

# The Impact of Best HR Practices and Employee Engagement on Career Success: A Discriminant Analysis

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** Best HR practices and employee engagement are the most popular mantras for high organizational performance, which are believed to first raise the morale and energy level of the employee, and later are to be followed by the spirited discretionary employee effort. In fact, engagement is a part of best HR practices, which is an umbrella concept. However, the intriguing question is: Do all these practices aimed at improving organizational performance make for individual employee's career success, which is the most powerful driving force behind an employee's performance? This research is an attempt to fathom out which factors contribute most to career success of an employee: Best HR practices or employee engagement or performance?

**Design and Methodology:** A survey was done on 206 employees working in different organizations in Andhra Pradesh, and a discriminant analysis (DA) was conducted to find out which factors contributed most to the career success of the employees.

**Original Contribution:** This research establishes a link between career success, engagement efforts, and best HR practices.

**Findings:** The results show that engagement contributes most to career success followed by best HR practices. Job performance has a doubtful role in determining career success.

**Originality and Value:** Organizations engaged in vigorous implementation of best HR practices would realize from this research that engagement efforts are better than best HR practices from the standpoint of an employee's career success.

**Practical Implications:** Engagement efforts, which are employee-centered, are the best bet than best HR practices, which are firm-centered.

**Keywords:** best HR practices, good HR practices, engagement, firm-centered, employee-centered practices, job performance

**JEL Classification :** J8, J81, J810, M12, M120

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HRM practices refer to organizational activities directed at managing the pool of human resources and ensuring that the resources are employed towards the fulfillment of organizational goals (Wright & Snell, 1991). The finest and handpicked practices that set an organization apart are the "best practices". "Best practices" or "high performance work practices" are described as HR methods and systems that have universal, additive, and positive effects on organizational performance" (Johnson, 2000). High performance work practices, best HR practices, high commitment HR practices, high-performance work culture, HR value chain, and universal HRM all share a common meaning.

Universal HRM is a set of best practices aimed at building highly committed, competent, and motivated workforce through the creation of a high-trust culture and high-involvement practices (Appleby & Mavin, 2000). Universal HRM is based on a three-pronged approach: **(a)** human capital base (best practices of recruitment, selection, training, and development), **(b)** motivation (recognition, reward, and good work systems), and **(c)** opportunity to contribute (job design, involvement, empowerment, and so forth) (Bamberger & Meshoulam, 2000 ; Lavania, 2010). Universal HRM, which is more employee-centered and focuses on engagement, is an extension of Jeffery Pfeffer's seven best HR practices by including employee involvement, employee engagement, employee empowerment, and creation of a strong work culture characterized by the said dimensions.

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Jeffery Pfeffer identified seven best HR practices of successful organizations (Pfeffer, 1998). They are:

- 1) Employment security ;
- 2) Selective hiring of new personnel;
- 3) Self-managed teams and decentralization of decision making as the basic principles of organizational design;
- 4) Comparatively high compensation contingent on organizational performance;
- 5) Extensive training;
- 6) Reduced status distinctions and barriers, including dress, language, office arrangements, and wage differences across levels; and
- 7) Extensive sharing of financial and performance information throughout the organization.

The other best practices that only add more specificity to them, include: **(1)** design and implementation of highly effective performance appraisal system, **(2)** putting in place effective grievance redressing procedures, **(3)** identifying best promotion criteria, **(4)** employee ownership (owning of their own company's shares), **(5)** empowerment of employees with decision-making authority and also with necessary resources, **(6)** employee suggestion schemes, **(7)** job rotation, and **(8)** career ladders that offer opportunities to grow in learning and shouldering bigger responsibilities (Mess, 2004). All the foregoing practices converge with commitment- based workforce management system, which is another term that preaches similar practices.

↳ **Commitment - Based Vs Control and Command - Based :** Commitment-based workforce management system, which is the opposite of control-based management, is a set of good HR practices that helps employees regulate their behavior on their own; such practices, for example, include staff participation, work teams, rewards linked to performance, competency building, empowerment, and so forth. Control-based management, on the contrary, depends heavily on standardization, close supervision, hierarchy, and so forth (Walton, 1985). Given this theoretical background, a brief review of the impact of best HR practices on organizations and employees is attempted in the following section :

↳ **Impact of Best HR Practices :** The study of Arthur (1994) found that HR practices that emphasized employee commitment (e.g., decentralized decision making, comprehensive training, salaried compensation, employee participation) were positively correlated with higher performance. Huselid (1995) too found that investments in HR activities such as incentive compensation, selective hiring, and employee participation led to improvement of employee skills and motivation, and thus resulted in reduced turnover, increased productivity, and increased firm performance. MacDuffie (1995) found that flexible production plants where team-based work systems and high-commitment HR practices (like performance-based compensation and extensive training) are in place consistently excelled mass production plants on performance.

Based on several empirical studies like the foregoing, the universalistic perspective suggests that all organizations should adopt this best practice approach for strategic human resource management (HRM) (Geringer, Frayne, & Milliman, 2002 ; Truss, 2001). Strategic HRM refers to the adoption of a specific set of good HR practices aligned with organizational strategies, namely, cost reduction, innovation, and market specialization. The study of Osman, Ho, and Galang (2011) showed that three main HR practices seem to have the highest influence on organizational performance : **(1)** employee relations and communication, **(2)** career planning, and **(3)** job/work design.

There is enough empirical evidence on the impact of best HR practices on organizational performance and employee outcomes, but that on career success is scant, particularly in the Indian context; when best practices mean a lot to the organization as seen from the extant literature, does it also mean the same for the employee's career success? Do best practices translate into career success of an employee? A brief discussion on career success will be presented opportunely after a brief discussion on both engagement and job performance and their impact on organizational outcomes.

↳ **Hypothesis 1 : Do best HR practices translate into career success for an employee?**

↳ **Engagement :** Engagement is a measure of an employee's willingness to spend discretionary effort to help the employer (Erickson, 2005). Employee engagement, also referred to as work engagement, worker engagement, and job engagement, means high levels of personal investment in and emotional connection with the work tasks performed in a job (Kahn, 1990). It is different from job attitudes. But, Robinson, Perryman, and Hayday (2004) defined employee engagement as “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. An organization must work to develop and nurture engagement, which requires a two-way relationship between the employer and employee.” Kahn (1990) referred to engagement as the “behaviors by which people bring in or leave out their personal selves during work role performances.” He was the first to mention this word. It is a near complete absorption of self into the work role. According to him, engagement can be noticed at the physical, cognitive, and emotional levels. Rich, Lepine, and Crawford (2010) defined it as a commonality among physical, emotional, and cognitive energies that individuals bring to their work role.

According to Rothbard (2001), engagement consists of two critical components: **(1)** attention, and **(2)** absorption; attention refers to cognitive availability, and the amount of time one spends thinking about a role, while absorption refers to losing track of time, getting engrossed in one's role, and intensity of one's focus on a role. Engagement is similar to flow, which is a mental state of operation in which a person in an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and success in the process of the activity.

From the foregoing discussion on meaning of 'engagement,' it is an easy guess that engagement is a result of the best HR practices, since they develop the employee from a holistic perspective so much so that the employee is fully engaged in his work and is focused on its final outcome. The next section gives a brief review of the outcomes of engagement.

↳ **Outcomes of Engaged Employees :** The sales performance of a global brewery showed an evidence of its strong link to the level of employee engagement; similarly, in a UK call center, an engaged and satisfied workforce showed high performance (Feather, 2008; Bharathi, 2009). There exists a positive relationship between engagement and organization performance as reflected in revenue growth, productivity, profitability, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, employee retention, and safety (Coffman, 2000). A research by Gallup Organization found that higher earnings per share is linked to higher engagement levels at the workplace (Ott, 2007). Work engagement mediates the relation between its distal antecedents like work context, demographic factors, and job performance (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011). When employees fill their work roles with enthusiasm, energy, and passion, their contextual performance will rise, which indicates an individual's clear tendency to behave in ways that facilitate the social and psychological context of an organization (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). According to Ashforth and Humphrey (1995), engagement accounts for the simultaneous expression of both strong motivation and psychological involvement.

The study of Albrecht (2010) showed that engagement partially mediates the influence of empowerment on affective commitment. Hallberg and Schaufeli (2006) too reported a moderately strong relation between engagement and commitment based on the research done on a sample of 176 Swedish ICT consultants and 150 police officers. Empowerment and engagement are the two main “psychological states” (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006; Spreitzer, 1995) which serve as the tools with which empowering leadership influences important outcomes such as employee commitment and turnover intentions. Marcum (2009) noted that for knowledge workers, traditional 'motivation' practices don't work, but engagement practices do. The empirical evidence available till now bears witness to the fact that engagement results in job satisfaction, commitment, and performance. But research on the relation of engagement to career success is either silent or scant, if not completely lacking, in this part of the world.

↳ **Hypothesis 2: Employee engagement efforts result in employee's career success.**

↳ **Hypothesis 3: As compared to best HR Practices, employee engagement efforts contribute better to career success.**

↳ **Best HR Practices Vs. Engagement :** How do best HR practices differ from employee engagement efforts? Is there a real difference? Best HR practices, no matter how holistic they are, are firm-centered but engagement is not; it is

employee-centered. Firms, through their best HR practices would try to extract work from the employees, and the employee toes the line willy-nilly. It is apparent that best HR practices originate from firms' interests, but not from the best intentions for the employee's career. But engagement efforts originate from the employee himself/herself. Engagement and best HR practices are as different as volition and imposition. In fact, many of the best HR practices like work design, performance-based remuneration, communication, reduction of status differences, and flattening of hierarchies have nothing to do with engagement. A distinction has to be made between employee-centered HR practices and firm-centered HR practices. Engagement belongs to the first category. This research is an attempt to make the distinction between employee-centered HR practices (engagement efforts) and firm-centered HR practices by exploring their impact on career success.

🔗 **Job Performance :** Performance is the accomplishment of a given task measured against preset known standards of accuracy, completeness, cost, and speed. In a contract, performance is deemed to be the fulfillment of an obligation, in a manner that releases the performer from liabilities under the contract.

Campbell (1990) defined individual work performance as “behaviors or actions of a staff member that are relevant to the goals of the organization.” In simple terms, it is what the organization hires one to do, and do well. What is commonly accepted is that organizations need and value staff members who perform well, and these high performers are considered a valuable asset and a cutting edge for the organization (Aghdasi, Kiamanesh, & Ebrahim, 2011; Yang, 2010; Yucle & Bektas, 2012).

An individual employee's performance consists of four dimensions - task performance, contextual performance, absence of counterproductive work behavior, and adoptive behavior (Koopmans, Bernaards, Hildebrandt, van Buuren, & de Vet, 2013); task performance refers to actual quantity of work assigned, while contextual performance involves behaviors that support organizational, social, and psychological environment. Adoptive behaviour is about continuous learning to keep up with the changes, and counterproductive behavior is intentional or unintentional behavior that has the potential to work against the objectives of the organization.

High performance of an individual employee is a pointer to the success of the human resources function, and the most important index that determines the success of an organization; it is obvious that all efforts of the organization are aimed at raising this. Furthermore, such high performance gives the employee job satisfaction, and multiple rewards too. Hence, performance is one metric which every party monitors, and whose ascent is a cause of joy for all and sundry. An employee who is happy with his performance must consider his career a success. Through this research, we want to understand if performance is positively related to career success.

🔗 **Hypothesis 4: An employee's perceived high performance influences his career success.**

🔗 **Career Success :** Since the focus of this research is career success, it is important that the concept of career success is briefly and adequately delineated. There is tons of literature on career success. But for a consensus on the concept of career success between us and the readers, a brief description of it is presented. Career success is an outcome of a person's career experiences; it is the accomplishment of desirable work-related outcomes at any point in a person's work experiences over time (Arthur, Khapova, & Wildrom, 2005). According to the Oxford dictionary, it is the attainment of an object according to one's desire; it also means the prosperous achievement of something attempted. The first meaning represents a subjective (personal) achievement, and the second one is based on the prosperity measured by social comparisons.

🔗 **Impact of HR Practices on Career Success :** By using Denmark's registry data from 1992 to 2002, the Institute for Study of Labor (IZA), Bonn, Germany claimed to provide rigorous evidence for the first time for the population of workers in an entire economy (not case study evidence) on the effects of the nature and scope of human capital (an outcome of best HR practices) on career success (Frederiksen & Kato, 2011). The research testified to a strong relation between schooling, broad exposure of the employee to multiple generalist functions, training on the job, and acquisition of firm-specific skills.

A significant relationship exists between job satisfaction and innovative HR practices (IHRP) (Organ & Lingl, 1995). Bateman and Organ (1983) found that the independently-rated job descriptive index, that reflects job satisfaction, did correlate well with the extent of innovative human resource practices. One of the focus areas of best



HR practices is career competency development. According to a study done on 213 Chinese knowledge workers, career competence can predict career success; there were three dimensions of career competence - know-how, know-why, and know-whom (Yu, 2013). According to another study on 278 university lecturers in Malaysia, training and development, appraisal system, and compensation are critical to employee retention (Hong, Hao, Kumar, Ramendran, & Kadiresan, 2012).

Given this backdrop on career success, best HR practices, engagement and performance, we went ahead with the research to resolve the dilemmas noted.

## Research Methodology

✍ **Sample Description :** The survey instrument was given to 400 employees of varied capacities working in different organizations in Andhra Pradesh. Of them, 206 respondents returned the duly filled questionnaires. The survey was conducted from June to July 2013. The response rate was 51.5%. The sample consisted of 98 (48% ) government sector employees and 108 (52%) private-sector employees. They respondents comprised of 45 (22%) females and 161 (78%) males. The age-based distribution of the respondents comprised of 60 (29%) young persons, 111 (54%) middle-aged people, and 35 (17%) old-aged individuals. When seen from the organizational hierarchy, the sample consisted of 29 (14%) lower level employees (staff), 36 (18%) junior managerial level employees, and 141 (68%) senior-level employees. From educational qualifications standpoint, 7 respondents were (3.4%) matriculates, 47 (22.8%) were graduates, 102 (49.5%) were postgraduates, and 50 (24.3%) were engineering graduates.

### Measures Used

✍ **HR Practices Scale :** To measure the extent of HR practices adopted, Jeffery Pfeiffer's 15-item scale (Cronbach alpha : 0.825) was used. The responses were taken on a *5-to-1* Likert scale. Sample items included : **(1)** Financial incentives are provided for excellent performance, **(2)** Our organization allows a long term perspective in dealing with people, and **(3)** Our organization gives higher than average wages in the industry.

✍ **Employee Engagement Scale :** Utrecht's 6-item employee engagement scale (Cronbach's alpha : 0.792) was used. The sample items included : **(1)** At work, I feel I am bursting with energy; **(2)** When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work, and **(3)** I am enthusiastic about my job.

✍ **Job performance :** The 6-item scale of Babin and Boles (1998) (Cronbach's alpha : 0.827) was used; the sample items are: **(1)** I am a top performer ; and **(2)** I get along with customers better than others.

✍ **Data Collection and Analysis :** The data collected was subjected to Discriminant Analysis (DA) on SPSS v20. The output is presented in the Tables 1 to 9. To give a little background about it, discriminant analysis helps one identify the contribution of certain variables like best HR practices, engagement, and performance of the dependent variable (career success). Dependent variable is a yes-or-no categorical variable in this research, which means that the respondent's career is assessed on his own (self-report) as either a success or a failure. The question asked was: Is your career a success?

## Results and Discussion

The Table 2 displays significant group differences signaling that the variables taken can truly discriminate between career success and career failure. An important assumption with DA is that variance-covariance matrices do not differ between groups formed by the dependent variable; for this assumption to be true, log determinants should be equal; this is found out from non-significant M from Box's M test. In this analysis, Tables 3 and 4 show the log determinants and Box's M. Box's M is non-significant at the value 0.211. Furthermore, the Eigen values table (Table 5) shows a canonical correlation of 0.305; when it is squared, it works out to 0.093; it means that the models explain only 9.3% of the variation in the grouping variable. Wilks's Lambda, which is shown as 0.907 in Table 6, is significant; it means that group means (successful and non-successful groups) vary significantly.

**Table 1. Group Statistics**

Careersuccess		Mean	Std. Deviation	Valid N (listwise)	
				Unweighted	Weighted
NO	HR Practices	45.44	9.799	9	9.000
	Job Performance	19.22	6.685	9	9.000
	Employee Engagement	18.44	5.457	9	9.000
YES	HR Practices	54.19	8.508	197	197.000
	Job Performance	22.53	3.965	197	197.000
	Employee Engagement	24.02	3.864	197	197.000
	HR Practices	53.81	8.727	206	206.000

Source : Primary Data

**Table 2. Tests of Equality of Group Means**

	Wilks's Lambda	F	df1	df2	Sig.
HR Practices	.958	8.976	1	204	.003
Job Performance	.973	5.597	1	204	.019
Employee Engagement	.922	17.215	1	204	.000

Source : Primary Data

The Tables 7 and 8 show the discriminant coefficients and structure matrix (correlation coefficients); the discriminant coefficients for best HR practices, job performance, and employee engagement are **(1)** 0.476, **(2)** -0.153, and **(3)** 0.846 respectively. Structure matrix in Table 8 shows the correlation coefficients of the variable with the discriminant score. These are considered better indicators than discriminant coefficients. The coefficients (as shown

**Table 3. Log Determinants**

Careersuccess	Rank	Log Determinant
NO	3	9.374
YES	3	9.228
Pooled within-groups	3	9.281

The ranks and natural logarithms of determinants printed are those of the group covariance matrices.

Source : Primary Data

**Table 4. Test Results**

<b>Box's M</b>		9.792
	Approx.	1.401
	df1	6
	df2	1045.946
	Sig.	.211

Tests null hypothesis of equal population covariance matrices.

Source : Primary Data

**Table 5 . Eigenvalues**

Function	Eigenvalue	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Canonical Correlation
1	.103 <sup>a</sup>	100.0	100.0	.305

<sup>a</sup>. First 1 canonical discriminant functions were used in the analysis.

Source : Primary Data

in the structure matrix) for engagement, best HR practices, and job performance are **(1)** 0.907, **(2)** 0.655, and **(3)** 0.517 respectively. Further, the percentage of original cases correctly classified is 83.5, which is more than the suggested percentage (75%) ( Table 9) , and hence, this analysis can be relied on.

The results show that employee engagement efforts contribute more to career success than to both - best HR practices and employee's own performance. It suggests that best HR practices are firm-centered, while engagement efforts are employee-centered. This leads one to think that employees are possibly more lured to engagement efforts than to best HR practices.

## Discussion on Hypotheses

➤ **Hypothesis 1:** This hypothesis is accepted. This foregoing hypothesis is accepted since the variable's discriminant coefficient of 0.476 and correlation coefficient (with discriminant score) of 0.655 are significant. Hence, best HR practices influence the career success of an employee.

**Table 6 . Wilks's Lambda**

Test of Function(s)	Wilks's Lambda	Chi-square	df	Sig.
1	.907	19.789	3	.000

Source : Primary Data

**Table 7. Standardized Canonical Discriminant Function Coefficients**

	Function
	1
HR Practices	.476
Job Performance	-.153
Employee Engagement	.846

Source : Primary Data

**Table 8 . Structure Matrix**

	Function
	1
Employee engagement	.907
HR Practices	.655
Job Performance	.517

Source : Primary Data

**Table 9. Classification Results<sup>a</sup>**

Careersuccess			Predicted Group Membership		Total
			NO	YES	
Original	Count	NO	7	2	9
		YES	32	165	197
	%	NO	77.8	22.2	100.0
		YES	16.2	83.8	100.0

<sup>a</sup> 83.5% of original grouped cases correctly classified.

Source : Primary Data

⇒ **Hypothesis 2:** This hypothesis is accepted. The hypothesis about engagement's instrumentality in employee career success is accepted since the discriminant coefficient (0.846) and correlation coefficient (0.907) are significantly high.

⇒ **Hypothesis 3:** This hypothesis is accepted. Engagement efforts indeed contribute more to career success than best HR practices.

⇒ **Hypothesis 4 :** An employee's perceived high performance influences his career success. This hypothesis is rejected. This hypothesis about the role of job performance is rejected since discriminant coefficient is insignificant and negative; but it shows relatively better positive correlation with career success discriminant score (structure matrix). The relationship is not clearly established, hence, the hypothesis is rejected.

## Conclusion

For career success to be experienced, organizational efforts for employee engagement are highly instrumental, followed by best HR practices as reflected in the magnitude of discriminant scores and correlation coefficients as well as their significant levels; but the contribution of job performance to career success is either very insignificant or negative, meaning, in a way, that job performance does not decidedly lead to career success. This research shows that best HR practices might help organizational performance, but not an employee's career success as much as it does the former. Employee engagement efforts, which are employee-centered, but not firm-centered, are accepted better by employees than a set of best HR practices. An organization which gives high priority to engagement over an amalgam of best HR practices can win the hearts of employees, since it leads to career success.

## Managerial Implications

This research shows that employee engagement contributes most to career success, followed by best HR practices. Organizations engaged in vigorous implementation of best HR practices would realize from this that engagement efforts are better than best HR practices. All organizational efforts introduced in the name of best HR best practices (extensive training, high compensation, sharing of information, reduction of status differences, etc.) should be keyed to employees' interests. It bears repetition that employee-centered practices contribute more to career success than firm-centered practices. Quite strangely, performance does not relate to career success. It might mean that performance is just a symbol, but not the essence for career success, and employee engagement is very critical for career success.

## Limitations of the Study

This research did not include several other variables like commitment, length of service, salary, type of organization, and so forth in its model. The variables, which were taken now for this research, cannot alone make this model a near-perfect fit, as seen from the total variability explained. Taking a complete set of both categorical and ratio variables, a full-fledged model of career success could have been built with the help of binary logistic regression. Furthermore, since the sample is drawn from a restricted universe, the findings cannot be generalized for other parts of the world or for other states of our country as well.

## Scope for Further Research

Factors that contribute to career success could vary by the type of industry, and industry-wise career success models can be built. Since engagement efforts are considered as superior to best HR practices in the matter of employee's career success, as this research shows, employees are possibly more lured to engagement efforts than best HR practices. Further research has to be undertaken in different settings outside India to confirm the hypothesis that engagement efforts are preferred by employees over and also are different from best HR practices since the former is employee-centered.



The relationship of job performance with career success, according to this research, is not only insignificant, but also negative. Furthermore, research in other settings is needed to clearly understand its relationship with career success, and cross-validate this finding. Further research that can clearly distinguish employee-centered HR practices from firm-centered HR practices has to be done to take this research forward. Similarly, further research has to establish whether employee-centered practices (like engagement) are more beneficial to a firm than firm-centered practices.

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