Engagement and Meaningfulness as Determinants of Employee Retention: A Longitudinal Case Study

Calvin Williams
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Engagement and Meaningfulness as Determinants of Employee Retention: A Longitudinal Case Study

by

Calvin Williams

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration Muma College of Business University of South Florida

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ABSTRACT

The lack of financial resources has long challenged government institutions to move employee wages toward the market rate average for hourly and salaried positions. This area of public employment, where motivation other than a pay increase is necessary due to constrained budgets, is not well studied or understood. The primary purpose of this longitudinal case study is to investigate factors that influence Administrative Service employees and increase their level of retention at the University of South Florida (USF), a state funded university. The objective of the case study was to better understand how enhanced psychological meaningfulness, and increased employee engagement influences service employee retention in a public-sector environment. The secondary purpose was to explore the relationship between employee engagement, intrinsic motivation, and psychological meaningfulness, and their linkage to employee retention. An exploratory conceptual model, derived from an experienced-based perspective, was used to examine the factors that were identified to influence the OAS employees. In this study, personal observations were combined with employee survey and turnover data. The research support to the employee engagement conceptual framework for this case study. The study's findings determined that employee retention strategies can be explored through employee engagement, intrinsic motivation, and psychological meaningfulness. The results confirm that meaningfulness is a psychological condition that intrinsically motivates members in the workplace, influencing employee engagement. The results from this exploratory case study can be utilized by academia
for further future research. The practitioners can use it to explore factors that are considered the best fit for their organization.
CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

The lack of financial resources has long challenged government institutions to move employee wages toward the market rate average for hourly and salaried positions. At public institutions, such as higher education, money for wages, salary, and operating expenses are provided by the state government. As a result, public education institutions, which rely heavily on state appropriations, are constantly experiencing the impact of limited funds to pay salary and hourly wage employees competitive market rates appropriate for their positions.

The shortage of dollars available for wages and salary places a greater importance upon psychological motivators. This case study considers how to retain public sector employees through engagement and motivation. According to Delaney and Royal (2107), motivation is the foundation of engagement and performance in the organization. This area of public employment, where motivation other than a pay increase is necessary due to constrained budgets, is not well studied or understood. Leaders in the public sector must recognize how to retain employees through intrinsic rewards that influence employee retention (Danish et al., 2015).

The motivation for writing this case study revolves around a personal reminder of the past and present challenges of retaining highly qualified employees. As an executive who has worked in different organizations within the public sector, my experience revealed that paying public sector employees using an outside market rate is often beyond the bounds of possibility. My observations and opportunities to lead within the government workplace culture produced
this perspective. As a senior military leader, I moved about every two years; hence, I was often faced with the difficulty of keeping employees motivated and engaged. Engagement proved to be the most daunting task. Similarly, my experience has been that the fundamental dilemma of employee retention is determining what motivates employees. As a hiring official, the pain point is knowing the recently hired service employee will show up for work fully aware that they may go elsewhere for employment within two years.

The purpose of this case study is to investigate factors that influence Office of Administrative Service (OAS) employees and increase their level of retention at the University of South Florida (USF), a state-funded university. In addition, this study investigates an employee engagement framework to improve OAS employee retention at the University of South Florida that aims to mitigate lagging salary and wages. This study aims to shed light on employee retention strategies through employee engagement, intrinsic motivation, and psychological meaningfulness. This case study explores how to motivate employees in a public sector organization by investigating ways to retain USF OAS employees when limited amounts of much-needed dollars to keep employees’ salary, and wages on parity with the market-rate average exist. The case follows my tenure at USF as Vice President of the Office of Administrative Services from 2015 to 2019. I sought to manipulate four factors to promote psychological meaningfulness and increase employee engagement and retention.

**Unemployment Rate**

From January 2015 through January 2019, the timeframe of this case, the unemployment rate trended downward, from 5.5% to 3.3% (US Department of Labor Statistics, 2020) (see Figure 1). During that period, there were more job openings than unemployed workers, so the shortage of government dollars available for salary and wages only exacerbated the problem of
retaining public-sector employees. During the five-year case study, the dollars made available by the state were not sufficient to meet the market-rate average. When faced with limited funds, keeping a state employee coupled with an unemployment rate trending downward makes for challenging conditions, especially when the unemployment rate continues below 10 percent.

![Florida Unemployment Rate](image.jpg)

Figure 1. State of Florida Unemployment Rate (Jan 2015 – Jan 2019)

**Financial Perspective**

The 2008 financial crisis “caused tremendous turmoil in employment” (Chalofsky and Krishna, 2009). Since the start of the recession, states have cut higher education funding percent per student. In the fiscal year (FY) 08 to FY14 higher education state funding recessions levels for states listed Florida ranked 12\(^\text{th}\) among the top 15 states that decreased student funding. Florida showed a decrease in student funding by nearly 30% (Mitchell et al., 2015). According to Mitchell et al. (2015), public individual state governments provide a large percentage of the dollars needed for public universities to operate (Mitchell et al., 2015). Authors, in 2013, “state and local dollars constituted 53 percent of education revenue funds used directly for teaching and instruction” (Mitchell et. al., 2015). In 2015, the University of South Florida, which relies heavily
on state appropriations, continued to experience the impact of limited funds to pay administrative employees (salary) and staff employees (hourly rate) the appropriate market rate for their positions or years of experience. Yet, the ability to retain high-performing employees is critical to the success of an organization, especially higher education institutions.

The objective of the case study is to better understand how psychological meaningfulness aimed at increasing employee engagement can positively influence service employee retention in a public-sector environment. The study addresses the following two exploratory questions:

1) How can leaders engage public sector service workers to influence their retention?
2) What factors influence service employees to be motivated in a public sector organization?

The study used four factors to assess their potential effects on employee engagement and psychological meaningfulness. The factors were studied by answering the following questions:

1. What effect does recognition and awards have on employee engagement?
2. What effect does professional development and training have on employee engagement?
3. What effect does equipment and technology have on employee engagement?
4. What effect does communication have on employee engagement?

The case study used a historical narrative of factors undertaken during the five-year case to explore the relationship between employee psychological meaningfulness and retention. Figure 2 presents the exploratory model used to examine the factors that were identified to influence the OAS employees. The model was derived from an experienced-based perspective, which presumed those factors: recognition/awards, professional development and training, equipment and technology and communications, would affect psychological meaningfulness, which would, in turn, affect employee retention. In addition, the exploratory model
communicates that when employees view the factors as personally value-added, they are intrinsically motivated (May, Gilson, & Harte, 2004).

Figure 2. Exploratory Conceptual Model
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the literature review was to explore how to retain public sector workers based on a belief that meaningfulness and intrinsic motivation influences employee engagement, which is essential for employee turnover and retention. Based on the literature review, research supports my opinion based on my personal experience, observations, and trial and error learning as a leader.

Concepts and Definitions

The concepts and definitions from the academic literature review support the belief that employee engagement by applying intrinsic motivation and psychological conditions of meaningfulness leads to retention. Below are definitions of the terms relevant to the case study:

- Employee Engagement causes employees to voluntarily engage in an organizational effort (Gupta & Sharma, 2016).
- Intrinsic Motivation is employees that are self-influenced based on workplace conditions that motivate them to be actively involved. (Danish et al., 2015).
- Meaningfulness is the usefulness that is viewed as beneficial to an employee’s value system (May et al., 2004).
- Psychological Meaningfulness is the employee’s view of the work efforts from a value-added perspective (Saks, 2011).
• Employee Turnover is an employee’s departure from one organization to another based on personal desires (Vermooten et al., 2019).

• Staff Employees are hourly wage employees who are paid on holidays celebrated by state universities, and qualify for overtime (OAS Budget Guide, 2017).

• Administrative Employees are salary-positioned employees who are not eligible for overtime but are paid on holidays celebrated by the state university (OAS Budget Guide, 2017).

• Other Personnel Services (OPS) Employees are hourly wage employees who are eligible for overtime. They are classified as temporary employees; therefore, they are not paid on holidays celebrated by the state university. (OAS Budget Guide, 2017).

In this case study, the targeted constructs were employee engagement, intrinsic motivation, and psychological meaningfulness. The literature review supported the view that employee engagement is linked to intrinsic motivation and psychological meaningfulness (Gupta and Sharma, 2016). Therefore, based on the literature review, definitions of the targeted constructs are provided below from the author’s perspective.

**Employee Engagement**

Kahn (1990) described employee engagement as exploiting a person’s sense of belonging to connect “physically, cognitively, and emotionally” while in the work environment. Additionally, employee engagement varies based on an employee’s psychological perspective regarding “benefits, or… meaningfulness” (Kahn, 1990). Employee engagement is regularly focused on “human capital strategies” to increase recruitment and retention (Delaney & Royal, 2017). According to Chalofsky and Krishna (2009), employee engagement is essential because of its “favorable relationship with employee behaviors that promote employee retention…”
While the literature provides evidence that employee engagement is vital, it also reveals that it is difficult to define and measure (Gupta & Sharma, 2016). The authors determined that it varies based on the institution, given its culture, coupled with the behavioral, psychological perspective of the employee (Gupta & Sharma, 2016).

**Intrinsic Motivation**

Intrinsic motivation comes from within the employee, and it is behavior that is driven by self-inspiration (Delaney & Royal, 2017). According to Ryan and Deci (2008), intrinsic motivation is an action of a specific kind taken due to the refreshing satisfaction it offers. The authors also stated that intrinsic motivation refers to a gratification construct that promotes an employees’ drive (Ryan & Deci, 2008). In addition, Kordbacheh et al. (2014) “posit that meaningfulness is the key ingredient to intrinsic motivation, which in turn influences employee engagement….”

The literature review also provides evidence that intrinsic motivation is associated with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which speaks to conditions that are necessary to promote “social development and well-being” Kordbacheh, Schultz, and Olson (2014).

**Psychological Meaningfulness**

The research found that psychological meaningfulness is associated with feeling valued as an employee (Saks, 2011; Rothmann & Welsh, 2013). The study also found that an employee’s feeling determines the worth associated with self-investment in terms of their “physical, cognitive, or emotional energy” (Kahn, 1990; Rothmann & Baumann, 2014).

According to May et al. (2004), psychological meaningfulness is linked to employee engagement and turnover.
Employee Engagement Conceptual Frameworks

The theoretical framework for the case study is to manage and increase employee engagement using intrinsic motivation and psychological meaningfulness. Kahn (1990) developed a theoretical framework using the theory, which was designed based on the notion that three physical conditions influence employees to be engaged: “meaningfulness, safety, and availability.”

May et al. (2004) built on Kahn’s (1990) conceptualization that employee engagement has a strong relationship with psychological conditions (meaningfulness, safety, and availability). May et al.’s (2004) investigation of Kahn’s (1990) psychological conditions also concluded that “meaningfulness displayed the strongest relation” to employee engagement. Also, the research revealed that psychological meaningfulness is “significantly related’ to employee engagement (May et al., 2004). Additionally, employee turnover is linked to psychological meaningfulness (May et al., 2004).

According to Kordbacheh et al. (2013), of the three physical conditions described by Kahn (1990) that influence employees to be engaged, “meaningfulness had the strongest relationship with engagement.” Also, according to Saks (2011), the employee’s overall view of their significance in the workplace affects the degree of meaningfulness of work from a psychological perspective, which drives the employee’s level of engagement in the organization.

A comprehensive review of research literature acknowledges the SDT as an avenue to facilitate workplace motivation by validating the constructs of its theoretical framework in the work environment (Gagne & Deci, 2005). In SDT, intrinsic motivation refers to performing acts for personal reasons rather than because the actions are requirements of the organization (Danish, et al., 2015). Expanding on employee self-determination, Chalofsky and Krishna (2009)
proposed, “there is a deeper level of intrinsic motivation known as meaningfulness…” Chalofsky and Krishna (2009) concluded that intrinsic-driven employees finding meaningfulness from a psychological perspective is essential for employee motivation in the “sense of choice.” The theoretical framework used in this study to address the exploratory questions focused on employee engagement in relation to intrinsic motivation and psychological meaningfulness.

The literature review supports the design of a conceptual framework to demonstrate the relationship between employee engagement, intrinsic motivation, and psychological meaningfulness. Gupta and Sharma’s (2016) designed a conceptual model to represent an engagement framework, in which the authors reviewed “different dimensions of employee engagement.” The Gallup 12-item survey used to determine employee engagement in the work environment is viewed as the example “questions for many research studies” (Harter et al., 2009). Gallup lists the following “12 things important to employees,” according to Gupta and Sharma (2016): “…

1) Knowing what’s expected,

2) having the right materials and equipment (Zajkowska & Ergonomics),

3) opportunity to do what I do best (career opportunities),

4) recognition and praise (recognition),

5) caring for me as a person (quality of life),

6) encourages development (opportunities),

7) my opinion counts (recognition),

8) connection with the mission of organization (leadership and company vision),

9) co-workers committed to quality work (team),

10) I have a best friend at work (team),
11) someone has talked with me about my progress (team),

12) opportunities to learn and grow (development).”

Gupta and Sharma’s (2016) extensive literature revealed that non-monetary opportunities are better employee engagement influencers than monetary opportunities.

Chalofsky and Krishna (2009) developed a conceptual framework of the relationship between employee engagement, intrinsic motivation, and meaningfulness from a psychological perspective. The research found that when designing a conceptual framework to explore meaningfulness, it is essential that we consider the “individual and the organizational factors that affect its development” (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009). The authors concluded that more research is needed to determine how intrinsic motivation and psychological meaningfulness influences employee engagement in the work environment (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009; Kordbacheh et al., 2014). Additionally, using their conceptual model designed for employment engagement, the authors concluded that meaningfulness and intrinsic motivation are essential for employee engagement (Kordbacheh et al., 2013).

Furthermore, Rothmann and Baumann (2014) concluded that other should be explored to determine their influence on psychological meaningfulness. The conclusions of Chalofsky and Krishna (2009) and Rothmann and Welch (2013), along with researchers’ other employee engagement models, embrace additional exploration of the relationship between intrinsic motivation, psychological meaningfulness, and employee engagement. Other research findings and results have concluded that meaningfulness and intrinsic motivation are essential for employee engagement (Kordbacheh et al., 2014). In addition, the relationship between employee engagement and retention has encouraged the significance of identifying consensus-driven aspects that foster employee retention (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009).
Given the number of conceptual frameworks discovered during the literature review, indications are that “employees must be asked on a regular basis what sparks and sustains their desire to work” (Wiley, 1997). According to Geldenhuys et al. (2014), this continuous view validates the need to do “a longitudinal case study and diary method…to gain better insight through” into psychological meaningfulness in the workplace.

The employee engagement conceptual framework for this case study aligns with the employee engagement conceptual frameworks designed by May et al. (2004), Rothmann and Baumann (2014), and Gupta and Sharma (2016). Additionally, my premise aligns with Kahn's (1990) and Chalofsky and Krishna (2009) research conclusions, which theorized that the relationship between employee engagement, intrinsic motivation, and psychological meaningfulness exists.
CHAPTER THREE:
METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

Summary of Methods

This longitudinal case study methodology explores public-sector service workers’ retention through psychological meaningfulness that influences employee retention. This case study examines a five-year period when factors were applied. The aim is to investigate how the OAS factors implemented over the five years, intended to manage and increase employee engagement, impacted employee retention. This chapter describes the methodology utilized in the study. In addition, it includes the sources of data collections methods applied to support this study. In addition to factors, this case study used other sources of data: historical narrative, survey, and turnover documentation (Yin, 2009).

Historical Narrative

The first data source was an historical narrative developed over the five years (Yin, 2009). Engagement is viewed as the result of an employee’s association with their goals and the organizational goals (Gupta & Sharma, 2016). Therefore, I led an effort to develop an Employee Engagement Program: OAS Excellence motto, goals and pillars, tactics to establish and reinforce employee engagement, a service philosophy, and guiding principles to communicate to the employees through the OAS newsletter, flyers posted in their breakrooms, the pillar team members, and town hall meetings. Figure 3 shows the program.
Organizational Change
This Employee Engagement Program was catalyzed by the need for organizational change within the Office of Administrative Services (OAS) at USF in order to effect the needed change a cultural paradigm shift had to occur. Employee engagement was key in gaining the critical mass necessary for success.

An annual employee survey was developed to measure the impact of the organizational change efforts. The survey uses both quantitative (series of questions answered on a five-point Likert scale) and qualitative data collection.

1. Excellence
The program was built on the concept of “excellence in all we do,” borrowed from the USAF. From this came the motto “Excellence Exceed Expectations.” To bring further definition to our idea of excellence the following text was written and utilized in conjunction with the motto. To achieve excellence you must be competent in your job and perform at a level that will make people say “Wow!” Channels of promotion included face-to-face (orientations and other presentations), electronic (email and digital display), and written communication (promotional products, posters, and newsletter).

2. Goal and Pillars
While there were many metrics established by the leadership team to measure the success of the program, to unite employees around a common purpose a high level goal was established: to become “the top workplace in Tampa Bay.” The “Pillars of Success” were defined as the four critical areas of focus to help achieve that goal: Communication, Technology & Equipment, Professional Development & Training, and Recognition & Awards.

3. Tactics for Establishing and Reinforcing
To help establish and reinforce the paths to increased engagement some of the many employed include quarterly Town Hall events, a monthly employee newsletter, and a peer nominated awards program. Posters, promotional products, and orientation sessions are also utilized.

4. Service Philosophy
The “excellence exceed expectations” motto formed a solid foundation for a successful program that, after two years, was evolved through the development of a formal service philosophy. The service philosophy was created in a workshop environment with representation from all levels of the organization. The result: “We impact lives every day by exceeding expectations and creating wow moments,” incorporates elements of the excellence motto and text as well as reinforcing the significant impact of the work OAS employees do.

5. Guiding Principles
Four guiding principles were selected to support the service philosophy. These guiding principles ask OAS employees to be safe, responsive, helpful, and competent. As has been the case from the inception of the program, an integrated marketing communication approach is being used to promote the components of this evolving initiative.
Additionally, the methodology consisted of factors implemented over the four years (2016-2019). In 2015, I hired key leadership positions, and then restructured the organization. In 2016, we focused on our employee salary approach. In 2017, we improved our methodology for employee salary and wage increases. Our goal was to implement market rate adjustments to bring our filled employee positions to 95 percent of the 2017 market rate by 2019. In 2019, we successfully moved a large percentage of our employees to 95 percent of the 2017 market rate, based on outside (private sector) analysis. The market rate was reflective of the average, not the maximum.

**Survey**

The second source of data for the case study was a survey. Figure 4 shows a sample of the employee survey. The OAS leadership and the pillar teams developed an employee survey for this study to solicit the employees' opinions. We designed the survey to measure the employees' opinion of factors to facilitate my organizational change efforts. As a part of our first quarter town hall meeting, we issued the survey to the employees for their response based on their reflection of the previous calendar year to date (i.e., 2015 responses were captured in 2016). As identified in the USF Administrative Services Employee Survey (2019), quantitative and qualitative data “was collected using…

- an initial question to identify the division that the respondent works in,
- a set of 13 questions that utilized a five-level (Likert-type) rating scale for responses,
- 1-4 open-ended questions, and
- 1-4 questions with dichotomous “yes/no” responses.”
Turnover Rate Comparison

The third source of data for the case was public university turnover rate comparisons. The study collected data from Florida institutions of higher learning. A Public Records Request (PRR) memorandum was sent to four Florida state-funded universities: University of South Florida (USF), University of Central Florida (UCF), Florida State University (FSU), University
of Florida (UF), and Florida International University (FIU) requesting their employee turnover
data to compare retentions levels of USF Administrative Services workers to the remaining four
state-funded universities. Appendix A shows a copy of the PRR.

The purpose was to compare turnover rates across the Florida state-funded institutions within
the case study timeframe (January 2015 through January 2019). The PRRs requested data to be
provided electronically through an Excel spreadsheet. In addition, each PRR asked for
information on all service department employee departures, promotions, transfers, and
promotions to validate employee retention data.
CHAPTER FOUR:  
RESULTS

Historical Narrative

Shortly after starting employment at USF in August 2015, I realized an employee engagement and motivation problem. Walkabouts within every department in the Office of Administrative Services revealed a lack of team spirit and a reluctance to share thoughts and perspectives. Seemingly, there was a focus on salary due to the pay ranges in similar positions in the private sector. Having spent 20 years as a federal government leader, this focus, and cultural challenges were not shocking.

The beginnings of organizational change started with an employee engagement model (see Figure 5). Based on my personal experience, the conceptual model was developed to represent the engagement framework used in this study to facilitate employee engagement and conceivably stabilize employee turnover. While market-rate adjustments were intended to bring and keep employees within at least 90 percent of the market wage average, the motivational factors associated with the employee engagement system contributed specifically to psychological meaningfulness.
Figure 5. Employee Engagement Model

To effect the needed change, a cultural paradigm shift had to occur. The program was initially conceptualized based on a foundation of “excellence in all we do,” one of the three core values established by the United States Air Force. From this state of mind, an organizational motto of commitment was etched on paper: “Excellence: Exceed Expectations.” To further define our idea of excellence, the following text was written and utilized in conjunction with the motto: To achieve excellence, you must be competent in your job and perform at a level that will make people say, ”Wow!” Channels of promotion included face-to-face (orientations and other presentations), electronic media (email and digital displays), and written communication (promotional products, cups, posters, newsletter, etc.) (see Figure 6).
The four factors were developed and incorporated into a diagram to create a mental image of what I desired to achieve as the Vice President (VP). Experience has taught me that to engage employees; a visual is needed to inspire them to connect to what the organizational leader desires to achieve mentally. I have personally found that employee buy-in is critical for any change effort. The four factors (also known as pillars of success) were linked to the OAS vision. The need for employee engagement from a primarily non-monetary (except for recognition and awards) perspective is expressed in Figure 7; this diagram was the focal point for facilitating psychological meaningfulness.
Each of the four pillars of success had a pillar team, and they were empowered to plan and design engagement opportunities based on the factor it covered. The four pillar teams consisted of at least one employee (aka pillar champions) from each division—the number of champions was based on the number of employees within a division. Pillar champions represented their perspective departments/divisions. As pillar champions, the representatives reported directly to the VP and served as volunteers for one to two years. They were voices that engaged other employees daily in their departments concerning the factors they were assigned and explained the related engagement opportunities. In addition, they prepared andbriefed engagement opportunities within their area of responsibility during the quarterly town hall meetings. Pillar champions were responsible for collecting ideas from each suggestion box (see Figure 8) and determining the appropriate pillar team to become the advocates to address the
employee’s ideas during the pillar champions quarterly meeting with the VP and the division directors. Additionally, they were empowered to sustain the program via employee training and engagement.

**Continue to Submit Your Ideas**

- Online or in your local suggestion box
- Ensure your request includes your name and contact information
- Provide as much information/details regarding your idea as possible

Figure 8. Idea Boxes © 2021, University of South Florida. Reprinted with permission.

A newsletter was developed to communicate the employee suggestions, ideas, and new engagement opportunities; it also captured photos of employees (see Figure 9).

To facilitate psychological meaningfulness across OAS, a service philosophy was established. The “excellence: exceed expectations” motto formed a solid foundation for a successful program that, after two years, evolved through the development of formal service philosophy. We created the service philosophy in an employee workshop environment with representation from all levels of the organization. The result, “We impact lives every day by exceeding expectations and creating wow moments,” incorporates elements of the excellence motto and text as well as reinforces the significant impact of the work OAS employees do.
Additionally, Figure 10 shows the four guiding principles used to support the service philosophy.

These guiding principles ask OAS employees to be safe, responsive, helpful, and competent.
In addition, we began to build a system for employee engagement that consisted of an organization’s foundation, goals and objectives, pillars of success, and service philosophy and guiding principles (see Figure 11). Finally, we began a communication blast that focused on informing 537 employees of our Employee Engagement System.

![Building a System for Employee Engagement](image)

Figure 11. Employee Engagement System © 2021, University of South Florida. Reprinted with permission.

**First Year – New Division Directors and Restructure**

In 2015, I began the hiring process to search for candidates to fill the executive administrator job. Two new divisional leader positions: Facilities Management Associate Vice President (AVP) and Administrative Services Director; all positions were filled in 2015. The Human Resources AVP was hired shortly before my arrival. When the Facilities Management (FM) division director first arrived in 2015, we combined three departments into a single FM division. He took the people who existed within the organization, looked at their structure, and figured out ways to give them the responsibility and authority to do the things they were doing.
Initially, the organizational restructure yielded added value in taking the Facilities Planning and Construction, Environmental Health and Safety, and Physical Plant departments and folding them under a single division (see Figure 12). The existing leaders within the three departments concurred that there was overlap and duplication of employee duties and responsibilities. Additionally, they highlighted from their perspective the tasks their departments did well, the ones that needed to be improved, and the functions that their departments should not handle. They also discussed benefits associated with bringing them under a single division to include better communication flow across all levels.

Figure 12. Initial Organizational Chart © 2021, University of South Florida. Reprinted with permission.
A logical area to beta test the restructure was the Facilities Planning and Construction and Physical Plant, because of known instances where these two departments competed against each other in determining costs associated with facility renovations and remodeling and repair for projects that exceeded a certain threshold. The department managers took approximately six months to complete the new organizational restructure, reorganized into a single division with six departments (see Figure 13).

![Organizational Chart](image)

Figure 13. Restructured Organizational Chart © 2021, University of South Florida. Reprinted with permission.

We built a budget structure and process to determine the proper allocation of funds to meet the needs of each department and allow employees to be engaged in their departments’ destiny, which facilitated employee engagement. The accomplishments in the first year placed the division in a better position for a deeper dive into the organizational construct, along with the assigned levels of responsibility and assigned tasks. According to Gupta and Sharma (2016), the term “employee engagement” continues to emerge because of its “linkage with organizational
success.” Given that the new department managers were empowered to right-size their budgets and justify the allocations for each area, our primary focus the first year was organizational construct and budgeting to cover operating expenses.

Next, it was time to look at and unravel the budget, starting with a zero-based budget for each department. Business lines were set up so that the employees could grow from the lowest level, all the way up to the senior positions. Then, we took the leaders who were given responsibility and tasked them with looking at the dollars assigned to them. Accomplishments in the first year put the division where it projected it needed to be; however, there was a need to verify that each department had achieved the correct balance of personnel dollars and expense dollars in the right locations. The new department managers were empowered to right-size their budgets and justify each area's allocations. The first year was primarily focused on operating expenses.

**Second Year – Salary Approach**

The second year was focused on employee salaries. I was informed that the employees had not witnessed a salary increase over the past three years. Therefore, the first order of business was to understand how much money the new division was allocating towards the employees. At the time, there was no strategic classification and compensation plan available, and no market-rate studies were known to use as a salary projection. Therefore, it was requested that the university human resources staff use existing position descriptions to determine an initial salary range using an outside market rate analysis. In certain areas within the division, the results indicated that employee salaries were down as low as 70 percent of the market rate for those positions in outside organizations. The concern was that an excessive number of employees were transitioning out of the departments. Exit interviews indicated that while the university benefits
were competitive with the outside employers, the salaries were significantly lower. Employees were willing to risk the lack of benefits to gain the dollars needed to pay their bills. The challenges were how to impact the turnover of employees and increase the pool of applicants to select while preventing the pressure of accepting a less qualified employee to train and set them up to leave the department for another offering at a higher compensation. Hiring an employee who is not the right fit just because a person is needed can potentially decrease workforce productivity and impact the organization’s quality of service.

The first market-rate results highlighted some problems with low salaries. First, the division needed to review all position descriptions to ensure they were relevant for the current market. In addition, they required more levels of separation in the positions to facilitate career progression. Second, the division needed to ensure that the outside organizations used to determine the market rate average were appropriate for salary comparison. The results showed at least 100 employees below the initial goal of salaries being 90 percent of the market rate average (see Figure 14). Hence, the immediate push was to get the amount of market-rate associated with the position to levels high enough to increase the talent pool that the division was seeking. I shared the expectation that hiring people needed to be commensurate with the goal of the university—to recruit the best and brightest, whether faculty, students, or staff employees. Additionally, the first market-rate assessments were conducted without collaboration with the directors responsible for overseeing the positions. The department managers formulated career progression lines (i.e., apprentice, journeyman, master craftsman), allowing staggered salary structure to mitigate the concern for salary compression that would impact high tenure employees.
We examined the market rate for all positions within the FM division, across all departments—staff, administrative, and OPS positions. The salary investigation highlighted employees who occupied temporary positions at the university for between five and seven years. We initiated an in-house push to focus more on Other Personal Services (OPS) position employees, encouraging department managers and supervisors to not overlook those temporary employees whose work ethic matched where the department was going as a new department and hire them into staff positions.

Figure 14. Sample FM Salary and Wage Variance by Department (2017 Market Average).

The OAS vision was to be the top place to work in the Tampa Bay area. To accomplish the vision, which focuses on improving talent acquisition and retention, we initially targeted positions, not individuals, with a sight picture to retain existing employees while placing the organization in a better position to hire more qualified applicants faster. While no empirical research data supported the rationale of focusing on the work positions rather than employees,
there was a significant response to the methodology introduced to employees during the town hall meeting and new employee gatherings that began quarterly. Everything about the decision seemed different from the organization’s past practices. Due to limited funds available to increase salaries, the focus was on specialized skills, hard-to-fill positions, and more notable positions. Though critical to student success and the student experience, positions like custodial, grounds, and bus drivers did not compete well for the limited salary dollars.

The first market rates were done without much collaboration with the directors responsible for overseeing the positions. Instead, the market rate was done based on existing position descriptions. As a result, we realized some problems; we needed to review all positions descriptions to ensure they were relevant for the current market and required levels of separation in the positions to facilitate career progression.

We looked at the market rate for all earned positions (staff, administrative, and OPS). The FM division’s initial focus was OPS workers; the positions could serve as a training ground to have someone work for the division. Then, the leaders could decide whether the person’s work ethic matched where the division was going as a new organization and hire them into the staff positions.

Third Year – Improved Methodology

As we continued to implement market rate adjustments to bring our filled employee positions to 95 percent of the 2017 market rate by 2019, the second round of market-rate assessments was completed using improved methodology and buy-in from the department managers. The analysis included more comparisons of other university counterparts. The human resources staff used at least four universities to settle on the appropriate market rate average for the various department positions. We were then ready to move the salary increases in the right
direction for the benefit of the employees. We looked at the need to have different market-rate levels, depending on the positions' level of responsibility and criticality. For example, after examining senior leadership positions within the division and department, we determined they needed to be higher to attract those positions.

In 2017, all division managers within the OAS office of responsibility verbally committed to implementing market rate adjustments to establish competitive compensation to attract and retain talent with the skillset necessary to meet position requirements. We sought to bring current and filled employee positions to 95 percent of the 2017 market rate average over a period of three fiscal years (FY) to meet the goal. The strategy used the annual distribution of state funds and the university’s annual two percent salary increase to achieve the objective. In FY2017-18, OAS moved employee positions to 90 percent of the market rate average and celebrated the achievement with the employees during a town hall meeting. The initial objective was to get all employees to 90 percent of the 2017 market rate average in FY2017-18.

**Fourth Year – Increased Salary and Wages**

We were poised to move to 95 percent for FY 2019-20, thus achieving the commitment to the employees, but found no university funds were available for increases in salary and wages. OAS was challenged to determine how to fund a two percent salary increase for the departments to support our commitment to continue to move employees’ wages and salaries to a higher rate. From my perspective, to do nothing or defer the salary and wage increases until the next fiscal year were not viable options. The three possibilities explored were to:

1. Offset operating expenses, auxiliary units’ budgets, and use emergency reserve dollars to create a new funding stream.
2. Offset deferred maintenance funds, offset auxiliary units’ budgets, and use emergency reserve dollars to create a new funding stream.

3. Defer hiring of positions, offset auxiliary units’ budgets, and use emergency reserve dollars to create a new funding stream.

We opted to do possibility #3 to meet my commitment to the employees; however, despite my best effort to move salary and wages forward, what I was able to accomplish was very limited. Again, our goal was to implement market rate adjustments to bring our filled employee positions to 95 percent of the 2017 market rate by 2019.

Survey

The survey was administered during the last quarter of each year, during the town hall meeting. The average number of employee responses received over the four-year period was 244 (2019 USF Administrative Services Employee Survey Results, 2019). The town hall participant responses were captured on a 1 to 5 scale. The scale was used to capture the employee’s opinions based on their level of agreement “(1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree)” (May et al., 2004). The employee responses were captured on paper, and “the results were entered into the web-based survey tool, Survey Monkey” (2019 USF Administrative Services Employee Survey Results, 2019).

We grouped the employee survey questions into four actionable areas: division of leadership and direction, feeling valued as an employee, tools, training, and growth, and feeling informed and connected. Question number one (Q#1) allowed the participant to identify their division. While question numbers (Q#s) 2-14 focused on responses desired to assess the four factors. We categorized the 13 questions into four actionable areas below:
1. Division of Leadership and Direction: This actionable area was set up specifically for the VP to appreciate if the division leads were making decisions in the best interest of the employees.

- Q#2 - My division operates with strong values and ethics.
- Q#3 - I believe my division is going in the right direction.
- Q#4 - I have confidence in the leadership of my division.

2. Feeling Valued as an Employee: We posted seven idea boxes across the OAS in the employee break areas. The pillar teams were responsible of collecting and providing feedback initially to the VP and the division leads and then to the individual that provided the idea/feedback.

- Q#5 - I feel appreciated for the work that I do.
- Q#6 - New ideas are encouraged in my division.
- Q#7 - My division cares about my questions.
- Q#8 - Employees are recognized for a job well done.

3. Tools, Training, and Growth: The employees provide the necessary tools and training to develop personally and professionally. We established supervisory and employee training. When I arrived, we only had one scholarship program, and we launched a second that allowed the administrative, staff, and OPS employees to complete for dollars to attend educational classes.

- Q#9 - My division is committed to supporting adequate training in order for me to perform my duties.
- Q#10 - I am provided with the proper tools to perform my job duties.
- Q#11 - I am encouraged to improve my professional knowledge of job skills.
4. Feeling Informed and Connected: There was a requirement for the division leads to meet often with all of their employees, not just the lead supervisors. Aside from the quarterly town hall meetings, we had a quarterly newsletter. I met with the division leads, the first line supervisor separately, and the department workers without the division lead. My favorite group to meet with was the night shift because they seemingly are left out (i.e., townhalls were during the day).

- Q#12 - My job makes me feel like I am part of something meaningful.
- Q#13 - I feel a connection to my division.
- Q#14 - I feel informed about what is going on in my division.

Figure 15 shows the descriptive statistics and the mean averages reflected across the four actionable areas for each year. The quantitative data shows that the participants' level of opinion was that they agree with all of the questions from 2017-2019. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the factors contributed to employee engagement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Division Leadership and Direction</th>
<th>Feeling Valued as an Employee</th>
<th>Tools, Training, Growth</th>
<th>Feeling Informed and Connected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q#2</td>
<td>Q#3</td>
<td>Q#4</td>
<td>Q#5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 15. Actionable Areas

Furthermore, Figure 16 shows a line graph that displays quantitative data across four years. Likewise, it also provides evidence that the actions were taken during the five years positively impacted employee engagement. In addition, Q#12 (feel part of something meaningful) specifically communicated that the employees were of the opinion that they experienced a meaningful sense of appreciation. Finally, the average of all participant responses trended upward from 2016 - 2019.
Figure 16. Analysis of the Survey

**Turnover Rate Comparison**

The purpose was to compare turnover rates across the five Florida state-funded institutions within the case study timeframe (January 2015 through January 2019). Only FSU provided an excel format suitable for making a turnover rate comparison with USF to determine if the implemented factors resulted in better retention at USF. The analysis compared four OAS departments: environmental health and safety, building services, facilities maintenance, and central utilities plant at FSU with their respective counterpart at USF.

Figure 17 shows the employee Turnover Rate Comparison. The average employee turnover rate for FSU remained high (21%), and the average turnover rate for USF was 9.4%. The FSU rate trended with the national average of 22%, while the USF turnover rate was substantially lower. Florida's unemployment rate continued to drop—from 5.5% to 3.3% during the timeframe of this study (reference Figure 1)—while USF had a corresponding upward drift. It is, therefore,
uncertain that the factors made the difference in the USF employee retention; however, it is highly possible that without the actions taken turnover would have been even higher since arguably, the employees could have easily found another place for employment if they so desired.

![Employee Turnover Rate FSU vs USF graph]

**Figure 17. Turnover Rate Comparison**
CHAPTER FIVE:
CONCLUSION

The purpose of this case study was to investigate factors that influence Administrative Service employees and increase their level of retention at the University of South Florida (USF), a state-funded university. The aim was to explore the relationship between employee engagement, intrinsic motivation, and psychological meaningfulness. The results revealed that psychological meaningfulness, associated with employee engagement, is linked to retention (May et al., 2004). Additionally, the exploratory conceptual model design for employment engagement concluded that meaningfulness and intrinsic motivation are essential for employee engagement (Kordbacheh et al., 2013). Furthermore, the employee survey was the appropriate tool needed to know the opinion of the employees. Wiley (1997) expressed that if you want to sustain an employee’s willingness to work, you must often solicit their opinions. Therefore, my go-to questions for all managers are how are the employees doing, and how do you know? According to Gupta and Sharma (2016), “employee engagement is an element for the success of any organization.” Therefore, longitudinal case studies are needed to assess the effects of the factors developed to improve employee engagement in your organization (Rothmann & Baumann, 2014).

This case study focused on management and employees who interact to fulfill a common goal—organizational commitment through improved employee engagement. Researchers acknowledge that increasing performance requires a commitment “by both sides” (Markos et al.,
This study confirms that increasing employee engagement requires a strategy around psychological meaningfulness. The findings showed that the three constructs employee engagement, intrinsic motivation, and psychological meaningfulness) chosen for this case study had “favorable relationships” (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009).

**Contribution**

This longitudinal case study contributed to employee retention by connecting the three constructs: employee engagement, intrinsic motivation, and psychological meaningfulness with the Employee Engagement Model, which was developed based on personal experience. Retention of high-performance government employees provides the needed knowledge continuity required to run the nation efficiently. In addition, a conceptual model that positively influences employees using intrinsic motivators will enable practitioners to manage better the salary and wage gap between the public and private sectors.

This study contributed to the existing literature on psychological meaningfulness, focusing on public institutions and their employees. It has been argued that employee engagement is key to lower rates of staff turnover (Rothmann & Welsh, 2013). This case study created an employee engagement framework that can be implemented and tested using other employee factors.

**Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The first limitation is associated with the turnover rate comparison. FSU was the only Florida state-funded university to provide usable data for the study. Further research could include data from other state universities in Florida and beyond for comparison. It would involve using the conceptual model developed for employee retention, implementing, and testing it “to gain better insight” associated with the factors relationship with psychological meaningfulness.
A second limitation is the sample size. Future research is needed in other organizations because the average sample size for this case study was too small to generalize a larger organization (Kordbacheh et al., 2014). A third limitation is this case study only focused on psychological meaningfulness. Kahn's (1990) research concluded three psychological conditions: “meaningfulness, safety, and availability.”

Kordbacheh et al. (2014) alleged that future research is necessary to establish meaningfulness as a concrete construct. The authors also asserted that the relationships between psychological meaningfulness and employee retention should be explored (Kordbacheh et al., 2014). Additionally, Rothmann and Welsh (2013) stated that “given the strong association between psychological meaningfulness and employee engagement, future studies should explore meaningfulness at work…” (p. 23). The authors included in the literature review posit that employee engagement is important, and future research is needed (Rothmann & Welsh, 2013). Another future case study could use the initial conceptual model developed to implement and test a new way of approaching retention, hiring, engagement, and motivation to determine if it yields better results. In future research, practitioners and researchers could develop an employee engagement framework to test other factors in the work environment (Suharti & Suliyanto, 2012). Additionally, future research could consist of other constructs such as employee involvement, and organizational commitment compared to employee engagement (Gupta & Sharma, 2016).

**Concluding Remarks**

A recommendation for practitioners is to inform others who would serve as enablers and champions to help facilitate increased awareness of the relevant factors within their organizations that could be modeled and implemented using an employee engagement framework (Rothmann
& Welsh, 2013). As a practitioner, I added a research perspective to my personal experience as a senior executive leader. While my leadership attributes have led to my success in mid and senior-level positions, this academic experience has yielded a greater appreciation for the space between academia and practitioner, which I now appreciate as a research space that is most beneficial to both environments. The exploratory conceptual model based on personal experience is an employee engagement framework applicable for both the public and private sectors. While the determinants might be different in other organizations, the literature review supports the engagement framework. My journey at the USF Muma College of Business has challenged my perspective as a practitioner, and hopefully, I have reciprocated by bringing new knowledge to academia. Thus, there is an opportunity for practitioners and academia to benefit from this case study.
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December 15, 2020

I am currently a doctoral candidate in the University of South Florida (USF) Muma College of Business, Doctor of Business Administration program. To support my dissertation, Pursuant to Article I, section 24 of the Florida Constitution, and chapter 119. R. S., I am requesting USF provide the following data for all of the Office of Administrative Services employees from August 2015 through September 2020.

- All Administrative Services employees who left USF’s employment:
• All Administrative Services employees who were promoted within Administrative Services:
  o Employee name
  o Employee Job Title (before Promotion)
  o Employee’s Administrative Services Department (before Promotion)
  o Salary Plan (before Promotion)
  o Hourly Rate (before Promotion)
  o Annual Rate (before Promotion)
  o Employee Job Title (after Promotion)
  o Employee VP Area and Department (after Promotion)
  o Salary Plan (after Promotion)
  o Hourly Rate (after Promotion)
  o Annual Rate (after Promotion)

• All USF employees who transferred and/or were promoted into Administrative Services from another VP Area:
  o Employee name
  o Employee Job Title (before Transfer/Promotion)
  o Employee’s Administrative Services Department (before Transfer/Promotion)
  o Salary Plan (before Transfer/Promotion)
  o Hourly Rate (before Transfer/Promotion)
  o Annual Rate (before Transfer/Promotion)
  o Employee Job Title (after Transfer/Promotion)
  o Employee VP Area and Department (after Transfer/Promotion)
  o Salary Plan (after Transfer/Promotion)
  o Hourly Rate (after Transfer/Promotion)
  o Annual Rate (after Transfer/Promotion)

Requesting the following data for all employees of the Division of Human Resources (including OPS Temps).

• All Division of Human Resources (DHR) employees who left USF’s employment:
  o Employee name
  o Employee Job Title
I will contact your office within 24 hours to discuss when I may expect fulfillment of my request and payment of any statutorily prescribed fees. If you have any questions in the interim, you may contact me via email at williams374@usf.edu or 571-285-9716.

Thank you,

Calvin Williams
4316 West San Luis Street
Tampa, Florida 33629
December 7, 2021

Dear Calvin Williams,

The University of South Florida Board of Trustees (USF) understands and acknowledges that you are preparing a paper to be published by ProQuest ETD (the "Publisher"), currently entitled Engagement and Meaningfulness as Determinants of Employee Retention: A Longitudinal Case Study (the “Work”). This letter provides permission for the Publisher to print and publish certain illustrations in the circumstances described herein and in connection with the Work.

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Interim Director
Technology Transfer Office
The University of South Florida Board of Trustees

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Schedule A

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