

Predictors of Employee Engagement and Its Mediating Role in Organizational Performance: Evidence from a Lusaka City Council

Africa K. Musonda¹, Siachisa Musole², Blessing Mataka³

¹Director, Human Resource, Lusaka City Council

^{2,3}Lecturer, Political and Administrative Studies, Mulungushi University

Abstract

Employee engagement is widely regarded as a determinant of organizational performance, yet the evidence still clusters in private-sector firms in high-income economies, leaving municipal government in sub-Saharan Africa thinly studied. This article examines the predictors of engagement and their influence on organizational performance at Lusaka City Council, Zambia's largest local authority. Guided by the Job Demands–Resources model and Social Exchange Theory, the study used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, pairing a survey of a stratified random sample of 300 employees with 15 semi-structured key-informant interviews. Data were analyzed through reliability and validity testing, correlation, multiple regression, and structural equation modelling with bootstrapped mediation, alongside reflexive thematic analysis. Job design and resources ($\beta = 0.31$) and reward and recognition ($\beta = 0.35$) both significantly predicted engagement, and engagement was the strongest predictor of performance (regression $\beta = 0.46$; structural path $\beta = 0.51$). Engagement partially mediated the effect of both antecedents, with significant indirect effects for job design ($\beta = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.26]) and rewards ($\beta = 0.19$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.28]); the model explained 58 per cent of the variance in performance. Qualitative evidence set these relationships against a governance backdrop of centralized decision-making, inconsistent recognition, and political interference, with perceived political interference in promotion and resource allocation emerging as an institutional-level breach of the fairness premise that individual human resource interventions cannot repair. The study provides the first structural-equation-modelled, mixed-methods account of the engagement–performance relationship in a Zambian municipal authority, and argues that, in fiscally constrained municipalities, the perceived fairness of rewards and the decentralization of authority matter more for engagement than the absolute level of financial reward.

Keywords: employee engagement; job design; Job Demands–Resources model; Lusaka City Council; organizational performance; public sector; reward and recognition; Social Exchange Theory; structural equation modelling; Zambia

1. Introduction

Engaged employees drive performance. Few claims in human resource management command wider assent, and for good reason: engaged workers bring energy, dedication, and absorption to their roles, converting that psychological investment into productivity, service quality, and discretionary effort (Saks, 2006; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). The scale of the prize is large. Gallup (2022) estimated that only

about one in five employees worldwide is engaged at work, and that low engagement drains the global economy of roughly US\$7.8 trillion a year. Disengagement, then, is no soft managerial worry. It is a measurable drag on economic performance.

The insight bites hardest where institutions run on people rather than capital. Local authorities are exactly such institutions. They deliver waste management, planning, housing regulation, public health, community development services that shape the daily lives of urban residents, and they deliver them through the effort of front-line and administrative staff. Yet public-sector organizations in developing countries often operate under conditions that corrode engagement: bureaucratic rigidity, weak recognition, scarce resources, and little room for initiative (Hope, 2014). Zambia's local government sector shows the pattern plainly. Councils across the country face fiscal distress, mounting arrears, and the steady loss of skilled staff (ZIPAR, 2025; Resnick, 2022), even as the demands on them grow with every wave of urban expansion. Lusaka City Council sits at the centre of this challenge. It administers a district of roughly three million residents (Zambia Statistics Agency, 2022), and it carries a service-delivery burden far larger than its budget. To meet it, the Council employs some 2,600 staff across administrative, technical, and field roles (Lusaka City Council, 2026). Training schemes and appraisal systems exist. What does not exist is evidence. No study has examined, empirically, what actually drives the engagement of this workforce or how that engagement converts into performance and without such evidence, neither municipal managers nor national policymakers can design human resource strategies with any confidence that they will improve service delivery.

This article closes that gap. It examines two organizational antecedents of engagement, job design and resources as well as reward and recognition, and asks whether engagement mediates their effect on organizational performance. The contribution is threefold. Empirically, it offers the first structural-equation-modelled, mixed-methods analysis of the engagement–performance relationship in a Zambian municipal authority. Theoretically, it tests whether the Job Demands–Resources model and Social Exchange Theory, both forged in Western private-sector research, hold in an African public-sector setting. Practically, it identifies which levers deliver the most engagement per kwacha under hard fiscal constraint. The rest of the article sets out the theory and hypotheses, the method, the findings, their implications, and the recommendations that follow.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Engagement, here, follows Kahn (1990): the harnessing of organizational members to their work roles through the simultaneous investment of physical, cognitive, and emotional energy. The dominant operationalization sharpens it. Schaufeli et al. (2002) describe engagement as a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind built from vigour, dedication, and absorption. Two theories explain how organizational practice produces that state, and why it should move performance.

2.1 The Job Demands–Resources model

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model starts from a simple division. Every job carries demands, which drain effort and energy, and resources, which help employees meet those demands and motivate in their own right (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Resources such as role clarity, autonomy, feedback, and access to tools and training satisfy basic psychological needs and set off a motivational process: resources feed engagement, and engagement feeds performance. The logic echoes the Job Characteristics Model, in which skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback generate the experienced meaningfulness and responsibility behind intrinsic motivation

(Hackman and Oldham, 1976), and self-determination theory's triad of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2000). One practical implication stands out. Where cutting demands is blocked by political and fiscal reality, supplying resources becomes the most accessible lever the model offers. Hence the first hypothesis.

H1: Job design and resources positively predict employee engagement.

2.2 Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET) reads the employment relationship as a chain of reciprocal exchanges governed by the norm of reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). The mechanism is intuitive. When an organization signals that it values employees through fair, transparent, merit-based recognition, employees feel bound to repay it with engagement and discretionary effort (Saks, 2006). The decisive variable is perception, not money. SET holds that it is the perceived fairness and consistency of rewards, rather than their absolute size, that triggers the reciprocal response. For cash-strapped public institutions this matters enormously, because it means engagement gains need not wait on a bigger pay bill. Hence the second hypothesis.

H2: Reward and recognition positively predict employee engagement.

2.3 Engagement and organizational performance

Both theories meet at the same point: engagement is the proximal psychological mechanism that turns human resource practice into performance. The evidence is robust. Harter et al. (2002), pooling 7,939 business units across 36 organizations, found generalizable links between unit-level engagement and outcomes from productivity to customer satisfaction to retention; Christian et al. (2011) showed that engagement predicts task and contextual performance alike. Public administration adds a further twist. Many who choose government careers are driven by public service motivation, an intrinsic pull toward serving the public interest that lifts the baseline of engagement (Perry et al., 2010). Integrative models of human resource management agree, placing employee motivation on the causal path between practice and outcome (Jiang et al., 2012). Two hypotheses follow.

H3: Employee engagement positively predicts organizational performance.

H4: Employee engagement mediates the relationship between (a) job design and resources and (b) reward and recognition, on the one hand, and organizational performance, on the other.

Together, the four hypotheses describe a partial-mediation model. Job design, resources, reward and recognition act on organizational performance directly and indirectly through engagement. That model is what the analysis tests.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design and setting

The study used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design inside a single-case framework (Yin, 2018; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). The sequence was deliberate. A quantitative survey first fixed the size and direction of the relationships; qualitative interviews then explained them. The case was Lusaka City Council, chosen because it is Zambia's largest local authority and thus a critical case for engagement in municipal governance. The design is pragmatist by intent, it serves an applied purpose generating evidence practitioners can use, rather than defending a single epistemology.

3.2 Population, sample, and procedure

The target population was the Council's workforce of roughly 2,600 employees across administrative, technical, and field departments (Lusaka City Council, 2026). A stratified random sample secured

proportional representation across departments and grades. The numbers held up well. Of 347 questionnaires distributed, 313 came back, a 90.2 per cent return and, after screening for incomplete or inconsistent responses, 300 were retained, a usable rate comfortably above the threshold generally regarded as adequate for survey research (Saunders et al., 2019). For the qualitative phase, 15 key informants from management and non-management roles were chosen purposively to span departmental experience.

3.3 Measures

Every construct was measured with multi-item five-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), adapted from established instruments, with the engagement items resting on the vigour–dedication–absorption conception of Schaufeli et al. (2002). Job design and resources drew on items covering skill variety, role clarity, autonomy, feedback, and access to tools and training. Reward and recognition covered financial adequacy, supervisory acknowledgement, fairness and consistency of recognition, and merit-based promotion. Organizational performance covered service efficiency, productivity, citizen satisfaction and process effectiveness. The interview guide mirrored these constructs and added open questions on the barriers to engagement and the strategies for lifting it.

3.4 Reliability, Validity and Analysis

Internal consistency was checked with Cronbach's alpha against the conventional 0.70 criterion (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Before factor analysis, sampling adequacy was confirmed by the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity (Kaiser, 1974), and construct validity was probed through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. The multivariate work then built in stages. Pearson correlations, read against Cohen's (1988) benchmarks, gave way to multiple regression (Field, 2018), with multicollinearity screened through variance inflation factors (Hair et al., 2010). The hypothesized model was estimated by structural equation modelling in AMOS, judged against established fit thresholds (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016; Byrne, 2016), and mediation was tested by bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). Interviews were analyzed by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The two strands were then triangulated.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary and informed. Responses were anonymous and confidential, and no identifying information was recorded. The research met the ethical requirements of Mulungushi University.

4. Results

4.1 Sample profile

The achieved sample of 300 was broadly balanced by gender, where 56 per cent were male and 44 per cent were female. It clustered in the economically active years, with 41.7 per cent aged 30 - 39 and another 28.3 per cent aged 40 - 49. It was also well educated: half held a bachelor's degree, 30 per cent a diploma, and 15 per cent a master's, so 95 per cent carried a post-secondary qualification. That profile matters for engagement, because higher education tends to raise expectations of autonomy, development and recognition.

4.2 Descriptive statistics and reliability

All four constructs scored above the scale midpoint, signaling a moderately positive climate (Table 1). Job design and resources led on the mean ($M = 3.78$). Reward and recognition trailed, lowest mean, widest spread ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.71$), an early sign that recognition is both the weakest and the most unevenly

felt part of the Council's human resource environment. Reliability was sound across the board, with engagement the strongest scale ($\alpha = 0.88$).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and scale reliability (N = 300)

Construct	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
Job design and resources	3.78	0.64	0.81
Reward and recognition	3.42	0.71	0.84
Employee engagement	3.65	0.69	0.88
Organizational performance	3.58	0.66	0.79

Responses on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Sampling adequacy held before extraction. Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin values ran from 0.81 to 0.86, meritorious, in Kaiser's (1974) terms and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant for every construct ($p < 0.001$). In both exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, all items loaded above 0.58 on their intended constructs, and the confirmatory loadings tracked the exploratory pattern closely. The measurement model was stable and replicable.

4.3 Correlations

Every construct correlated positively and significantly with the others at the 0.01 level (Table 2). The strongest link, as the meta-analytic record predicts (Harter et al., 2002), ran between engagement and performance ($r = 0.72$). One detail foreshadowed the multivariate results: reward and recognition correlated slightly more tightly with engagement ($r = 0.61$) than job design and resources did ($r = 0.58$).

Table 2. Correlation matrix for key constructs (N = 300)

Construct	1	2	3	4
1. Job design and resources	1.00			
2. Reward and recognition	0.52	1.00		
3. Employee engagement	0.58	0.61	1.00	
4. Organizational performance	0.55	0.57	0.72	1.00

All correlations significant at $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).

4.4 Regression analyses

Two regression models were run. The first predicted engagement, and both antecedents mattered: reward and recognition ($\beta = 0.35$, $t = 5.71$, $p < .001$) edged out job design and resources ($\beta = 0.31$, $t = 4.85$, $p < .001$), and together they explained 49 per cent of the variance in engagement, $F(2, 297) = 142.50$, $p < .001$ (Table 3). The second predicted performance. Here engagement dominated ($\beta = 0.46$, $t = 7.25$, $p < .001$), while both antecedents kept smaller but significant direct effects; the model accounted for 58 per cent of the variance in performance, $F(3, 296) = 135.60$, $p < .001$ (Table 4). Variance inflation factors between 1.72 and 2.10 ruled out multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2010).

Table 3. Multiple regression predicting employee engagement (N = 300)

Predictor	B	SE	β	t (p)
Constant	1.45	0.12	—	12.08 (<.001)
Job design and resources	0.34	0.07	0.31	4.85 (<.001)
Reward and recognition	0.37	0.06	0.35	5.71 (<.001)

$R = 0.70$; $R^2 = 0.49$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.48$; $F(2, 297) = 142.50$, $p < .001$.

Table 4. Multiple regression predicting organizational performance (N = 300)

Predictor	B	SE	β	t (p)	VIF
Constant	1.12	0.09	—	12.44 (<.001)	—
Job design and resources	0.28	0.08	0.21	3.45 (.001)	1.72
Reward and recognition	0.31	0.08	0.24	3.82 (<.001)	1.85
Employee engagement	0.52	0.07	0.46	7.25 (<.001)	2.10

$R = 0.76$; $R^2 = 0.58$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.57$; $F(3, 296) = 135.60$, $p < .001$.

4.5 Structural equation model and mediation

The full model was estimated at once by structural equation modelling, which beats stepwise regression for mediation because it models measurement error and solves all paths together (Byrne, 2016). Fit was good: $\chi^2/df = 2.18$, CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.064, SRMR = 0.047 — every index inside accepted bounds (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016). The structural paths repeated the regression story (Table 5). Reward and recognition ($\beta = 0.38$) and job design and resources ($\beta = 0.34$) both drove engagement, and engagement drove performance hard ($\beta = 0.51$, critical ratio = 8.12). The direct effects of the two antecedents on performance survived but shrank ($\beta = 0.19$ and $\beta = 0.21$). Their influence runs mainly through engagement.

Table 5. Standardized structural path coefficients

Path	β	CR (t)	p
Job design and resources → Engagement	0.34	5.67	<.001
Reward and recognition → Engagement	0.38	5.89	<.001
Employee engagement → Performance	0.51	8.12	<.001
Job design and resources → Performance	0.19	2.71	.007
Reward and recognition → Performance	0.21	2.96	.003

Bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples confirmed both indirect effects, their 95 per cent confidence intervals clearing zero (Table 6). The reward pathway through engagement ($\beta = 0.19$) ran slightly ahead of the job-design pathway ($\beta = 0.17$), a rank order that held across correlation, regression,

and structural estimates (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). Both direct and indirect effects were significant. That is partial mediation, and it confirms Hypothesis 4.

Table 6. Bootstrapped indirect effects through employee engagement

Indirect path	β	Boot SE	95% CI
Job design → Engagement → Performance	0.17	0.04	[0.10, 0.26]
Rewards → Engagement → Performance	0.19	0.05	[0.11, 0.28]

Table 7 gathers the verdicts. All four hypotheses held. Engagement stood out twice as the dominant predictor of performance and as a partial mediator of both antecedent pathways.

Table 7. Summary of hypothesis testing

H	Statement	Result
H1	Job design and resources → engagement	Supported ($\beta = 0.31$)
H2	Reward and recognition → engagement	Supported ($\beta = 0.35$)
H3	Engagement → organizational performance	Supported ($\beta = 0.46$)
H4	Engagement mediates both pathways	Supported (partial mediation)

4.6 Qualitative findings

The interviews explained what the numbers could only imply. On job design, respondents agreed that roles are formally defined, then described overlapping duties, heavy centralization, and shortages of equipment and training. Decisions pile up at the top, one put it, “leaving little room for initiative at lower levels”. This is why a fairly healthy mean ($M = 3.78$) sits beside only a moderate effect on engagement. The structure is there. The autonomy and resources that bring it to life are not, and the gaps fall hardest on technical and field staff.

On reward and recognition, interviewees drew one distinction again and again: the level of reward versus its fairness. Recognition, they said, tracked your supervisor rather than your achievement, and promotion looked open to influences beyond performance. That explains the construct’s low mean and high variance. A favoured minority report satisfaction; a larger group, overlooked despite real effort, report disillusionment, the very inequity Social Exchange

Theory expects to erode reciprocal commitment (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005).

On engagement and performance, the link was vivid. Respondents tied felt appreciation and adequate support to visibly better service delivery, teamwork, and citizen responsiveness, the strong engagement–performance path, in their own words. Pride in public service ran deep, a durable source of dedication even in hard conditions, consistent with public service motivation (Perry et al., 2010); vigour and absorption, by contrast, rose and fell with resources and supervision. Three barriers recurred across every department: chronic resource scarcity, weak upward and lateral communication, and perceived political interference in personnel and resource decisions. Each map onto the framework, scarcity as the high-demand, low-resource trap of the JD-R model, interference as a breach of the fairness premise in Social Exchange Theory. Each point past individual managers toward institutional reform.

5. Discussion

The findings back the model, and in doing so they carry two well-travelled theories into terrain where they are rarely tested. Three points stand out.

First, the antecedents behave as theory predicts but not with equal weight. Job design and resources predicted engagement (H1), exactly as the JD-R motivational process anticipates: clear, resourced roles draw more of the person into the work (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Reward and recognition predicted it too (H2), and slightly harder, on every estimate. The interviews explain the difference in kind. Job design works through intrinsic channels; meaningfulness, competence, autonomy, while recognition works through trust and fairness; and because public employees hold strong norms of merit, breaches of those norms demotivate out of all proportion to the modest reward levels the means suggest. The practical reading is sharp. In a cash-strapped council, the binding constraint on engagement is not the size of the reward budget but the fairness with which recognition and promotion are run.

Second, engagement was the dominant predictor of performance (H3) and a partial mediator of both antecedent paths (H4). That puts it at the heart of the practice–performance relationship, in line with the meta-analytic evidence (Harter et al., 2002; Christian et al., 2011) and with integrative HRM models that treat motivation as the mediating mechanism (Jiang et al., 2012). The mediation was partial, not full and the distinction is informative. Job design and rewards also lift performance directly: better-resourced staff and clearer roles cut duplication and error whatever the motivational effect. But the larger share of their influence flows through engagement. One number invites caution. The engagement–performance correlation here ($r = 0.72$) tops the private-sector meta-analytic benchmark of Harter et al. (2002), which may reflect how immediately municipal commitment shows up in service outcomes though it may also owe something to common-method variance, since both constructs were measured by perception.

Third, the study tests whether Western, private-sector engagement theory travels to African public administration. It does. The motivational and reciprocity mechanisms worked as predicted under bureaucratic constraint, resource scarcity, and political pressure which undercuts the claim that these theories fail in low-income public settings. But there is a boundary condition the mainstream literature underplays. Where promotion and resource allocation are seen as political rather than meritocratic, the fairness premise beneath Social Exchange Theory is breached at the institutional level, and no individual-level HR fix can fully repair it. This squares with long-standing accounts of patronage and thin meritocratic insulation in African public services (Hope, 2014; Resnick, 2014), and with evidence that skilled Zambian council staff are hard to keep (Resnick, 2022).

The practical implications follow at once. Because engagement is the main conduit to performance, investing in it is strategy, not sentiment. Because rewards work through perceived fairness rather than size, the cheapest effective lever is a transparent, merit-based system of recognition and promotion. And because centralization and political interference choke the autonomy the JD-R model counts as a core resource, lasting gains demand decentralized routine decisions and personnel management insulated from political pressure. None of this is a call to spend more. It is a call to govern people differently.

6. Conclusion

This study asked what predicts engagement at Lusaka City Council, and how engagement shapes performance. The answer is clear. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design and structural equation modelling, it found that job design and resources and reward and recognition both predict engagement, that engagement is the single strongest predictor of performance, and that engagement

partially mediates the effect of both antecedents, a model explaining 58 per cent of the variance in performance. The qualitative evidence rooted these relationships in the Council's lived governance, showing the statistics reflect real organizational dynamics rather than measurement artefacts. The headline is this: human capital, mobilized through engagement, is the primary lever of municipal performance and pulling it depends less on money than on the fairness, autonomy, and supportive supervision that the JD-R model and Social Exchange Theory jointly predict. The implication is bracing for a cash-strapped council. The most powerful instruments of reform are largely budget-neutral.

7. Recommendations

7.1 For Council management

Four measures follow for Council management. First, redesign jobs participatively, stripping out role overlap and building autonomy and task variety into front-line work. Second, replace supervisor-dependent discretion with a transparent, competency-based system of recognition and promotion, anchored in a human resource information system that grounds appraisal in evidence and leaves an audit trail. Third, phase resource allocation to put the most critical tools first into high-impact service departments. Fourth, strengthen supervisory practice, so that feedback, a core job resource, actually reaches the front line. The common thread is fairness made visible. Where employees can see that effort is recognized and decisions are evenhanded, the reciprocity that drives engagement follows.

7.2 For national policymakers

Three measures follow for national policymakers, and each addresses an institutional barrier that lies beyond the reach of any single council. First, raise engagement from an internal concern to a governance metric by building engagement indicators into the performance reporting of local authorities. Second, strengthen the Local Government Service Commission's capacity to shield municipal recruitment and promotion from political interference. Third, standardize human resource capacity-building for senior council officers. These are the repairs that individual managers cannot make alone.

8. Limitations of the Study

Three limitations qualify the findings. The first is design: the study is cross-sectional, so while the structural model is consistent with the hypothesized causal ordering, it cannot establish causation, and reverse or reciprocal influence between engagement and performance cannot be ruled out. The second is measurement: both engagement and performance were captured through self-reported, perceptual scales completed by the same respondents, which raises the possibility of common-method variance and may inflate the observed associations, the engagement–performance correlation reported here ($r = 0.72$), well above private-sector meta-analytic benchmarks, should be read with this caveat in mind. The third is scope: the single-case focus on Lusaka City Council affords analytical depth but limits statistical generalization to other local authorities, whose resource endowments, leadership, and political contexts differ. These limitations temper the strength of the claims without unsettling the central finding, which is corroborated across multiple analytical methods and triangulated against qualitative evidence.

9. Areas for Future Research

The limitations map directly onto an agenda for future work. Longitudinal and quasi-experimental designs are needed to track the effects of specific engagement interventions over time and to establish causal direction with greater confidence. Studies should triangulate self-reported engagement against objective

performance indicators, citizen-satisfaction indices, service-delivery turnaround times, or revenue-collection rates to address common-method concerns and strengthen external validity. Comparative research across multiple councils, and across urban and rural authorities, would test how resource disparities and local political dynamics condition the model and reveal whether the primacy of reward fairness observed here generalizes. Finally, future studies could extend the framework to examine the moderating role of leadership quality and the distinct contribution of public service motivation, both of which the present findings suggest may shape the strength of the engagement pathway. Pursued together, these directions would convert a robust single-case account into a generalizable, causally grounded basis for human resource reform in sub-Saharan African local government.

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