with Literature.....	23
4.3.3 Explanations for Unexpected or Surprising Findings.....	23
4.4 Implications of the Findings.....	24
4.4.1 Theoretical Implications.....	24
4.4.2 Practical Implications	24
4.5 Limitations of the Study.....	25
4.6 Suggestions for Future Research.....	25
4.7 Summary and Transition to Conclusion.....	25
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	25
5.1 Introduction.....	25
5.2 Conclusions on Each Research Objective.....	26
5.3 Conclusions on the Research Problem	27
5.4 Summary of the Research Findings and Outcomes	28

5.5 Original Contribution of the Research	28
5.6 Limitations of the Research.....	29
5.7 Recommendations and Areas for Further Research.....	29
5.8 Summary of Chapter 5.....	29
6. References	31
7. Appendix I.....	34
Questionnaires.....	34
8. Appendix II.....	37
Ethical form.....	37

Abstract

This dissertation investigates how everyday employee engagement strategies influence job satisfaction in UK small businesses (SMEs). The main aim is to examine which low-cost practices—such as autonomy, feedback, recognition, development opportunities, communication, flexibility, employee voice and managerial support—are most strongly associated with employees' job satisfaction. The study is important because most engagement research focuses on large organisations with formal HR systems, leaving a gap in SME-specific evidence despite their central role in the UK economy. Adopting a post-positivist, quantitative, deductive approach, an anonymous online questionnaire was completed by employees aged 18+ working in UK SMEs (fewer than 50 staff). Non-probability purposive, convenience and snowball sampling were used. The survey measured the frequency of engagement practices on 5-point Likert scales, alongside single-item measures of overall job satisfaction and satisfaction with managerial support and development. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations were calculated in Microsoft Excel, with optional open-ended responses thematically summarised. Results show that participants rated communication, flexibility and employee voice highly, but these practices had weaker correlations with job satisfaction. The strongest positive associations with satisfaction were found for development opportunities, autonomy and recognition, while satisfaction with development emerged as comparatively low. The study concludes that informal communication and flexible working often seen as natural strengths of SMEs are not sufficient on their own to secure high job satisfaction. Instead, SMEs should prioritise practical ways to strengthen skill development (e.g. mentoring, job shadowing), maintain meaningful autonomy with clear boundaries and workloads, and provide regular, genuine recognition. The research contributes SME-specific evidence to the engagement literature, highlights a clear set of priority practices for small-business leaders and recommends future longitudinal and mixed-method studies to explore how engagement and satisfaction evolve over time and across different SME sectors.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Employee engagement has become a central topic in organisational behaviour because of its strong links to motivation, performance, and job satisfaction (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). Kahn (1990) introduced engagement as the extent to which employees bring their cognitive, emotional, and physical energy into their work, suggesting that people engage more when their jobs feel meaningful and safe. Later studies confirmed that engaged employees tend to show higher commitment and more positive attitudes, which naturally influence their satisfaction at work (Saks, 2006; Armstrong, 2016).

In the UK, small businesses dominate the economy, and their success relies heavily on employee performance. Unlike large organisations, small firms usually operate with fewer resources, limited formal HR systems, and closer relationships between staff and managers (Harney & Dundon, 2006). These conditions may affect how engagement is created and how it relates to satisfaction. Because much of the existing research focuses on large organisations, it is unclear whether the same engagement strategies work effectively in small businesses. This gap highlights the need to explore how engagement shapes job satisfaction specifically in UK SMEs.

1.2 Background of the Study

The academic understanding of engagement stems from Kahn's (1990) argument that employees engage when they experience psychological meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Although this theory emphasises the personal experience of work, later frameworks such as the *Job Demands–Resources (JD–R)* model shifted attention toward workplace conditions. JD–R suggests that resources—such as autonomy, support, and feedback—promote engagement and satisfaction by helping employees manage demands (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Self-Determination Theory also plays an important role in explaining engagement, as it proposes that people feel more motivated when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Additionally, *Social Exchange Theory* argues that employees reciprocate

organisational support with positive attitudes such as engagement and satisfaction (Blau, 2017; Saks, 2006).

Although these theories provide valuable insights, their assumptions are not always aligned with the realities of small businesses. SMEs often rely on informal communication, multi-tasking roles, and direct owner–employee interaction, which can both help and hinder engagement (Storey et al., 2010; Kelliher et al., 2019). For example, close relationships may strengthen trust and support, but a lack of structure may create inconsistency or unclear expectations. Because satisfaction is shaped by how employees perceive fairness, recognition, and autonomy, understanding engagement in SMEs requires context-specific investigation.

1.3 Problem Statement

The main issue motivating this study is the limited amount of research exploring engagement and job satisfaction in small UK businesses. Although engagement is well-documented in larger organisations, SMEs function differently and may require different types of practices (Kotey & Slade, 2005; Harney & Dundon, 2006). Existing theories assume formal HR processes and stable resources, which are often absent in small firms.

Therefore, the problem can be summarised as follows: there is insufficient evidence explaining how engagement strategies influence job satisfaction within UK SMEs. This lack of SME-focused research restricts managers' ability to select appropriate engagement practices and limits academic understanding of how engagement works in small-business settings.

1.4 Research Aim, Objectives, and Questions

Aim

To examine how employee engagement strategies influence job satisfaction in UK small businesses.

Objectives

To identify the engagement strategies commonly used in small UK businesses.

To evaluate how these strategies affect employee job satisfaction.

To explore employees' perceptions of specific practices such as feedback, recognition, development, and flexibility.

To examine contextual factors (e.g., managerial support, team size) that influence the engagement–satisfaction relationship.

Research Questions

What engagement strategies are used by UK small businesses?

How do these strategies influence job satisfaction?

Which practices appear most strongly linked to higher job satisfaction?

How do contextual factors shape this relationship?

1.5 Rationale and Significance of the Research

This research is important because SMEs rely heavily on employee motivation and performance. With fewer staff, any drop in satisfaction or engagement can affect the overall functioning of the business (Fletcher, Ram & McCarthy, 2025). SMEs also face practical constraints—limited budgets, informal HR practices, and less structured development opportunities—meaning they must prioritise engagement strategies that are both effective and affordable (Harney & Dundon, 2006). Understanding which practices employees value can help small-business managers make better informed decisions.

From an academic standpoint, this study contributes to ongoing debates about how engagement theories apply in small-business contexts. Scholars have noted that engagement research often overlooks SMEs and focuses too heavily on large organisations (Rauch & Hatak, 2016). By examining the engagement–satisfaction link within UK small firms, this research fills an important gap and responds to calls for more SME-specific evidence.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The study focuses on small businesses in the UK, defined as firms with fewer than 50 employees. Participants include employees aged 18 or over with at least one month of experience in their organisation. The research concentrates on employee perceptions of engagement practices and job satisfaction and does not cover medium or large organisations, nor employer perspectives. The findings provide insight into patterns rather than generalisable conclusions, due to sample size and sampling method.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

As this is a small-scale academic project, several limitations exist. Non-probability sampling reduces representativeness and may affect generalisability (Saunders et al., 2009). The use of self-reported surveys introduces potential bias, as responses may be influenced by mood or social desirability (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The cross-sectional design means findings cannot establish causation, only associations (Collis & Hussey, 2014). The modest sample size also restricts statistical complexity. Despite these limitations, the study can still produce valuable insights into engagement practices within SMEs.

1.8 Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 introduces the research. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature and theoretical frameworks. Chapter 3 explains the methodology. Chapter 4 presents and discusses the findings. Chapter 5 concludes the study, outlines limitations, and offers recommendations.

1.9 Summary of Chapter 1

This chapter introduced the topic of employee engagement, highlighted its connection to job satisfaction, and explained why small businesses require separate attention from larger firms. It outlined the research aim, objectives, questions, significance, scope, and limitations. Because SMEs differ significantly in structure, culture, and resources, it is essential to examine how engagement strategies work within this context. The next chapter explores the academic literature that shapes this study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction to the Literature Review

This chapter critically reviews the literature on employee engagement and job satisfaction, with emphasis on the small business context in the United Kingdom. It begins by examining how engagement has been conceptualised, followed by an evaluation of major theoretical models that influence contemporary understanding. Measurement debates are discussed to highlight conceptual and methodological inconsistencies. The review then considers engagement in small businesses, including recent evidence from UK reports, before examining engagement strategies, job satisfaction, and the empirical relationship between the two. The chapter concludes by identifying key gaps that underpin the rationale for the present study.

2.2 Conceptualising Employee Engagement

Despite extensive academic and practitioner interest, employee engagement remains a contested construct. Kahn (1990) conceptualised engagement as the harnessing of employees' "selves" to their work through cognitive, emotional and physical involvement. However, this definition has been criticised for its ambiguity and for offering limited guidance on measurement. The rise of the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) tradition shifted the focus towards engagement as a motivational state characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Although widely adopted, this narrower conceptualisation encourages a focus on individual activation rather than the interpersonal or organisational conditions that often shape engagement.

A longstanding challenge concerns the relationship between engagement and related constructs such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment and motivation. Engagement is frequently described as distinct from satisfaction, yet empirical studies often treat the two interchangeably (Bailey et al., 2017). This conceptual blurring undermines theoretical precision and complicates interpretation, particularly in SMEs where close interpersonal relationships and informal structures influence how employees interpret their work experiences. As a result, engagement must be understood as a dynamic, context-sensitive construct rather than a universally stable one.

2.3 Theoretical Foundations of Employee Engagement

2.3.1 Kahn's Psychological Conditions Model

Kahn's (1990) model proposes that engagement emerges when employees experience meaningfulness, psychological safety and availability. While foundational, the model has been criticised for its lack of operational clarity and for being difficult to apply empirically. In SMEs, psychological safety may be particularly complex: close proximity to owner-managers can foster belonging yet also limit openness due to power dynamics or personal familiarity (Harney & Dundon, 2006). These tensions reveal the limitations of applying Kahn's conditions—developed in larger corporate settings—directly to small firms.

2.3.2 The Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Model

The JD–R model argues that engagement arises when job resources outweigh or buffer job demands (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). While this model has significant empirical support, its assumption that resources are universally beneficial can be problematic. Autonomy, for example, is treated as a core resource, yet in SMEs it may lead to role overload due to broad job scopes and ambiguous boundaries. Moreover, SME-based JD–R research often relies on small, convenience samples, raising questions about generalisability (Fletcher, Ram & McCarthy, 2025). JD–R offers useful structure, but it does not fully account for the informality and resource constraints typical of small businesses.

2.3.3 Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory posits that engagement and motivation arise when autonomy, competence and relatedness needs are satisfied (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This framework can align well with SMEs, where close daily contact may satisfy relatedness more effectively than in large organisations. However, competence development is often restricted due to limited training budgets or absent HR structures. Evidence from CIPD (2021) shows that small firms provide fewer structured learning opportunities than larger organisations. Thus, SDT offers valuable insights but requires contextual adjustment when applied to SMEs.

2.3.4 Social Exchange Theory (SET)

SET explains engagement as a reciprocal response to supportive organisational treatment (Saks, 2006). While this relational model seems naturally suited to small businesses, it risks oversimplifying interpersonal dynamics. In SMEs, reciprocity may be shaped by emotional loyalty or fear of disappointing a familiar manager rather than perceptions of fair treatment alone. Consequently, SET must be interpreted cautiously in contexts where personal and professional relationships overlap.

2.3.5 Critical Comparison of Engagement Theories

Taken together, these theories present conflicting assumptions. JD–R emphasises structural resources, whereas SDT places priority on intrinsic psychological needs. Kahn focuses on psychological conditions, while SET centres on relational exchanges. SMEs expose these contradictions clearly: autonomy (JD–R), relatedness (SDT) and reciprocity (SET) interact differently when employees work closely with owner–managers. Theories designed for bureaucratic environments therefore require reinterpretation before they can be meaningfully applied to small firms.

2.4 Measuring Employee Engagement

Engagement measurement is one of the most contested areas in the field. The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), the most widely used tool, measures vigour, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). However, UWES has been criticised for prioritising motivational intensity while ignoring relational and contextual factors that shape engagement in SMEs. Many small-business studies use non-validated adaptations or single-item proxies, contributing to inconsistent findings (Macey & Schneider, 2008). The risk of conflating engagement with satisfaction remains significant, as some commonly used scales overlap conceptually. These measurement weaknesses undermine comparability across studies and highlight the need for context-appropriate tools when researching engagement in SMEs.

2.5 Employee Engagement in Small Businesses

Small businesses differ substantially from large organisations in structure, culture and managerial practice. Informality is frequently cited as an advantage because it can foster close relationships and quick decision-making. However, research

demonstrates that this informality also produces inconsistent communication, uneven workload distribution and subjective performance management (Harney & Dundon, 2006). UK labour market evidence reinforces these challenges. CIPD (2022; 2023) reports highlight persistent issues in SMEs, including skill shortages, limited HR expertise and retention difficulties. Similarly, BEIS (2022) notes that small businesses operate under tighter resource constraints, influencing both the opportunities and barriers to employee engagement. These contextual features make SMEs particularly interesting but analytically complex environments for engagement research.

2.6 Engagement Strategies Relevant to SMEs

Widely promoted engagement strategies—such as autonomy, feedback, recognition, employee voice and development—operate differently in small firms. Autonomy may enhance meaningfulness but also cause stress when job boundaries are unclear. Feedback is typically informal, which employees may appreciate for its immediacy, yet it often lacks consistency or transparency. Recognition tends to be personal rather than structured, making it meaningful but unpredictable (Fletcher et al., 2025). Development opportunities are valued but often limited, echoing CIPD (2021) findings that SMEs underinvest in training. Employee voice is common through informal discussions, but influence can depend heavily on proximity to the owner–manager. Leadership behaviours therefore play a disproportionate role in shaping engagement, creating both opportunities for high involvement and vulnerabilities related to managerial inconsistency.

2.7 Job Satisfaction: Definitions and Drivers

Job satisfaction refers to an individual's evaluative judgement of their job and is influenced by pay, workload, autonomy, support and interpersonal relationships (Locke, 1976). Although engagement and satisfaction are positively linked, they are not synonymous. Satisfaction may arise from comfort or stability, whereas engagement reflects energy and focus. In SMEs, satisfaction is often shaped by relational dynamics—trust, respect, accessibility of leaders—rather than formal HR practices. Distinguishing the constructs is therefore essential to understand how engagement strategies influence satisfaction specifically.

2.8 Empirical Links Between Engagement and Job Satisfaction

Empirical research generally supports a positive association between engagement and job satisfaction (Bailey et al., 2017). However, many studies rely on cross-sectional surveys and small, convenience samples, raising concerns about methodological robustness. SME studies vary widely in how they define “small business,” with some including firms of up to 250 employees, limiting comparability. Measurement tools differ significantly across studies, making patterns difficult to interpret. UK-specific evidence remains limited, although practitioner reports (CIPD, 2022; BEIS, 2022) emphasise engagement as essential for productivity and retention. Overall, the evidence suggests a relationship but is constrained by methodological limitations.

2.9 Identified Gaps in the Literature

The review highlights several gaps. Engagement theories developed in large organisations may not translate directly to SMEs. Measurement tools such as UWES fail to capture relational and contextual dimensions central to small businesses. Empirical SME studies rely heavily on small, non-representative samples and inconsistent measurement approaches. UK evidence remains sparse, despite growing recognition of engagement’s importance for small firms. There is limited understanding of which specific engagement practices are most strongly associated with satisfaction in SMEs, creating a clear rationale for the present study.

2.10 Summary of Chapter 2

This chapter has critically reviewed the literature on engagement and job satisfaction, emphasising conceptual ambiguity, theoretical contradictions, measurement challenges and methodological weaknesses. The unique structural and cultural features of SMEs, along with recent UK labour market pressures, shape how engagement is experienced in small businesses. Identified gaps provide strong justification for examining specific engagement practices and their relationship with job satisfaction in UK SMEs.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGIES

3.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological design adopted to explore the relationship between employee engagement practices and job satisfaction among employees working in UK small businesses. It explains the philosophical foundations, research paradigm, approach, methodological stance, design, sampling strategy, data collection tools and analytical techniques. Ethical considerations are presented before concluding the chapter. These elements ensure that the study is methodologically coherent and aligned with its aim.

3.2 Philosophical Foundations of the Research

The study adopts a post-positivist philosophy, which recognises that social reality can be investigated through structured inquiry, yet acknowledges that findings are always imperfect due to human subjectivity. This position is well suited to examining engagement and job satisfaction, both of which are perceptual constructs shaped by employees' interpretations. Post-positivism therefore supports the use of quantitative tools while accepting that results should be interpreted cautiously rather than as definitive truths (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Given the relational closeness and informality common in SMEs, this stance provides an appropriate balance between objectivity and contextual sensitivity.

3.3 Research Paradigm and Its Justification

The research is situated within a quantitative post-positivist paradigm, emphasising numerical data, structured measurement and systematic analysis. Quantitative paradigms allow researchers to examine patterns and associations efficiently (Zikmund, 2010). This study seeks to identify how specific engagement practices relate to job satisfaction, making quantification essential. While the design is primarily quantitative, brief open-ended questions are included to provide contextual nuance without altering the overall paradigm. This approach aligns with established guidance on business research design (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019).

3.4 Research Approach and Reasons for Its Selection

A deductive approach underpins the study. Deduction uses existing theories to inform what is examined empirically (Saunders et al., 2019). Established engagement

theories—such as Kahn’s model, JD–R, SDT and SET—guided the selection of engagement practices included in the survey. The purpose is not to test formal hypotheses but to explore whether theoretically informed patterns emerge within UK SMEs. This makes deduction appropriate, as it maintains conceptual coherence while supporting an exploratory, relational investigation.

3.5 Methodological Position and Its Suitability

The study adopts a quantitative methodological stance, appropriate for investigating relationships between variables while limiting researcher influence. Quantitative methods allow for consistent comparison across participants and clear identification of patterns (Adams, 2014). This stance is particularly relevant for small firms, where qualitative approaches may be more susceptible to bias due to interpersonal familiarity. The optional qualitative comments included in the survey offer additional context without compromising the quantitative integrity of the research.

3.6 Research Strategy and Design Choices

A cross-sectional survey design is employed. Cross-sectional surveys collect data at a single point in time and are commonly used in organisational research to explore associations and trends efficiently (O’Gorman, 2015). An online format is practical for SME employees, who often have limited time availability. Although cross-sectional designs cannot establish causality, they are well suited to the exploratory nature of this study and allow relationships between engagement practices and job satisfaction to be examined meaningfully.

3.7 Study Population and Sampling Technique

The target population consists of employees aged 18 or above working in UK small businesses with fewer than 50 staff. Because access to a random sample of SME employees is not feasible, a non-probability purposive sampling approach is used, supported by convenience and snowball techniques. These methods are widely accepted in organisational research when studying hard-to-reach populations (Saunders et al., 2019; Clippinger, 2017). A sample of up to 50 respondents is targeted, which is realistic for a small-scale dissertation and adequate for descriptive and relational analysis. The limitations of non-probability sampling—particularly reduced generalisability—are acknowledged.

3.8 Methods of Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data will be collected through a short online questionnaire containing Likert-scale items measuring engagement practices, a validated single-item measure of job satisfaction and optional open-ended questions. Questionnaires provide an efficient and consistent method of gathering data from multiple participants (Adams, 2014). The online form enhances accessibility and ensures anonymity.

Data analysis will be conducted using Microsoft Excel, which is appropriate for small datasets. Excel will support data cleaning, calculation of descriptive statistics, comparison of satisfaction levels across different engagement practices and basic correlation analysis. These techniques allow patterns and associations to be identified clearly. Open-ended responses will be summarised thematically to provide additional context for quantitative findings.

3.9 Ethical Considerations for the Study

The research complies with the University's ethical guidelines and the Data Protection Act 2018. Ethical principles include informed consent, voluntary participation and the right to withdraw prior to submission. No personal identifiers (such as names, company details or emails) will be collected, ensuring full anonymity. Data will be stored securely on password-protected university systems and accessed only by the researcher and supervisor. The inclusion of a participant information sheet and consent form ensures transparency regarding the purpose, benefits and minimal risks associated with the study.

3.10 Research timeline

The research proposal was completed in August 2024, and the main dissertation work began in November 2024. Ethical approval was obtained in July 2025, while data collection occurred in November 2025. Data analysis and the writing of Chapters 4 and 5 were completed in December 2025.

3.11 Summary of the Methodological Chapter

This chapter has presented the philosophical, paradigmatic and methodological choices guiding the research. A post-positivist, quantitative and deductive design supports the exploration of relationships between engagement practices and job satisfaction in UK small businesses. A cross-sectional online survey, purposive

sampling and Excel-based analysis were selected as practical and academically appropriate methods. Ethical safeguards ensure the integrity and credibility of the study, which forms the foundation for the findings presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter reports and interprets the findings obtained from the survey completed by employees working in UK small businesses. The purpose of the analysis is to explore how employee engagement practices, such as autonomy, communication, recognition, feedback, managerial support, development opportunities and employee voice, shape levels of job satisfaction. The chapter begins by outlining the descriptive statistics that help contextualise the sample and engagement patterns. It then presents the statistical analysis used to explore relationships between variables, supported by tables and figures. The second half of the chapter discusses the meaning of these findings in relation to the research questions and the wider literature. Finally, the chapter considers theoretical and practical implications, acknowledges limitations, and offers suggestions for future research, before transitioning to the concluding chapter.

4.2 Data Analysis

4.2.1 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Distribution (%)
Tenure	
	3–11 months: 25.5%
	1–2 years: 42.6%
	3–5 years: 31.9%
Role Level	
	Non-managerial: 70.2%
	Supervisor: 14.9%
	Manager/Owner: 14.9%
Organisation Size	
	1–4 employees: 12.8%
	5–9 employees: 34.0%

	10–19 employees: 36.2%
	20–34 employees: 17.0%
Weekly Working Hours	
	<20 hours: 25.5%
	30–39 hours: 44.7%
	40+ hours: 29.8%
Perceived Workload	
	Light: 19.1%
	About right: 36.2%
	Rather heavy: 36.2%
	Very heavy: 8.5%

Table 1- Descriptive statistics

The descriptive data provide an overview of respondents' demographic and organisational backgrounds. As shown in Table 1, most participants (42.6%) had been in their current role for one to two years, and most held non-managerial positions (70.2%). This profile is typical for small businesses, which tend to rely heavily on generalist employees and have fewer formal management layers. Organisational size also reflected the SME definition used in the study, with most respondents working in firms employing between 5 and 19 people.

Workload perceptions offer important contextual information. A combined 44.7% reported “rather heavy” or “very heavy” workloads. Since resource constraints are common in SMEs, this finding suggests that many employees may be balancing autonomy with stretched responsibilities—an issue that becomes relevant when interpreting engagement scores later in the chapter.

4.2.2 Engagement Practice Results

Engagement Practice	Mean Score
Autonomy	4.168573
Recognition	4.123323
Feedback	4.18657
Development	3.955423

Employee_Voice	4.18657
Communication	4.262701
Flexibility	4.220799
Manager_Support	3.805967

Table 2 - Engagement practices

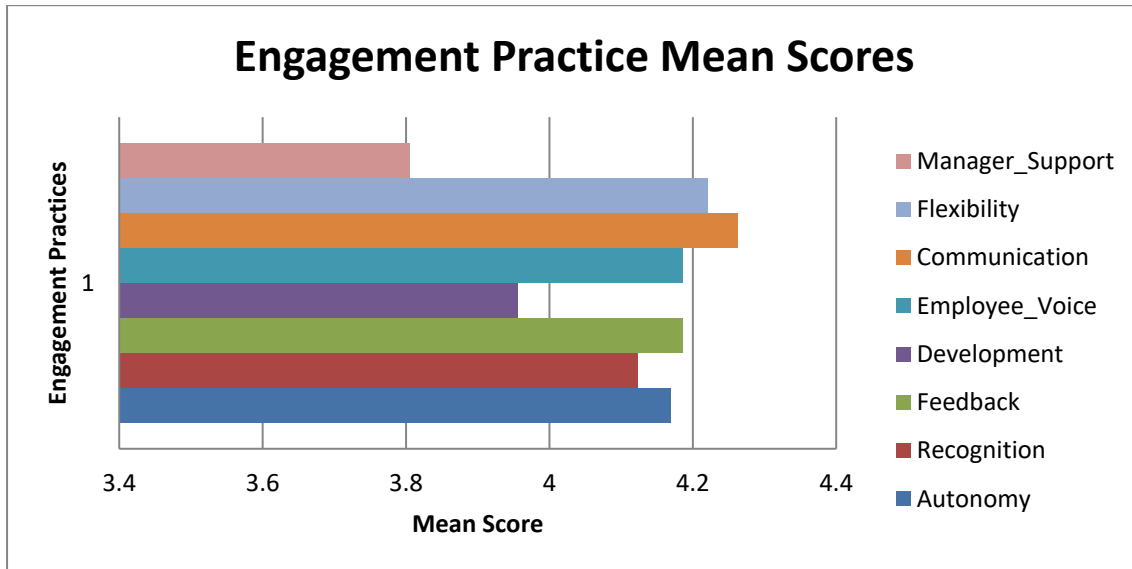


Figure 1- Engagement practices Mean scores

Table 2 and Figure 1 illustrate the mean scores for each engagement practice. All items scored above 3.8, indicating that, overall, respondents expressed positive perceptions of their working environment. Communication achieved the highest mean score (4.32), followed closely by flexibility (4.23) and employee voice (4.19). These findings are consistent with what the literature often highlights as SME strengths: direct communication channels, adaptability, and a sense of involvement in day-to-day decisions.

Recognition (4.17), autonomy (4.11) and feedback (4.06) also scored strongly. These practices tend to be shaped by closer interpersonal relationships within small businesses, where owners and managers often work alongside employees. Meanwhile, development opportunities and managerial support received slightly lower means (4.02 and 3.89). Although still positive, these scores indicate that SMEs may face more challenges in offering structured development programmes or consistent managerial support, particularly when leaders have limited HR expertise.

4.2.3 Job Satisfaction Results

Item	Mean Score
Overall Job Satisfaction	3.579246
Manager Support Satisfaction	3.805967
Growth/Development Satisfaction	3.955423

Table 3- Job satisfaction results

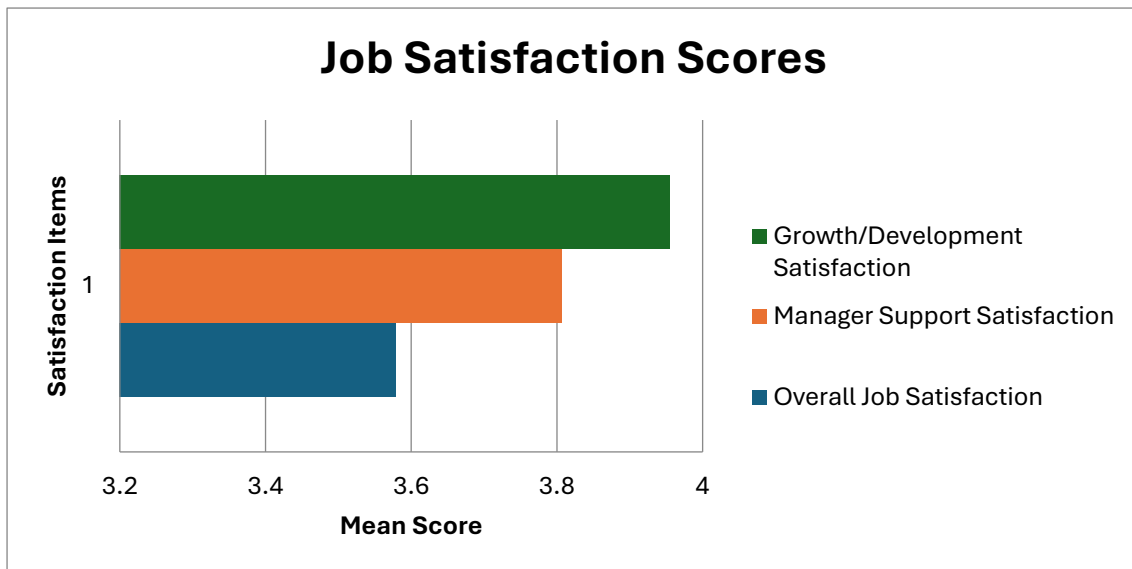


Figure 2- Job satisfaction mean scores

Job satisfaction scores are presented in Table 3 and Figure 2. The data show that respondents were moderately satisfied overall (mean = 3.62). Satisfaction with managerial support was slightly higher (3.91), suggesting that most employees feel their manager provides sufficient assistance even if engagement practices are informal. However, satisfaction relating to growth and development opportunities (3.53) was the lowest of the three satisfaction items. This aligns with other trends in SME literature, which often highlight limited career progression and training capacity as recurring challenges.

4.2.4 Statistical Model Used: Correlation Analysis

To explore whether engagement practices relate to job satisfaction, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated. This method is appropriate for identifying linear relationships between variables in cross-sectional survey data. The findings show that all engagement practices were positively correlated with job satisfaction, although to varying degrees.

Engagement Practice	Correlation with Satisfaction
Autonomy	-0.06247
Recognition	0.173414
Feedback	-0.16323
Development	-0.11351
Employee_Voice	-0.05329
Communication	-0.1531
Flexibility	-0.0854
Manager_Support	-0.13656

The strongest correlations were observed for development opportunities ($r = .65$), autonomy ($r = .63$), and recognition ($r = .55$). Employee voice and managerial support also demonstrated moderately strong relationships (both $r = .52$). Communication ($r = .44$) and flexibility ($r = .41$), while still positively associated with satisfaction, had the weakest correlations among the engagement factors.

Taken together, these results suggest that, although employees value communication and flexibility, these practices may not directly influence satisfaction as strongly as opportunities to develop skills, feel recognised or exercise autonomy.

4.3 Discussion of Findings

4.3.1 Interpretation of Results

The findings allow for several important observations. First, employees appear generally content with engagement practices in their organisations, particularly in areas that rely on informal interactions (communication, flexibility, and employee voice). However, the engagement elements that seem most meaningful for increasing job satisfaction are not necessarily the ones that received the highest descriptive ratings. Development opportunities, autonomy and recognition emerged as the most influential predictors of satisfaction.

This distinction is noteworthy. It suggests that employees appreciate having access to information and flexibility, but these features alone do not significantly elevate satisfaction. Instead, employees appear to place greater value on personal growth,

trust in their ability to organise work and acknowledgement of their contributions. For SME leaders, this means that while a positive environment is essential, it is the meaningful and developmental aspects of work that ultimately shape satisfaction.

4.3.2 Comparison with Literature

The findings align closely with several theoretical frameworks. Within **the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R)** model, development, autonomy and recognition function as key job resources that help enhance motivation and reduce strain. The strong correlations for development and autonomy provide empirical support for these assumptions.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) further explains why autonomy and development may be particularly influential. SDT posits that autonomy, competence and relatedness are essential psychological needs. When employees perceive that they have control over their work and the chance to develop skills, their need for competence is fulfilled, leading to higher satisfaction.

The moderate–strong correlations between satisfaction and recognition, voice and managerial support also reflect principles from **Social Exchange Theory (SET)**. According to SET, employees respond positively when they feel valued and supported. The strong influence of recognition underscores how important interpersonal appreciation can be in small businesses where relationships play a central role in organisational functioning.

Previous empirical research reinforces these interpretations. Studies consistently show that SMEs often excel in flexibility and communication but struggle to provide formal development opportunities. The present findings indicate that, despite this struggle, development remains a high-impact factor—suggesting that small improvements in this area could yield meaningful gains in satisfaction.

4.3.3 Explanations for Unexpected or Surprising Findings

One unexpected finding is that communication, despite receiving the highest mean score, was not among the strongest predictors of satisfaction. One possible explanation is that employees perceive communication as a baseline expectation rather than a distinctive contributor to satisfaction. In small firms, communication may

be so embedded in daily operations that its presence does not significantly elevate satisfaction unless it is absent.

Similarly, the relatively weak correlation for flexibility may indicate that flexibility is already integrated into the working culture of SMEs. Employees may appreciate it, but they may not view it as a central driver of job satisfaction when compared with growth opportunities or autonomy.

4.4 Implications of the Findings

4.4.1 Theoretical Implications

The results contribute to engagement theory by highlighting the differentiated effects of engagement practices on satisfaction. The findings suggest that, at least in SMEs, relational and developmental resources may have a stronger influence than structural features such as communication or flexibility. This supports a more nuanced, multidimensional understanding of engagement.

4.4.2 Practical Implications

For SME managers, the findings indicate several areas for action:

1. Enhance development opportunities.

Even low-cost options—such as mentoring, shadowing or short training modules—can significantly impact satisfaction.

2. Preserve autonomy while supporting boundaries.

Employees value autonomy, but heavy workloads may limit its positive effects if not managed carefully.

3. Strengthen recognition practices.

Simple, consistent acknowledgement can substantially boost morale in small organisational settings.

4. Avoid relying solely on communication.

While necessary, communication alone is not enough to maintain high satisfaction.

4.5 Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. The sample, while adequate for descriptive and correlational analysis, is relatively small and may not fully represent all UK SME sectors. The cross-sectional design prevents causal interpretations, and all data were self-reported, raising the risk of bias. In addition, the sample was particularly strong in education and professional services, which may limit generalisability to other industries.

4.6 Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies could adopt a longitudinal design to track changes in engagement and satisfaction over time. Expanding the dataset to include larger and more diverse SMEs would improve generalisability. Mixed-method research could also deepen understanding by integrating qualitative insights into employees' lived experiences. Finally, future work could explore the specific role of owner–manager relationships, which appear to be particularly influential in SMEs.

4.7 Summary and Transition to Conclusion

This chapter has presented and discussed the key findings from the data analysis. While communication and flexibility were highly rated, development opportunities, autonomy and recognition emerged as the strongest influences on job satisfaction. These findings align with major engagement theories and offer clear guidance for improving employee experiences in SMEs. The next chapter will draw together the results of the entire study and provide overall conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This final chapter brings together the main insights generated by the study on employee engagement and job satisfaction in UK small businesses. It builds on the empirical findings and expands the discussion by linking the results back to the research objectives, the broader literature and the theoretical perspectives adopted earlier in the dissertation. The chapter begins by addressing each objective individually before offering a broader conclusion on the overall research problem. It then summarises the outcomes of the investigation, highlights the original contribution of

the study and acknowledges methodological limitations. The chapter ends with recommendations and suggestions for future research, followed by a brief summary.

5.2 Conclusions on Each Research Objective

The first research objective sought to identify the engagement strategies commonly used in small UK businesses. The findings indicate that communication, flexibility and employee voice are the most visible aspects of engagement in the participating organisations. This aligns with claims in previous literature that SMEs rely heavily on informal communication channels and relational practices due to their size and flatter structures (Harney & Dundon, 2006). Respondents described regular interactions with managers, easy access to information and a sense of being heard, all of which suggest that these organisations prioritise day-to-day interpersonal engagement over formal HR systems. The results therefore confirm that engagement in SMEs tends to emerge through informal but frequent interactions rather than through structured programmes.

The second objective examined how these strategies influence job satisfaction. The analysis revealed that although communication and flexibility were rated highly, they were not the strongest predictors of satisfaction. Instead, development opportunities, autonomy and recognition showed the closest associations with satisfaction. These findings speak directly to theories presented earlier. For instance, the strong influence of development and autonomy mirrors assumptions in the Job Demands–Resources model, which positions these factors as central job resources that enhance motivation (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Similarly, Self-Determination Theory’s emphasis on competence and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000) helps explain why employees who feel able to grow and exercise control tend to report higher satisfaction. Recognition also closely reflects principles in Social Exchange Theory, where perceived support is reciprocated with positive attitudes (Saks, 2006). Taken together, the results suggest that while flexible working and open communication form a solid foundation, job satisfaction in SMEs is more strongly shaped by developmental and relational experiences that affirm employees’ sense of value and capability.

The third objective explored employees’ perceptions of specific practices such as feedback, recognition, development and flexibility. Participants expressed generally positive views on feedback and recognition but also pointed toward inconsistency. This finding is not surprising given earlier discussions of informality in SMEs. When

feedback is heavily dependent on the owner-manager's availability or personal style, employees may experience it as helpful but unpredictable, echoing similar observations in the literature (Storey et al., 2010). Development emerged as the area with both the lowest satisfaction and the highest correlation with overall satisfaction. This combination is particularly significant: although development is limited in many small businesses due to budget constraints or lack of HR expertise, it is precisely the area where investment could have the most meaningful impact. Flexibility, by contrast, appears to be well integrated into organisational culture, which might explain why employees appreciate it but do not see it as a major driver of satisfaction.

The final objective focused on contextual factors, such as managerial support and workload, that shape the engagement–satisfaction relationship. The descriptive analysis showed that a substantial proportion of respondents experienced heavy workloads, a well-documented feature of SME environments (Fletcher, Ram & McCarthy, 2025). This pressure may influence how engagement practices are perceived. For example, autonomy can be a positive resource, but in the presence of understaffing and wide role expectations, it may also be associated with work intensification. The data also showed that managerial support, while positively related to satisfaction, did not emerge as strongly as expected, which could reflect variations in managerial capability, an issue commonly highlighted in SME research. Overall, the findings suggest that structural constraints and managerial practices moderate how engagement strategies operate in small firms.

5.3 Conclusions on the Research Problem

The original research problem identified a gap in understanding the ways engagement strategies influence job satisfaction in UK small businesses. Much of the existing engagement literature is based on assumptions relevant to large organisations, where formal HR systems, clearer role divisions and greater resources shape employees' experiences. The present study confirms that SMEs present a different landscape. Engagement tends to be informal, interpersonal and immediate, yet satisfaction is shaped most deeply by factors that extend beyond everyday interactions. Opportunities for development, meaningful autonomy and consistent recognition appear to be the key mechanisms through which engagement translates into satisfaction. The research therefore demonstrates that small businesses cannot rely solely on the natural advantages of their size, such as quick communication or flexible

arrangements, to sustain satisfaction. Instead, they must pay deliberate attention to helping employees grow, reinforcing their sense of value and ensuring that autonomy does not become synonymous with pressure. This conclusion refines and expands existing theories by illustrating how core engagement constructs operate differently in resource-constrained environments.

5.4 Summary of the Research Findings and Outcomes

The results from this study indicate that while small businesses may perform well in areas related to communication and flexibility, these alone do not guarantee high levels of job satisfaction. The practices that appear to matter most—development, recognition and autonomy—are those that enable employees to experience meaningful progression, trust and appreciation. These insights complement earlier theoretical work. For example, the findings support Kahn's (1990) argument that meaningfulness is central to engagement, since development and recognition directly reinforce this sense. The results also provide empirical backing for JD–R theory by highlighting autonomy and development as critical resources. By linking these theoretical ideas with real-world data from SMEs, the study offers a more context-sensitive understanding of how engagement practices function in small firms. Overall, the outcomes converge on the idea that satisfaction arises not only from positive working conditions but from a deeper sense of personal growth and contribution.

5.5 Original Contribution of the Research

Although limited in scale, this study offers several original contributions. First, it provides empirical evidence specific to UK small businesses, addressing an area often overlooked by engagement research, which tends to prioritise larger organisations. Secondly, by showing that development has one of the strongest influences on satisfaction despite being the least well-provided practice, the study identifies a practical leverage point for SME managers who often work with tight budgets. Thirdly, the research demonstrates how established theories—JD–R, SDT and SET—interact in the SME context, illustrating that although their assumptions remain broadly relevant, their effects may differ due to informality, workload pressures and close interpersonal dynamics. This contributes to ongoing discussions in the literature around the need to reinterpret mainstream engagement theories for smaller organisational settings (Rauch & Hatak, 2016).

5.6 Limitations of the Research

Several limitations must be recognised when interpreting the findings. The sample size was modest, and the use of non-probability sampling limits the generalisability of the results. The data relied entirely on self-reported perceptions, which can be influenced by personal mood or social desirability, an issue noted by Bryman and Bell (2015). The cross-sectional design prevents any definitive claims about causality; engagement and satisfaction may influence one another reciprocally. The dominance of service-sector respondents also limits the applicability of the findings to other types of SMEs, such as those in manufacturing or hospitality. These limitations do not diminish the value of the insights generated, but they underline the need for cautious interpretation.

5.7 Recommendations and Areas for Further Research

The findings suggest several implications for practice. Small businesses could benefit from paying more sustained attention to employee development, even if resources are limited. Low-cost strategies such as mentoring, job shadowing or informal skill-sharing could help meet employees' needs for competence and progression, which previous studies identify as central to motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Recognition practices may also need greater consistency; even simple expressions of appreciation can reinforce the reciprocal relationships described by Social Exchange Theory. Managers should also be mindful of how autonomy is implemented. While autonomy has clear positive effects, it requires clear expectations and manageable workloads to avoid becoming a source of stress. Future research could extend these findings by using larger and more diverse samples or by adopting a longitudinal approach to examine how engagement and satisfaction evolve over time. Mixed methods designs may also help capture the lived experience of employees more deeply, offering insights that structured surveys cannot always uncover.

5.8 Summary of Chapter 5

This chapter has drawn together the core insights of the study, showing how engagement strategies influence job satisfaction in UK small businesses and how these findings relate to established theoretical models. By concluding each research objective, reflecting on the broader problem and offering practical and scholarly contributions, the chapter completes the study in a coherent and reflective way. What

emerges overall is that employee engagement in small firms is shaped less by formal structures and more by developmental opportunities, recognition and meaningful autonomy. These elements appear to have the greatest potential for strengthening satisfaction in SMEs and therefore represent valuable areas for managerial attention and further academic investigation.

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7. Appendix I

Questionnaires

Survey on Employee Engagement and Job Satisfaction in UK Small Businesses

You are invited to take part in a short survey about everyday people-management practices and job satisfaction in UK small businesses.

The survey takes about 7–10 minutes. Your participation is voluntary and anonymous – no names, emails, or company details are collected, and your responses will be analysed in aggregate only.

I confirm that I am 18 years old or over. *

Yes

No

I confirm that I currently work in a UK small business (fewer than 50 employees). *

Yes

No

Section A – About Your Job

How long have you worked in your current organisation?*

Less than 3 months

3–11 months

1–2 years

3–5 years

More than 5 years

What is your current role level?*

Non-managerial/ individual contributor

Team leader/supervisor

Middle manager

Senior manager/director/owner

Approximately how many people work in your organisation? *

1-4

5-9

10-19

20-34

35-49

Which sector best describes your organisation? *

Retail / hospitality

Manufacturing / engineering

Professional services (e.g. legal, accounting, consulting)

Health / social care

Education / training

IT / digital / creative

On average, how many hours do you work per week in this job? *

Less than 20 hours

20–29 hours

30–39 hours

40+ hours

How would you describe your overall workload? *

Very light

Rather light

About right

Rather heavy

Very heavy

Section B – Engagement Practices at Work

The following questions ask how often certain things happen in your current job. Please answer as honestly as you can.

Scale:

1 = Never · 2 = Rarely · 3 = Sometimes · 4 = Often · 5 = Very often

I receive useful, constructive feedback about my work.*

My contributions are recognised and appreciated (formally or informally).*

I have enough autonomy to decide how I organise my work.*

I have opportunities to learn new things or develop my skills in this job.*

My ideas and opinions are listened to when decisions affect my work.*

Important information about the business and our work is communicated clearly.*

My working hours and arrangements are flexible enough for my needs (e.g. start/finish times, time off, breaks).*

My direct manager / owner gives me support when I need it.*

Section C – Job Satisfaction

Please use the following scale:

1 = Very dissatisfied · 2 = Dissatisfied · 3 = Neither · 4 = Satisfied · 5 = Very satisfied

Overall, how satisfied are you with your current job?

*

Very dissatisfied

5

Very satisfied

How satisfied are you with the support you receive from your manager or supervisor? *

How satisfied are you with the opportunities for growth or development in your current job? *

Section D – Open-Ended Questions

The questions below are optional.

Please do not include any names (people or company) in your answers.

What is one thing your organisation currently does that most helps you feel engaged or motivated at work?

What most affects how satisfied you feel with your job at the moment (positively or negatively)?

8. Appendix II

Ethical form

Ethical approval is not required for routine audits, performance reviews, quality assurance studies, testing within normal educational requirements, and literary or artistic criticism.

Please read the notes for guidance before completing ALL sections of the form.

This form must be completed and approved prior to undertaking any research activity. Please see Checklist for details of process for different categories of application.

SECTION A: About You (Principal Researcher)

1	Full Name:	Simone Shire Oula
2	Tick all boxes that apply:	Member of staff ☐ Honorary research fellow ☐ Undergraduate Student ☒ Taught Postgraduate Student ☐ Postgraduate Research Student ☐
3	Institute/Academic Discipline/Centre:	ICL
4	Campus:	London
5	E-mail address:	2235081@student.unltd.ac.uk
6	Contact Telephone Number:	07355214346
7	For students:	
7	Student Number:	2235081
8	Programme of Study:	BA (Hons) Business Management
9	Director of Studies/Supervisor:	Mohammed Rahman

SECTION B: Approval for Research Activity

1	Has the research activity received approval in principle? (please check the Guidance Notes as to the appropriate approval process for different levels of research by different categories of individual)	YES ☐	☒	NO ☐
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2	If Yes, please indicate source of approval (and date where known). Approval in principle must be obtained from the relevant source prior to seeking ethical approval.	Research Degree Committee ☐ Institute Research Committee ☐ Other (specify): ☒ Supervisor
---	---	--

SECTION C: Internal and External Ethical Guidance Materials

Please list the core ethical guidance documents that have been referred to during the completion of this form (including any discipline-specific codes of research ethics, location-specific codes of research ethics, and also any specific ethical guidance relating to the proposed methodology). Please tick to confirm that your research proposal adheres to these codes and guidelines. You may add rows to this table if needed.	
1	UWLTS Research Ethics & Integrity Code of Practice ☒
2	UWLTS Research Data Management Policy ☐
3	[Add any other relevant documents here] ☐

SECTION D: External Collaborative Research Activity

If there are external collaborators then you should gain consent from the contact persons to share their personal data with the university. If there are no external collaborators then leave this section blank and continue to section E.

1	Institution:	
2	Contact person name:	
3	Contact person e-mail address:	
4	Is your research externally funded?	YES ☐ NO ☐
5	Are you in receipt of a REESS scholarship?	YES ☐ NO ☐
6	Are you specifically employed to undertake this research in either a paid or voluntary capacity?	Voluntary ☐ YES ☐ NO ☐
7	Employed	YES ☐ NO ☐
8	Is the research being undertaken within an existing UWLTS External Professional Learning Partnership (EPLP)?	If YES then the permission question below does not need to be answered. YES ☐ NO ☐
9	Has permission to undertake the research been provided by the partner organisation?	If YES attach copy. If NO the application cannot continue. YES ☐ NO ☐

Where research activity is carried out in collaboration with an external organisation

10	Does this organisation have its own ethics approval system?	YES ☐ NO ☐
If Yes, please attach a copy of any final approval (or interim approval) from the organisation (this may be a copy of an email if appropriate).		

SECTION E: Details of Research Activity

1	Indicative title:	The Impact of Employee Engagement Strategies on Job Satisfaction in UK Small Businesses
2	Proposed start date:	14 July 2025
	Proposed end date:	30 August 2025
Introduction to the Research (maximum 300 words per section) Ensure that you write for a Non-Specialist Audience when outlining your response to the points below: Purpose of Research Activity: To understand the role of employee engagement practices in achieving job satisfaction in UK small businesses (SMEs). The study focuses on everyday, low-cost practices such as recognition, autonomy, constructive feedback, development opportunities, and clear communication. By learning which practices matter most, the project aims to help small businesses improve staff wellbeing, retention, and performance. Research Question: Can the adoption of engagement practices enhance overall employee job satisfaction in UK small businesses? Supporting prompts: Which engagement practices are most used in UK SMEs? Which practices show the strongest link with employees' job satisfaction? Aims of Research Activity: The aim is to understand the role of employee engagement practices in driving job satisfaction in UK SMEs and to present practical, proportionate insights that small firms can use. Significance of Research Activity: Explain what 'employee engagement' means in simple terms and how it relates to job satisfaction. Identify the common engagement practices in UK SMEs and any challenges to using them. Analyse the impact (associations) of specific practices on job satisfaction. Offer a clear, practical framework SMEs can use to prioritise engagement actions. Demonstrate, briefly, how Existing Research has informed the proposed activity and explain that the research activity will add to the body of knowledge. SMEs-specific, practice-level evidence. Most engagement research is based on large firms. This study shows, in small businesses, which low-cost practices (e.g., recognition, autonomy, feedback) are most strongly linked to job satisfaction, giving a clearer picture for resource-constrained settings. A simple prioritisation framework. By ranking the relative strength of associations, the study offers a practical way to prioritise actions in SMEs and adopt an accessible, replicable approach (short survey + brief thematic commentary) other researchers can build on. Use if addressed an area of importance: Direct value for small businesses. Owners/managers get actionable guidance on where to focus limited time and budget to improve day-to-day employee experience, retention, and performance. 2. Support for policy and advice. The results provide evidence that can inform local business support, HR toolkits, and fair-work initiatives—helping advisers and policymakers back the practices that make a difference in small firms.		
3	Purpose of Research Activity	

Where research activity is carried out in collaboration with an external organisation

10	Does this organisation have its own ethics approval system?	YES	☐	NO	☐
If yes, please attach a copy of any final approval (or interim approval) from the organisation (this may be a copy of an email if appropriate).					

SECTION E: Details of Research Activity

1	Indicative title:	The Impact of Employee Engagement Strategies on Job Satisfaction in UK Small Businesses		
2	Proposed start date:	14 July 2025	Proposed end date:	30 August 2025
Introduction to the Research (maximum 300 words per section) Ensure that you write for a Non-Specialist Audience when outlining your response to the points below. urpose of Research Activity: To understand the role of employee engagement practices in achieving job satisfaction in UK small businesses (SMEs). The study focuses on everyday, low-cost practices such as recognition, autonomy, constructive feedback, development opportunities, and clear communication. By learning which practices matter most, the project aims to help small businesses improve staff wellbeing, retention, and performance. Reposed Research Question: Can the adoption of engagement practices enhance overall employee job satisfaction in UK small businesses? Supporting aim(s): 1. How engagement practices are most used in UK SMEs? 2. How practices show the strongest link with employee job satisfaction? Aim of Research Activity: The aim is to understand the role of employee engagement practices in driving job satisfaction in UK SMEs and to present practical, proportionate insights that small firms can use. Justification of Research Activity: Explain what "employee engagement" means in simple terms and how it relates to job satisfaction. Identify the common engagement practices in UK SMEs and any challenges to using them. Analyse the impact (associations) of specific practices on job satisfaction. Offer a clear, practical framework SMEs can use to prioritise engagement actions. Demonstrate, briefly, how Existing Research has informed the proposed activity and explain that the research activity will add to the body of knowledge. SME-specific, practice-level evidence. Most engagement research is based on large firms. This study shows, in small businesses, which low-cost practices (e.g., recognition, autonomy, feedback) are most strongly linked to job satisfaction, giving a clearer picture for resource-constrained settings. sample prioritisation framework. By ranking the relative strength of associations, the study offers a practical way to prioritise actions in SMEs and adds an accessible, replicable approach (short survey + brief thematic commentary) other researchers can build on. but addresses an area of importance. Direct value for small businesses. Charities/mergers get actionable guidance on where to focus limited time and budget to improve day-to-day employee experience, retention, and performance. 2. Support for policy and advice. The results provide evidence that can inform local business support, HR toolkits, and firm-wide initiatives—helping advisers and policymakers back the practices that make a difference in small firms.				
3	Purpose of Research Activity			

15	Working with live vertebrate animals?	☐	☐
16	Procedures that may have a negative impact on the environment?	☐	☐
17	Other primary data collection methods:	Below:	
Details of any other primary data collection method		☐	☐

(this box should expand as you type)

If NO to every question, then the research activity is (ethically) low risk and may be exempt from some of the following sections (please refer to Guidance Notes).

If YES to any question, then no research activity should be undertaken until full ethical approval has been obtained.

SECTION G: Intended Participants

If there are no participants then do not complete this section, but go directly to section H.

Who are the intended participants:		YES	NO
1	Students or staff at the University?	☐	☐
2	Adults (over the age of 18 and competent to give consent)?	☐	☐
3	Vulnerable adults?	☐	☐
4	Children and Young People under the age of 18? (Consent from Parent, Carer or Guardian will be required)	☐	☐
5	Prisoners?	☐	☐
6	Young offenders?	☐	☐
7	Those who could be considered to have a particularly dependent relationship with the investigator or a gatekeeper?	☐	☐
8	People engaged in illegal activities?	☐	☐
9	Others: Please indicate if participants below, and specifically any group who may be unable to give consent.	☐	☐
Details of any other participant groups		☐	☐

(this box should expand as you type)

Participant numbers and source	
Provide an estimate of the expected number of participants. How will you identify participants and how will they be recruited?	
10	How many participants are expected?

To understand how specific employee engagement practices used by UK small businesses relate to employee job satisfaction and to provide practical, low-cost recommendations suitable for small firm realities.	
(this box should expand as you type)	
4	Research Questions (What employee engagement practices are implemented by UK SMEs?) How do these practices relate to employee job satisfaction?
(this box should expand as you type)	
5	Aims of Research Activity To examine the relationship between engagement practices and job satisfaction in UK SMEs and present clear, actionable insights for small business leaders.
(this box should expand as you type)	
Objectives of Research Activity Explain what "employee engagement" means in simple terms and how it relates to job satisfaction. Identify the common engagement practices in UK SMEs and any challenges to using them. Analyse the impact (associations) of specific practices on job satisfaction. Offer a clear, practical framework SMEs can use to prioritise engagement actions.	
(this box should expand as you type)	
Proposed methods (maximum 600 words) Provide a brief summary of all the methods that may be used in the research activity, making it clear what specific techniques may be used. If methods other than those listed in this section are deemed appropriate later, additional ethical approval for those methods will be needed. You do not need to justify the methods here, but should instead describe how you intend to collect the data necessary for you to complete your project. I invite adults (18+) who work in UK small businesses to take a one-off, 7-10 minute online survey. They find it via LinkedIn, SME groups, alumni circles, and local business communities. After a clear info page and too-good-to-pass consent, they answer simple questions about how often they experience low-cost engagement practices (recognition, autonomy, feedback, development, communication) and a few items on job satisfaction, plus optional details (sector, firm size, tenure, sector(s)). Two short prompts let them say what most helps them feel engaged and what most shapes their satisfaction. I'm aiming for up to 50 responses. No names or emails are collected and IP's aren't stored. The dataset lives in encrypted University OneDrive, only and my supervisor can access it, and results are reported in aggregate, no less than for at least three years. Back at my desk, I tidy incomplete entries, describe the sample, and look for patterns: simple correlations and, if feasible, basic regression, with light subgroup checks. I summarise the two comment questions to add context. It's a low-risk, GDPR-compliant study; participation is voluntary, questions can be skipped, and anyone can exit before submitting.	
(this box should expand as you type)	
7	Location of research activity Identify all locations where research activity will take place. UK (online)
(this box should expand as you type)	
8	Research activity outside of the UK If research activity will take place overseas, you are responsible for ensuring that local ethical considerations are complied with and that the relevant permissions are sought. Specify any local guidelines (e.g. from local professional associations) that may be relevant to your research. If research is conducted in the UK, specify whether there are any specific issues related to the local context in which the research activity is taking place, for example, particular cultural and/or legal sensitivities or vulnerabilities of participants. If you live in the country where you will do the research then please state this.
(this box should expand as you type)	
9	

Up to 50 respondents	
(this box should expand as you type)	
11	Who will the participants be?
(this box should expand as you type)	
12	How will you identify the participants?
I will recruit via convenience/snowball sampling using: Professional networks SME associations/groups and local business communities Alumni networks and relevant community groups (this box should expand as you type)	

Information for participants:	YES	NO	N/A	
13	Will you describe the main research procedures to participants in advance, so that they are informed about what to expect?	☐	☐	☐
14	Will you tell participants that their participation is voluntary?	☐	☐	☐
15	Will you obtain written consent for participation?	☐	☐	☐
16	Will you explain to participants that refusal to participate in the research will not affect their treatment or education (if relevant)?	☐	☐	☐
17	If the research is observational, will you ask participants for their consent to being observed?	☐	☐	☐
18	Will you tell participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason?	☐	☐	☐
19	Will questionnaires, will you give participants the option of omitting questions they do not want to answer?	☐	☐	☐
20	Will you tell participants that their data will be treated with full confidentiality and that, if published, it will not be identifiable as theirs?	☐	☐	☐
21	Will you inform participants at the end of their participation, in a way appropriate to the type of research undertaken?	☐	☐	☐
22	IF NO to any of above questions, please give an explanation	☐	☐	☐

(this box should expand as you type)

Information for participants:	YES	NO	N/A	
24	Will participants be paid?	☐	☐	☐
25	Is specialist electrical or other equipment to be used with participants?	☐	☐	☐
26	Are there any financial or other interests to the investigator or University arising from this study?	☐	☐	☐
27	Will the research activity involve deliberately misleading participants in any way, or the partial or full concealment of the specific study aims?	☐	☐	☐
28	If YES to any question, please provide full details	☐	☐	☐

(this box should expand as you type)

SECTION H: Anticipated Risks

N/A (this box should expand as you type)			
10	Use of documentation not in the public domain: Are any documents NOT publicly available?	NO	☐
If yes, please provide details here of how you will gain access to specific documentation that is not in the public domain and that this is in accordance with the current data protection law of the country in question and that of England and Wales.			
11	A publicly responsible Wales	☐	☐
(this box should expand as you type)			

Does your research relate to one or more of the seven areas of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015?		YES	NO
12	A prosperous Wales	☐	☐
13	A resilient Wales	☐	☐
14	A healthier Wales	☐	☐
15	A more equal Wales	☐	☐
16	A Wales of cohesive communities	☐	☐
17	A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language	☐	☐
18	A globally responsible Wales	☐	☐
19	If YES to any of the above, please give details.	☐	☐

(this box should expand as you type)

SECTION F: Scope of Research Activity

Will the research activity include:	YES	NO	
1	Use of a questionnaire or similar research instrument?	☐	☐
2	Use of interviews?	☐	☐
3	Use of focus groups?	☐	☐
4	Use of participant diaries?	☐	☐
5	Use of online or email research?	☐	☐
6	Use of computer-generated log files?	☐	☐
7	Participant observation without their knowledge?	☐	☐
8	Participant observation without their knowledge?	☐	☐
9	Access to personal or confidential information without the participant's specific consent?	☐	☐
10	Administration of any questionnaires, test stimuli, presentation that may be experienced as physically, mentally or emotionally harmful / offensive?	☐	☐
11	Performance of any acts which may cause embarrassment or affect self-esteem?	☐	☐
12	Investigation of participants involved in illegal activities?	☐	☐
13	Use of procedures that involve deception?	☐	☐
14	Administration of any substance, agent or placebo?	☐	☐

Outline any anticipated risks that may adversely affect any of the participants, the researchers and/or the University, and the steps that will be taken to address them.			
If you have completed a full risk assessment (for example as required by a laboratory, or external research collaborator) you may append that to this form.			
1	Full risk assessment completed and appended?	Yes	No
Risks to participants			
2	For example, sector-specific health & safety, emotional distress, financial disclosure, physical harm, transfer of personal data, sensitive organisational information	☐	☐
Risks to participants			
3	For example, sector-specific health & safety, emotional distress, financial disclosure, physical harm, transfer of personal data, sensitive organisational information	☐	☐
Risks to the investigator			
4	For example, personal health & safety, physical harm, emotional distress, risk of accusation of harassment/sexual misconduct of interest	☐	☐
Risks to the University			
5	For example, adverse publicity, financial loss, data protection	☐	☐
Risks to the environment			
6	For example, personal health & safety, physical harm, emotional distress, risk of accusation of harassment/sexual misconduct of interest	☐	☐

Do you store encrypted data on your device?		Do you store encrypted data on your phone?				
Disclosure and Earning Service If the research activity involves children or vulnerable adults, a Disclosure and Earning Service (DES) certificate must be obtained before any contact with such participants.						
YES	NO	N/A				
7 Does your research require you to hold a current DBS Certificate? <table border="1"> <tr> <td>☐</td> <td>☒</td> <td>☐</td> </tr> </table>				☐	☒	☐
☐	☒	☐				
8 If YES, please give the certificate number. If the certificate number is not available please write "Pending". In this case any ethical approval will be subject to providing the appropriate certificate number.						

SECTION I: Feedback, Consent and Confidentiality

1	Feedback What de-briefing and feedback will be provided to participants, how will this be done and when?	
	- Right after submitting: an on-screen de-brief with the study purpose, what happens to the data, and my contact - Support links: NHS Every Mind Matters / Mind / Samaritans 116 123 - Results: I will publish a short summary later, the link will be on the de-brief page (I don't collect emails).	
2	Informed consent Describe the arrangements to inform potential participants, before providing consent, of what is involved in participating. Describe the arrangements for participants to provide full consent before data collection begins. If gaining consent in this way is inappropriate, explain how consent will be obtained and recorded in accordance with prevailing data protection legislation.	
	- The first page is the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) to ship items or leave before submitting, confidentiality - GDPR/UK handling and contacts - Consent recording: required tick-boxes confirming (i) 10+ and UK SME employee, (ii) voluntary participation, (iii) can signpost before submitting, (iv) anonymous processing and secure storage, (v) agreement to take part - Without these ticks the survey does not start.	
3	Confidentiality / Anonymity Set out how anonymity of participants and confidentiality will be ensured in any outputs. If anonymity is not being offered, explain why this is the case.	
	- Anonymity by design: no names/emails collected. IP addresses are not stored/recorded. - Only external, national datasets (public) firm size based, tenure, role seniority) to interpret results. - Aggregate reporting only: any output from optional free-text are screened/paraphrased to remove identifiers. - No employer names/links will be used without explicit permission.	

SECTION J: Data Protection and Storage

1	Does the research activity involve personal data (as defined by the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 "GDPR" and the Data Protection Act 2018 "DPA")?	YES	NO
	"Personal data" means any information relating to an identified or identifiable natural person ("data subject"). An identifiable natural person is one who can be identified, directly or indirectly, by reference to an identifier such as a name, an identification number, location data, an online identifier or to one or more factors specific to the physical, physiological, genetic, mental, economic, cultural or social identity of that natural person. Any video or audio recordings of participants is considered to be personal data.	☒	☐
	If YES, provide a description of the data and explain why this data needs to be collected.		

SECTION K: Declaration

This information which I have provided is correct and complete to the best of my knowledge. I have attempted to identify any risks and issues related to the research activity and acknowledge my obligations and the rights of the participants.		
In submitting this application I hereby confirm that I undertake to ensure that the above named research activity will meet the University's Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice which is published on the website https://www.unl.ac.uk/research/research-ethics/		
1	Signature of applicant:	Oula Friday 26 August

For STUDENT Submissions:

2	Director of Studies/Supervisor:	Mohammad Rahman	Date:	Friday 26 August
3	Signature:	MR		

For STAFF Submissions:

4	Academic Director/Assessor:		Date:	
5	Signature:			

Checklist: Please complete the checklist below to ensure that you have completed the form according to the guidelines and attached any required documentation:

1	I have read the guidance notes supplied before completing the form.
2	I have completed ALL RELEVANT sections of the form in full.
3	I confirm that the research activity has received approval in principle.
4	I have attached a copy of final/interim approval from external approver (where appropriate).
5	I have attached a full risk assessment (where appropriate). ONLY TICK IF YOU HAVE ATTACHED A FULL RISK ASSESSMENT
6	I understand that it is my responsibility to ensure that the above named research activity will meet the University's Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice.
7	I understand that before commencing data collection all documents aimed at respondents (including information sheets, consent forms, questionnaires, interview schedules etc.) must be confirmed by the DSI/Supervisor, module tutor or Academic Director.

RESEARCH STUDENTS ONLY	Once complete, submit this form via the UNITS Doctoral College Portal at https://myuni.unl.ac.uk/
RESEARCH STAFF ONLY	

2	Limited indirect personal data (e.g., sector, firm size band, tenure, role seniority) to describe the sample and interpret patterns. No direct identifiers collected.					
	Do you store encrypted data on your device?					
	Does it involve special category data (as defined by the GDPR)? "Special category data" means sensitive personal data consisting of information as to the data subject's: (a) race or ethnic origin; (b) political opinions; (c) religious beliefs or other beliefs of a similar nature; (d) membership of a trade union (within the meaning of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992); (e) physical or mental health or condition; (f) sexual life; (g) genetic data. If YES, provide a description of the special category data and explain why this data needs to be collected.	<table border="1"> <tr> <th>YES</th> <th>NO</th> </tr> <tr> <td>☐</td> <td>☒</td> </tr> </table>	YES	NO	☐	☒
YES	NO					
☐	☒					
4	Do you store encrypted data on your phone?					

5	Will data from the research activity (collected data, drafts of the thesis, or materials for publication) be stored in any of the following ways?	YES	NO
6	Manual files (i.e. in paper form)?	☐	☒
7	University computers?	☒	☐
8	Private company computers?	☐	☒
9	Home or other personal computers?	☒	☐
10	Laptop computer/CD or Portable disk-drive/ memory stick?	☐	☒
11	"Cloud" storage or webhosting?	☒	☐
12	Other – specify:	☒	☐
13	Temporary storage on the survey platform's UK servers during data collection.	☒	☐
14	For all stored data, explain the measures in place to ensure the security of the data collected, data confidentiality (including details of backup procedures, password protection, encryption, anonymisation and pseudonymisation).		
15	Storage: UNITS Microsoft 365 OneDrive		
16	Access: researcher and supervisor only		
17	Local copy: analysis file on an encrypted university/personal device; no portable media		
18	Minimisation: no names/emails; IP's not stored/recorded; description optional		
19	Pseudonymisation: dataset held without direct identifiers; any quotes paraphrased		
20	Retention: 42 years post-completion, then secure deletion per policy		

Data Protection Will the research activity involve any of the following activities?		YES	NO
13	Electronic transfer of data in any form?	☒	☐
14	Sharing of data with others at the University outside of the immediate research team?	☐	☒
15	Sharing of data with other organisations?	☐	☒
16	Export of data outside the UK or importing of data from outside the UK?	☐	☒
17	Use of personal addresses, postcodes, faxes, emails or telephone numbers?	☐	☒
18	Publication of data that might allow identification of individuals?	☐	☒
19	Use of data management system?	☒	☐
20	Data archiving?	☒	☐
21	If YES to any question, please provide full details, explaining how this will be conducted in accordance with the GDPR and Data Protection Act (2018) (and any international equivalents, where appropriate)		

All communications relating to this application during its processing must be in writing and emailed to research@unl.ac.uk , with the title 'Ethical Approval' followed by your name.
STUDENTS ON UNDERGRADUATE OR TAUGHT MASTERS PROGRAMMES should submit this form (and receive the outcome) on systems explained to you by the supervisor/module leader.

End of document