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Strategies for Promoting Employee Engagement in the Information Technology Sector

Ephrem Belete Zelelew
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Ephrem Belete Zelelew

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

Strategies for Promoting Employee Engagement in the Information Technology Sector

by

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MS, Maharishi University of Management, 2008

BS, Unity University College, 2004

Diploma, Jimma College of Agriculture, 1998

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

December 2023

Abstract

Information technology (IT) organizational leaders are concerned with employee disengagement as it negatively impacts productivity and goal achievement. Gallup employee workforce engagement tracking number shows that disengaged employees in the United States cost billions of dollars annually in productivity. Grounded in the social exchange theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore leadership strategies that IT organizational leaders in the Washington DC metro area of the United States use to increase employee engagement and improve productivity. The participants were three IT organizational leaders who increased employee engagement and improved productivity. Data were collected from semistructured interviews, publicly available documents from websites, social media, and other related documents participants were willing to share. Through thematic analysis, four themes were identified: (a) leadership style and behaviors, (b) conducive and inclusive organizational culture and environment, (c) effective communication and feedback, (d) recognition and career development. A key recommendation is for IT organizational leaders to actively encourage employee participation in decision making during all phases of project planning and execution. The implications for positive social change include the potential to provide quality service and support to the local communities the leaders serve.

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Dedication

Above all, this doctoral study is a dedication to my late father, Master Warrant Officer Belete Zelelew, whose invaluable lessons on the virtues of hard work, courage, and dedication have left me at a loss for words. He planted a spirit in me, and his influence has consistently driven me to strive for excellence for personal fulfillment and to make him happy and honor his memory. His example taught me to confront life's challenges head-on, attain significant milestones, and continually prepare for the next endeavor.

My dedication also extends to my beloved wife, Sara Kallayou Addisu. Her unwavering love, boundless patience, constant encouragement, and uncompromising support have illuminated our life journey, including the demanding path of this doctoral study and the countless challenges ahead. Without her, this journey would have been impossible. To my beautiful and smart children, Deacon Kidus Ephrem, Wudasse Ephrem, and Eyuel Ephrem, I cherish your love and presence in my life, and I embarked on this journey with you in my heart. I aspired to demonstrate that with constant determination, one can achieve any goal, regardless of age. It is a reminder that we are forever young enough to pursue our dreams, no matter the obstacles that will stand in our way.

I want to dedicate this accomplishment to my beloved fathers, my lovely grandma, and my beautiful sister, Meseret Belete, who now resides in heaven. I believe they are watching over me from above and praying for me, always standing before God.

To all of you, I offer my sincerest thanks and congratulate you. With your eternal support, I have reached this significant milestone.

Finally, I wish to dedicate this study to my family, friends, and church community, both near and far. Your confidence in me, patience, consistent encouragement, prayers, thoughts, and inspired me. You have lent your unwavering support to my family in my absence, understanding the time and commitment this journey demanded. Your presence has been a beacon of hope for me and my family during this challenging and, at the same time, rewarding journey. May God bless you all - Amen.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Background of the Problem

Ever-changing and fiercely competitive organizational environments are a challenge for survival and growth, requiring various strategies including the effective use of resources to provide a unique value to customers. Organizations with a solid brand, products, and new technology alone do not help them win over competitors (Qalati et al., 2022). Organizations need a strategy to engage employees actively and achieve their best productivity. (Riyanto et al., 2021). An engaged employee is intellectually and emotionally connected to the organization, is enthusiastic about its aims, and is dedicated to its ideals (Qalati et al., 2022). One challenge organizations face is employee turnover due to a lack of motivation, employee engagement, and employee commitment to organizations (Riyanto et al., 2021). An engaged employee is fully involved in and enthusiastic about the work and acts according to the organization's interest (Jan et al., 2016).

Multiple studies were conducted to identify employee engagement initiatives and their impact on employee productivity in many industries. However, there is a shortage or gap in research related to IT organizations and employee engagement. Some of the current research results around the IT sector cover the relationship between employee engagement with productivity using cross-sectional methodologies, and the researchers suggest future research to use other approaches and identify the problem of employee disengagement (Moyo, 2020). Some are older and do not reflect current conditions, including the virtual working environment of IT organizations employees (Qalati et al.,

2022). Researchers are covering only a few factors affecting employee engagement, like organizational culture, rather than covering factors like job-related factors and stress factors (Okolo et al., 2018). Another gap in IT-based organizations and employee engagement is the lack of leadership strategies (Bhuvanaiah & Raya, 2016). Riyanto et al. (2021) stated that employee engagement is only 15%, while 85% of employees in an organization are not engaged or inactive, which affects their productivity and organizational goal achievement. Moyo (2020) discussed that IT organizations regularly lose employees regardless of high compensation strategy and benefits because of less employee engagement and commitment. Such low employee engagement shows that the challenge faced by organizations is not retaining talented employees but how to engage them. The background to the problem was provided, and the focus shifted to the problem statement.

Problem and Purpose

Disengagement of organizational employees because of job dissatisfaction and discouragement adversely impacts productivity and an organization's ability to achieve goals and competitive advantage (Riyanto et al., 2021). Gallup Institute data shows that globally, employee engagement is only 15 % (Riyanto et al., 2021). The specific business problem was that some IT organizational leaders lacked leadership strategies that increased employee engagement. The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore leadership strategies that some IT organization leaders used to increase employee engagement and improve productivity. The targeted population comprised three IT organizational leaders from three IT organizations in the Washington DC metro

area of the United States, who successfully increased employee engagement following the implementation of their leadership strategies. The implications for positive social change included the potential for IT organizational leaders to gain knowledge to implement strategies for employee engagement, which could reduce the cost of training new employees, ensure quality products, and, through consistency of workers, improve customer relations of the communities they served.

Population and Sampling

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case research study was to explore leadership strategies some IT organizational leaders used to increase employee engagement and improve productivity by gathering data from three IT organization leaders in the Washington DC metro area, United States. I purposely selected and interviewed these leaders using a semistructured interview approach. The selection criteria included individuals with at least five years of IT leadership experience who possessed leadership experience, employed strategies that increased employee engagement and held strategic decision-making roles such as project managers, program managers, or directors within IT organizations. I obtained IT leaders' information from professional groups in the Washington DC metro area to identify and recruit suitable participants. The organizations included LinkedIn, local IT professional groups, and the association of IT professionals. Additionally, I analyzed publicly available organizational documents from participants' organizational websites, social media, and other related documents that participants were willing to share to gather relevant information for this qualitative multiple-case study. Once I collected the interview responses, I documented

them, interpreted the collected data, and emailed them to the participants for accurate review. I conducted this member checking process until no new information was shared and data saturation was achieved.

Nature of the Study

There were three research methods for this study, quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Qualitative researchers focus on an interpretive methodology to obtain an in-depth understanding of research phenomena, allowing researchers to get closer to the phenomenon by interacting with the research participants (Scalcău, 2023). I chose the qualitative methodology, which included interviews with IT leaders, a review of relevant and publicly available documents, and organizational information from publicly available websites and social media that participants were willing to share. Quantitative researchers test theories by looking at the relationships among variables so that numbers can be analyzed using statistical procedures (Scalcău, 2023). Mixed-methods research methodology combines both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect and analyze data (Lo et al., 2020).

I used the qualitative research method to explore what, why, and how employee engagement. The qualitative methodology was appropriate because I did not need to analyze variables' characteristics or correlations among variables using statistical analysis through hypothesis testing, which was the case with quantitative research methods. Furthermore, the mixed-method approach was unnecessary, requiring a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

I considered the qualitative research designs of narrative, phenomenological, ethnographic, and case studies. According to Yin (2018), the narrative design involves participants' personal stories being told in an open, interpretive manner that is often nonstructural and sequential. Yin explained that the phenomenological design is interpretivism in which the researcher focuses on the participants' life experiences to gain insights and grasp meanings. In contrast, Yin discussed that ethnographic researchers develop an in-depth explanation of everyday life's social and cultural order for a group. Using a case study design helps the researcher highlight real-world business problems, investigate the problem in-depth within the participants' environmental context, and use various direct data as part of the data collection process for validating findings (Yin, 2018).

For my planned case study design, I used semistructured interviews, publicly available organizational policies and procedures documents, information from websites, records about employee engagement, and notes taken from each participant's behavior during the interview. Yin (2018) discussed using multiple case study designs to explore personal accounts or documents by collecting data and answering what, how, and why the phenomena are from multiple entities. I used a multiple case study design to explore what, how, and why of employee engagement and strategies that IT leaders used in multiple organizations.

Research Question

What strategies do some IT organizational leaders in the Washington DC Metro area of the United States use to increase employee engagement and improve productivity?

Interview Questions

- 1 Based on your experience, what are some consequences of not having strategies to engage employees in your organization?
- 2 What strategies are you using to engage employees?
- 3 How did you implement employee engagement strategies?
- 4 What strategies do you find employees see as the most meaningful for increasing job productivity?
- 5 What strategies did you deploy to maintain employee engagement?
- 6 Based on your experience, how and why do employees become disengaged at work?
- 7 How do you measure the success of your employee engagement strategies?
- 8 What were the key barriers to implementing your strategies to engage your employees?
- 9 How did you successfully address the critical barriers to engaging employees?
- 10 What other information will you share concerning employee engagement and job satisfaction in the IT industry?

Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that supported this study was the social exchange theory (SET), based on the premise that employees experience a series of interactions with organizational leaders that determine their engagement and productivity (Reader et

al., 2016). Thibaut and Kelley (1959) examined social interactions and how individuals evaluate the values of interpersonal relationships within a group. Homans (1961) advanced Thibaut and Kelley's findings and developed the term SET, explaining how individuals engage in a social exchange when there is a mutual psycho-sociological benefit built on the employee and organizational relationships, which could contribute to improved employee and organizational productivity. The premise of SET is that in interdependent relationships, transactions between parties begets a norm of reciprocity and, possibly, quid pro quo reciprocity (Huang et al., 2016). The logical connections between the SET and my study topic were that mutual psycho-sociological benefit built on the employee and organizational relationships that had relevance to employee engagement, and it was the lens through which I explored the strategies some IT leaders used to increase employee engagement and improve productivity.

Operational Definitions

The following are key terms and their definitions within the context of this study:

Disengaged employee: Disengaged employee is an employee who shows withdrawal and disconnection in the duties they are expected to perform (Yanchus et al., 2018).

Employee engagement: Employee engagement is a positive organizational outcome consisting of the three original states of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral, and the fourth state psychological about an employee's active work-related role (Shuck et al., 2016).

Job dissatisfaction: Job dissatisfaction is the unpleasurable emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job as frustrating or blocking the attainment of one's job values or as entailing disvalues (Pandey et al., 2021)

Reciprocity: Reciprocity is a type of social rule that underscores the importance of repaying what others have provided (Tremblay et al., 2021).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are a critical part of a research study foundation accepted as accurate or plausible. Assumptions are premises that a researcher considers or believes to be true or accurate and are the basis for some viewpoints without concrete evidence (Mitchell et al., 2021). In this qualitative study, there were two assumptions. The primary assumption was that participants would provide honest and objective answers to the interview questions. Another assumption included the appropriateness of the selected research method and designed to collect the data for answering the overarching research question.

Limitations

Research may not be entirely free, flawless, or inclusive of all study aspects. Some limitations may affect the validity of the research study's findings, and reporting research limitations is very important for understanding and utilizing research findings (Sperling, 2022). Sperling (2022) described research limitations as those elements that the researcher cannot control, may impact the study, or place constraints on the investigation. One of the limitations could have been the small number of IT organization leaders I planned to include as participants in the study, which could have affected the

generalization of the research findings. However, Yin (2018) suggests that the replication of the study is essential when thinking of a sample size, and when conducting a multiple case study, a selection of two or more cases is appropriate. Furthermore, employees were not part of the participant pool, and the study may have lacked their perspectives.

Delimitations

Research studies should define the scope. Delimitations are elements the researcher includes and excludes in a study by defining the study scope and boundaries, improving the research process, rigor, relevance of findings, and completion rates using a formalized and standardized approach applied flexibly (Coker, 2022). The study's primary delimitation focused on IT leaders who successfully implemented a strategy to engage employees and improve their productivity in the Washington DC metro area. Additionally, the study did not include employees. The study results may not have applied to other industries and IT organizations outside of the geographical location. Finally, the research findings depended on a reliable, credible, and accurate interpretation and presentation of data from the study participants.

Significance of the Study

The study was significant in that the results may have provided new insights regarding identifying and introducing effective leadership strategies that had enhanced the capability and efficiency of leaders at IT organizations in the Washington DC Metro area, the United States. Organizations with employee engagement strategies help employees to be productive, leading to higher productivity, company reputations, business growth, and financial gain for businesses and employees (George & Massey,

2020). During research, Budriene and Diskiene (2020) found that higher productivity, profitability, and financial gains help businesses and employees address social and financial issues such as poverty within their communities and families. The research findings have significance showing the contribution of engaged employees to organizational goal achievement, employee benefits, and positive social effects.

Contribution to Business Practice

The study findings might be of value to IT organizational leaders, extend the existing knowledge on employee engagement improvement, and increase employee productivity and organizational and personal goal achievements. This study may be significant because employees and organizational productivity are impacted directly when employees get engaged. Also, the study findings help IT organizational leaders understand the strategies to engage their employees and improve their productivity. When IT organizational leaders focus on creating an environment where employees are motivated to engage, the IT organization benefits by increasing employee productivity and organizational goal achievements. IT organizational leaders concerned with meeting the organizational objective of implementing engagement strategies may find the results of this research study helpful and improve an organizational work environment and culture that increases employee engagement, productivity, and organizational goal achievements.

Implications for Social Change

IT organizational leaders focus on employee engagement and productivity and create an environment where employee motivation and satisfaction are met, helping these

organizations achieve their goals and sustain in the industry they operate. This entails cultivating an environment that effectively addresses employee motivation and satisfaction, ultimately contributing to the achievement and sustained success of the organization within its industry. By strategically implementing employee engagement strategies, IT organizational leaders have the potential to elevate job satisfaction levels, which fosters a highly productive work environment that promotes heightened employee motivation and engagement, culminating in positive social outcomes that benefit the broader community. Malenfant et al. (2019) discussed that organizational employees often participate in community-building projects and activities in many ways. Employees who are deeply engaged and highly motivated exhibit a profound commitment to their work. This commitment translates into substantial improvements in productivity and the delivery of high-quality products or services, ultimately yielding positive outcomes for the employees, the organization, their families, and the broader community. Such engaged and productive employees tend to have lower rates of absenteeism, sustained high levels of engagement, and enhanced personal well-being, which, in turn, bolsters support for their families and the surrounding community. This phenomenon can benefit the organization's competitive standing, financial productivity, and broader societal and community impact. Noteworthy manifestations of such contributions may encompass activities such as event sponsorship and various other community-focused initiatives. When employees within an IT organization are engaged and highly productive, it catalyzes community advancement through the support and positive influence these employees extend to their families and the larger society. IT leaders can foster employee

engagement that, in turn, can drive meaningful societal impact. As Rohim and Budhiasa (2019) articulated, employees' profound sense of organizational connection is cultivated when leaders recognize their dedication and inspire and actively contribute to improving their communities.

Incorporating a more dedicated and experienced workforce can lead to heightened customer satisfaction. For IT leaders who champion and implement employee engagement strategies, there is significant potential for driving positive societal change through investments in employee development and community betterment. The outcomes of this research could pave the way for organizational growth and the support of employee well-being, encompassing mental and physical health and work-life equilibrium. These findings may catalyze leaders to encourage employee participation in corporate-sponsored community events and even provide productive, engaged employees with paid time off for volunteering in non-profit organizations and community service initiatives. Furthermore, this research study finds that it can foster positive societal changes by enhancing employee engagement and increasing motivation, productivity, and overall well-being. Empowered employees tend to exhibit greater self-assuredness in their professional and personal lives. In the broader context, these findings could contribute to reducing unemployment rates and invigorating local economies. Engaged employees will be motivated and productive, remain employed within their organization, and generate income to support themselves, family, and the community. Engaged employees will benefit from the values and rewards implemented through the organizational engagement strategy used by IT organizational leaders.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore leadership strategies that some IT leaders in the Washington DC Metro area, United States, used to increase employee engagement and improve productivity. In alignment with Paul and Criado (2020), this is a comprehensive literature review with a discussion that comprises the purpose of the literature review and a detailed summary and analysis of previous related research and findings. Specifically, this literature review examined the research and findings related to employee engagement, disengagement, job satisfaction, and productivity. Additionally, this literature review has embedded descriptions of discrepancies such as gaps in research, conflicts in previous studies, and questions raised in previous research. Evidence was also needed to explore, discuss, critically analyze, and synthesize strategies for promoting employee engagement in the IT sector. A literature review is often used to critically evaluate the work in a particular field of study, theme, or discipline. A literature review intends to highlight pertinent theories, crucial concepts, empirical techniques, contexts, and unresolved research questions to establish a future research agenda based on these elements (Paul & Criado, 2020).

Literature Review Organization

I organized the literature review into sections: (a) critical analysis and synthesis of SET, (b) analysis and synthesis of conceptual framework and alternative conceptual frameworks, and (c) critical analysis and synthesis of employee engagement concepts. The critical analysis and synthesis are of topics such as collective engagement, types of employee engagement, successful employee

engagement implementation, and analysis of factors influencing employee engagement within an organization for its achievements of organizational goals and identifying strategies for increasing employee engagement. I used research studies from the following databases: ABI/INFORM Complete, Business Source Complete, EBSCO, Emerald Management, ProQuest Central, SAGE Premier, and Science Direct. In addition, I used Google Scholar with a focus on recent resources in selecting literature to review. The key search terms were leadership *disengagement*, *social exchange theory*, *engagement*, *employee disengagement*, *work productivity*, *work-life balance*, *employee retention*, *community relations*, *employee engagement*, *information technology*, *leadership engagement*, *reciprocity*, *value*, *rewards*, *organizational commitment*, and *organizational culture*.

There were 156 references used in this study, of which 147 were peer-reviewed articles (94.2%), and 137 of those peer-reviewed articles (93.2%) were published between 2018 and 2023 (within five years of my anticipated graduation date). The breakdown of the sources of references for this literature review is in Table 1.

Table 1
Summary of Literature Review Sources

Reference Type	< 5 Years	> 5 Years	Total	% Total < 5 Years
Peer-reviewed journals	137	10	147	93.2
Non-peer-reviewed journals	2	1	3	66.7
Books	3	2	5	60.0
Government sites	1	0	1	100
Total	143	13	156	91.7

Critical Analysis and Synthesis of Social Exchange Theory

Change management and adapting to the constantly evolving organizational world through well-defined processes and technological advancements are crucial for organizations to enhance competitiveness, sustainably address challenges, and fulfill stakeholder interests. Fichter (2019) emphasized that change is a transformative process in organizations, involving the shift in how organizations perform their activities and the transformation of relationships within and outside the organizational environment through effective change management. New trends, innovations, and technological advancements facilitate this process that enhances competitiveness and sustainability. In contrast, Hospodková et al. (2021) highlighted the challenges the constantly changing organizational world poses. Hospodkova found it necessary for change management leaders to analyze and adjust organizational direction, structure, and capabilities to meet the interests of internal and external stakeholders. This adaptation is particularly crucial in

the context of advancing technological solutions. Both perspectives of Fichter and Hospodkova et al. underscore the importance of change management in navigating organizational transformations and addressing the complexities of the evolving business landscape. Change is a transformative nature in organizations, and there is a need for change management leaders to effectively navigate and adapt to the challenges presented by the ever-changing organizational landscape. They must do this while leveraging technological advancements to meet stakeholder interests. Technology is changing how organizations perform their activities and how employees interact with the organization and between themselves. Automation of processes became prevalent and changed how humans' valuable and intangible resources interact towards improved productivity and achieving organizational and personal goals (Hospodková et al., 2021). If not addressed strategically, employee disengagement could have resulted in poor outcomes for IT-based organizations and other industries. The analysis of professional and scholarly literature associated with the SET was insightful because it helped understand the application of its critical constructs to the problems of disengagement and provided insights into identifying gaps in leadership strategies for improving employee engagement.

Social Exchange Theory

SET fosters effective relationships, work attitudes, and behaviors, leading to employee engagement, commitment, and empowerment. SET can lead to beneficial outcomes through an organization's sociological and psychological exchanges. Nachmias et al. (2021) emphasized that leaders' use of social exchange promotes personal responsibility, appreciation, and trust. Further, Nachmias et al. found that

SET theory enables employees to form professional relationships, friendships, and organizational groupings based on social responsibility. The SET application of key constructs also contributes to employee engagement, commitment, and empowerment, leading to strategic productivity through reciprocity norms and interpersonal relationships. Imam and Chambel (2020) described the social exchange as a mutual investment and perceived obligations between two parties, such as an organization and its employees, which generate feelings of gratitude, trust, and guilt as outcomes of the social exchange process. Both perspectives emphasized the importance of SET in fostering positive interactions and outcomes within organizations. However, Nachmias et al. focused more on the broad impact of SET on work attitudes and behaviors, while Imam and Chambel specifically highlighted the emotional outcomes of the social exchange process. SET emphasis on the importance of engaging in sociological and psychological exchanges between individuals within an organization to foster effective relationships, desirable work attitudes, and behaviors, leading to employee engagement, commitment, and empowerment and resulting in beneficial consequences such as trust and gratitude (Imam & Chambel, 2020; Nachmias et al., 2021). The use of SET has a myriad of uses. It has been used to identify whether an organization supports the interest of its employees and whether the employees reciprocate with increased engagement.

SET has the reciprocal relationship between organizations and employees in its fundamental premise, where mutual benefits, perceived support, and fulfillment of expectations enhance employee engagement, productivity, and positive behavior.

Akkermans et al. (2019) highlighted that when employees perceive their organization as meeting their expectations, it leads to enhanced productivity, which has positive organizational implications. Xiong and King (2019) underscored SET as a framework for employees to comprehend available incentives and how their efforts contribute value to the company. SET is widely applied to understand employee and employer engagement relative to productivity dynamics. Moreover, Xuecheng et al. (2022) contributed to reciprocal relations by describing the obligation aspect of SET, where one party feels compelled to reciprocate based on the benefits received through positivity and devotion. Xuecheng et al. also highlighted SET's perspective on employee engagement and fostering productivity through reciprocal benefits such as training, mutual benefits, and obligations. In their findings, the researchers illustrated the importance of SET in explaining the reciprocal nature of the employee-employer relationship and how it influences engagement, productivity, and mutual benefits (Xiong & King, 2019; Xuecheng et al., 2022). Overall, SET is widely applied to understand the dynamics of engagement and productivity between employees and employers, emphasizing the importance of positive reciprocity, mutual benefits, and fulfillment of obligations. Implementing SET principles can contribute to a positive and beneficial relationship between organizations and employees, leading to organizational success and employee satisfaction.

Homans' SET categorizes benefits and rewards into success, stimulus, value, deprivation-satiation, and emotions propositions based on the benefit and reward influence on employee behavior, motivation, and engagement. Cook et al. (2013)

elaborated on Homans' propositions, highlighting their implications. Cook et al. detailed that the success proposition suggests rewarding employee actions increase motivation, engagement, and productivity. In contrast, the stimulus proposition may have implications that past rewarded behaviors will likely be repeated in similar situations. Furthermore, Cook et al. described the value proposition as more valuable than the reward in influencing employee productivity. The deprivation-satiation proposition explains that the value of additional rewards diminishes as employees receive the same incentive repeatedly (Cook et al., 2013). Neuhofer et al. (2016) also found that Homans divided SET categories based on benefits and rewards, including the success proposition, stimulus proposition, value proposition, deprivation-satiation proposition, and emotions proposition. According to Govender and Bussin (2020), these propositions were established assuming that rewarding employee behavior encourages them to continue their actions up to diminishing marginal utility.

The emotion proposition is intended to emphasize employees' reactions to different reward situations, where they may respond negatively if unmet expectations or the return on their efforts is deemed unfair. Overall, these studies provide insights into the different facets of SET and its impact on employee behavior, motivation, and emotional responses to rewards (Cook et al., 2013; Govender & Bussin, 2020; Neuhofer et al., 2016). Organizational leaders may find applying the SET helpful in understanding employees' reactions to different situations of rewards and benefits,

maintaining a positive relationship with their employees, and keeping them engaged and productive.

SET provides insights into the exchange-based relationship between employees and organizations, where employees evaluate rewards, repeat rewarding actions, and disengage from adverse outcomes, impacting their engagement. SET also has a lens to understand how social exchanges and manager-employee relationships can enhance employee engagement and productivity through reciprocity and rewards. Homans (1961) highlighted the significance of the exchange-based relationship between employees and organizations, emphasizing that when employees assess the value of rewards, they will engage in actions that yield positive returns and avoid interactions that lead to adverse outcomes, impacting their level of engagement. Building upon this, O'Connor and Crowley-Henry (2017) contended that engaged employees exert their best efforts by contributing to enhanced organizational productivity. They further suggested that SET provided a valuable framework to examine their research question. Their research question concerned strategies for improving employee engagement and productivity through social exchanges and manager-employee relationships. O'Connor and Crowley-Henry also emphasized the importance of reciprocity and rewards as integral components of this open exchange process. It is evident that understanding the dynamics of employee organization relationships and implementing effective social exchange constructs can significantly influence employee engagement and overall organizational success.

The relationship between employers and employees influences employee engagement, productivity, social relationships, and creativity. According to Nachmias et al. (2021), a positive relationship between employers and employees results in higher employee engagement and productivity across physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. When employees feel valued and supported by their organization, they are more likely to be actively involved and perform at their best. Apart from Nachmias et al. (2021), Tan et al. (2021) emphasized the negative impact of an undermined reciprocity and organizational exchange relationship on social relationships and creativity. Employees who perceive a lack of fairness or reciprocity may experience reduced motivation and engagement, leading to decreased creativity and a focus on maintaining a balance in the exchange relationship. Recognizing the employer-employee relationship's critical role, organizations may prioritize building positive relationships that foster employee engagement, productivity, and creativity. By establishing a fair and reciprocal exchange relationship and providing support across physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions, employers can cultivate a work environment that promotes employee well-being and enhances organizational productivity, which is lacking in organizational strategic leadership planning.

The reciprocal exchange relationship between employees and organizations involves the exchange of monetary values, resources, and fulfillment of expectations, influencing employee productivity, engagement, and career progression. McLeod et al. (2021) highlighted the exchange of monetary values and resources, such as salaries and health benefits, for employees' efficient completion of tasks and assignments.

This perspective emphasized the transactional nature of the employee-organization relationship, where employees exchange their services for financial rewards. Unlike McLeod et al. (2021), Imam and Chambel (2020) emphasized meeting employee expectations. When employees perceive that their organization is meeting their expectations, they are more likely to respond with increased productivity, engagement, and desirable organizational behaviors. Fulfilling employee expectations contributes to a favorable exchange relationship. McLeod et al. (2021) and Imam and Chambel (2020) acknowledged the reciprocal exchange relationship between employees and organizations. While McLeod et al. (2021) focused on exchanging monetary values and resources, Imam and Chambel (2020) emphasized the importance of meeting employee expectations. These perspectives complement each other, as exchanging monetary values can be seen as one method organizations fulfill employee expectations. The reciprocal exchange relationship between employees and organizations involves the exchange of monetary values and resources, and the fulfillment of expectations. Recognizing and fostering the reciprocal exchange relationship is crucial for organizations aiming to optimize employee productivity, satisfaction, and career advancement opportunities. Given the research conducted by Imam and Chambel (2020) and McLeod et al. (2021), organizations may create a positive and mutually beneficial work environment by understanding the interplay between exchanging tangible rewards and fulfilling expectations. Engaged employees with reciprocal benefits may be more likely to contribute positively to an organization and personal goals.

The role of positive relationships, strategic leadership, and identified factors in enhancing employee engagement, productivity, and reciprocal behavior within organizations are crucial. According to Imam and Chambel (2020), positive relationships between employees and their organization lead to increased productivity and positive responses to required organizational behavior. Their research findings emphasized the significance of fostering a favorable work environment and employee satisfaction.

Building on this, Alsunki et al. (2020) found that identifying factors influencing employee engagement and productivity and incorporating them into strategic planning as a foundation for leadership strategies was critically important. By considering these factors, leaders can align their approaches with employee needs, leading to the benefits described in the SET. Additionally, Nachmias et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of determined and committed leadership in establishing effective relationships with employees. Through strategic leadership, leaders can leverage these relationships to enhance employee engagement and productivity, acknowledging the benefits employees receive as rewards for their contributions. Alsunki et al. (2020), Imam and Chambel (2020), and Nachmias et al. (2021) found the significance of positive employee-organization relationships on strategic leadership fostered engagement, productivity, and organizational success. These perspectives underscore the multi-faceted approach required to cultivate productive relationships within organizations and drive employee satisfaction and motivation. Organizations can enhance employee engagement, productivity, and overall success

by nurturing positive employee-organization relationships, incorporating identified factors into strategic planning, and demonstrating determined and committed leadership. Fostering an environment of mutual benefit and understanding, grounded in effective leadership strategies, enables organizations to maximize employee potential and achieve their goals. Managers who follow and include the SET conceptual framework in their strategic planning concept may promote employee engagement and increase productivity.

Understanding factors contributing to employee motivation, participation, and engagement and including organizational strategies in IT organizations is essential for organizational goal achievements. Alsunki et al. (2020) highlighted that understanding these factors can prevent software project design and implementation failures, increasing employee engagement and productivity. Building upon this, Riyanto et al. (2021) revealed that implementing strategies focused on motivation and job satisfaction influenced employee engagement positively, which, in turn, led to increased productivity in their IT-based workplaces. Furthermore, Moro et al. (2021) highlighted the factors that encouraged and satisfied employees in their participating IT organizations. Engaged IT organizations employees advised their leadership to align themselves with their desires and expectations through a supportive leadership strategy, fostering a positive work environment, job satisfaction, and improved engagement and productivity. Alsunki et al. (2020); Moro et al. (2021); and Riyanto et al. (2021) findings converge on the significance of understanding factors, implementing motivation and job satisfaction strategies, and adopting a supportive leadership approach to enhance employee

participation, engagement, and productivity in IT organizations. Alsunki et al. (2020) focused on project success, Riyanto et al. (2021) emphasized the impact of motivation and job satisfaction, and Moro et al. (2021) provided insights into factors that satisfy employees. Alsunki et al. (2020); Moro et al. (2021); and Riyanto et al. (2021) perspectives highlighted the interplay between organizational factors, employee well-being, and overall productivity in the IT sector. By understanding the factors influencing employee engagement, implementing motivation and job satisfaction strategies, and adopting a supportive leadership style, IT organizations can create a positive work environment that fosters job satisfaction, improves employee engagement and productivity, and enhances the success of software projects. Leadership strategy impacts employee engagement, motivation, innovation, creativity, and improved productivity, facilitating the fulfillment of organizational and personal goals as a social exchange between organizational leaders and employees. Supportive leadership strategy and employee perceived benefit per the social exchange principle can contribute to developing and sustaining organizational commitment, employee engagement, and improved productivity.

Relevance of SET in Employee Engagement

Organizational leaders who foster and support a work-life balance culture and create a positive work environment directly influence employee engagement, productivity, and organizational goal success. Employee perception of their manager's support for socioeconomic explicit and implicit value, in return, they will reciprocally support their leaders and organization by working efficiently towards achieving their

goals (Jais & Suat, 2022). Simbula et al. (2023) also described the importance of investing in growing the identification and building of high-quality social exchange-based relationships, values, and contractual obligations. Simbula et al. found this as the center of SET, for enhancing organizational productivity through the investment in human capital. Sunyoto et al. (2021) examined employee engagement as a factor for increased productivity based on SET. The result shows that SET could still be a lens to study the perception of organizational support in predicting employee engagement directly and its positive effect on their productivity (Sunyoto et al., 2021). The presence of positive social exchange between employees and organizational leadership with a balanced work-life result can create a favorable work environment that propels a meaningful psychological environment leading to nurturing, engaged, and productive employees. Such studies revealed that SET is a relevant conceptual framework to study employee engagement as the theory vested based on socioeconomic and psychological leader-member exchange, which is significantly related to and affects employee engagement through such benefit fulfillment strategies (Jais & Suat, 2022; Simbula et al., 2023).

Alternative Supportive Theories

I considered the employee engagement theory (EET) and Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (HNT) theories as possible conceptual frameworks. Although EET and HNT support SET theories, after carefully reviewing each theory, I selected the SET. I rejected EET and HNT because they would not provide data on how to improve employee engagement or how engaging employees in the workplace contributed to

increasing employee engagement and productivity through applying leadership strategies towards employee engagement and increased productivity.

Employee engagement theory

Employee engagement is a vital aspect of business organization productivity, referring to employee commitment, passion, and enthusiasm toward employee and organizational goal achievement from a psychological state perspective. Kahn (1990) and Sahni (2021) explored the concept of EET and its impact on employee engagement and productivity. Kahn (1990) defined EET as expressing employees' physical, cognitive, and emotional selves during role productivity. He identified three physiological conditions influencing engagement: psychological meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Psychological meaningfulness relates to an individual's perception of their value and worth in the workplace. Physiological safety refers to the need for a secure and trustworthy environment, while physiological availability refers to the ability and resources to engage on a personal level. Sahni (2021) supports the notion that EET leads to improved engagement and productivity by describing how engaged and committed employees experience physical, psychological, and emotional excitement at their workplace. Conversely, Kwon and Park (2019) examined the life cycle of EET through an examination of various studies relevant to it. They argued that it is in its early stages and there are other key constructs such as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral factors that influence employee engagement levels. Kwon and Park suggest more significant attention to the practical applications of the employee engagement theory.

These findings collectively contained the importance of EET in fostering a positive work environment, promoting engagement, and achieving organizational goals from an employee performing an assigned role perspective. The underpinning of the EET is that there is an interplay between employee expression, physiological conditions, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement, highlighting its significance in fostering a productive and engaged workforce. However, neglected is the social exchange aspect between employee and employer and its influence on employee engagement. Organizational leadership that prioritizes investments in the improvement of the relationship between employees and their work environment to reduce costs, may enhance the effectiveness of human capital usage and may improve employee engagement and organizational productivity.

Furthering the argument that the EET is primarily suited towards the employee versus social exchange is the notion that organizational leadership is crucial in leveraging the interconnectedness of EET elements' cognitive, emotional, and physical engagement and their impact on employee engagement within the workplace along with the achievement of employees' personal and organizational goals. According to Kahn (1990), cognitive engagement involves employees feeling connected to their work roles and viewing their tasks through a work lens rather than the transaction aspect, leading to increased engagement. Further, Kahn described emotional engagement as an element that influences how an employee thinks and displays high energy levels in response to task accomplishment. Moreover, the physical element of EET refers to the willingness and commitment displayed by

employees to complete assigned tasks. These three elements of EET, cognitive, emotional, and physical engagement, are interconnected and impact an employee's overall engagement with their workplace tasks. Organizational leadership plays a crucial role in understanding and leveraging these elements to achieve personal and organizational goals. As per Kahn, the EET theory has the premise that when employees are psychologically present, they invest their time and energy in their work without expecting immediate social exchange or visible rewards. This understanding of EET can guide leaders in creating an environment that promotes employee engagement and facilitates positive outcomes.

EET is still in its early application stages in the workplace, requiring further understanding and research to enhance employee engagement through leadership strategies and improve organizational productivity. Kwon and Park (2019) found that employee engagement theory (EET) is still in its early stages of formal application in the workplace, primarily due to a need for more practical understanding and knowledge regarding assessing, enhancing, and sustaining employee engagement. They emphasized the need for further research to examine the lifecycle of employee engagement and the interplay of various personal and environmental factors. This knowledge gap is essential for developing more effective practical applications to enhance employee engagement and increase organizational productivity. Building upon this, Sahni (2021) described EET as a framework where fully engaged employees experience satisfaction, productivity, and commitment to their organization. Meaningful work, growth opportunities, supportive management, and a

positive organizational culture drive the state of engagement. Sahni (2021) suggested that fostering employee engagement can lead to increased employee retention. However, because there is a lack of a universal claim for generalization, EET may require additional research to provide comprehensive clarity and validation concerning the relationship between employee engagement and productivity. These insights indicate the importance of understanding how implementing strategies to foster employee engagement contributes to organizational success and employee well-being through other lenses like SET.

EET provides insights into employees' feelings within organizational dynamics and has some limitations compared to SET. While SET includes social interactions, exchanges, and organizational relationships, it also has an ethical construct related to fair treatment and compensation at the organizational level for all employees (Cook et al., 2013). EET tends to focus on an individual employee's experience regarding employee engagement level, commitment, and motivation (Nu Ngoc Ton et al., 2021). EET is limited to emphasizing employee role and assignment accomplishment rather than fair compensation, opportunities for development, and a positive work environment to increase employee engagement and improve productivity and create a reciprocal relationship with the organization.

SET is core to this qualitative multiple case study's purposes is used to help explore leadership strategies that some IT leaders use to increase employee engagement and improve productivity rather than exploring the employee's psychological and emotional level. As a result, the personal psychological and emotional factors an

employee may emphasize cultural or other backgrounds it would be challenging to form a single solution and address the complex interaction of these factors to my qualitative multiple case study. Therefore, the shortcomings of EET would create challenges in developing organizational leadership strategies because the key constructs of EET relate to each employee's psychological needs, detailed as physical, cognitive, and emotional characteristics. This is not the purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs

I considered Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (HNT) as an alternative conceptual theory to understand employee engagement. Maslow's HNT, proposed in 1943, that individuals have a hierarchical structure of needs that must be satisfied sequentially and has significance in understanding human motivation and personal growth. At the pyramid's foundation are the essential physiological needs, such as air, food, and water, followed by safety and security, above the need for belongingness, love, and self-esteem. Yurdakul and Arar (2023) provided a comprehensive discussion on Maslow's classification of human needs into five stages: physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization, highlighting the significance of satisfying each level of needs to progress towards the higher levels, starting with the fulfillment of physical survival. However, Maslow's HNT has faced criticism and scrutiny from professionals and researchers across various disciplines, such as its nature of focusing on individual needs rather than collective or group motivation and growth (Bowen, 2021; Montag et al., 2020; Yurdakul & Arar, 2023). HNT has gained popularity as a theory of human motivation and has been extensively researched,

reviewed, and criticized by professionals and researchers from diverse fields, indicating the enduring impact and relevance of HNT in understanding human motivation and pursuing personal growth.

The physiological needs are the primary and first step in HNT, listing food, water, shelter, clothing, and sleep as the basic needs of human beings to remain alive and sustain life and a base for all other hierarchical needs fulfillment (Maslow, 1943). Organizational leadership should ensure these essential elements for one's existence are satisfied and a conducive work environment to enable employees to meet these needs are identified and detailed in their strategies. Also, HNT defines safety needs as a second level in the hierarchy covering personal security, employment, health, resources, property, family, and morality as significant elements that may affect and influence employee behavior (Maslow, 1943). Safety needs include protection from danger, stability, order, and security while working to meet needs in a safe working environment and perform duties and responsibilities. The third level in HNT, love, and belonging, involves a desire for love, affection, belongingness, acceptance, and connection and the need for friendships, social interaction, and intimacy required after physiological and safety needs in the pyramid (Maslow, 1943), The need to have connection, relationships, and interaction with other persons and groups such as family, social organization, friendship circles, and formal and informal groups are all influenced by this need. Organizational leadership should devise strategies to treat employees, so they feel cared for, loved, and encouraged. Esteem needs refers to the desire for respect, recognition, self-esteem, and feeling vital and valued by others, as

well as the need to feel self-confident and respected by oneself (Maslow, 1943). The fourth level in HNT, self-esteem, ensures a sense of self-value and appreciation of individual worth in society. The final level in Maslow's HNT, self-actualization needs, is described by Maslow (1943) as the highest level, which involves the desire to reach one's full potential, to become all one can become, and the need for personal growth, creativity, self-fulfillment, and a sense of purpose. Self-actualization, the basis of one's motivation to achieve the need, makes organizational employees creative and develops their capabilities and knowledge to reach their full potential. Self-actualization will be met only after meeting physiological, safety, love, belonging, and esteem. Organizational leaders should assign job activities and create an opportunity and environment for employees to self-actualize.

Researchers criticized and discussed the limitations of Maslow's HNT on the nature of needs and the lack of consideration of societal needs during extreme life situations, its validity across different contexts, its sequential approach, and its oversight of individual potential and environmental factors (Bowen, 2021; Montag et al., 2020; Yurdakul & Arar, 2023). These critical perspectives emphasized the need for a more comprehensive and acceptable understanding of human motivation and needs, considering contextual and individual factors when applying HNT. Yurdakul and Arar (2023) questioned the strict hierarchical nature of needs. They argued that it fails to consider societal needs during extreme life situations while raising concerns about the theory's validity across different cultural, age, gender, and income contexts. Montag et al. (2020) further criticized the theory's sequential approach, asserting that

individuals may have different natural and cultural differences that affect the satisfaction of their needs. Additionally, Bowen (2021) pointed out that Maslow's theory of self-actualization overlooks individual potential and environmental factors in motivation and fulfillment, suggesting that HNT bases its assumption on a materialistic framework. These critical perspectives highlight the need to consider contextual and individual factors when applying HNT, indicating that a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of human motivation and needs is required. The critical perspectives on Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory highlight the need for a more comprehensive understanding that considers contextual and individual factors, questions the theory's strict hierarchical nature and sequential approach, validates the factors across diverse contexts, and explores the oversight of individual potential and environmental factors.

Organizational employees come from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, need different motivational factors, and may need to follow different structures and steps as they move up the hierarchy, get engaged, and fulfill their needs. Therefore, the limitations of HNT in understanding employee engagement factors may put this qualitative multiple case study's validity and reliability in question. Therefore, HNT was not an appropriate conceptual framework to explore the strategies some IT leaders used to increase employee engagement and improve productivity.

Employee Engagement

There are research studies conducted to explore and recommend frameworks for engagement with varying constructs. Al Mehrzi and Singh (2016) examined

literature related to engagement. They proposed a comprehensive framework that would address the engagement factors such as the connectedness of, leaders, teams, perceived organizational support (POS), and the organization's culture. While Al Mehrzi and Singh (2016) suggested tangible and non-tangible elements that impact an individual's motivation to stay engaged; Kleinaltenkamp et al. (2019) suggested a framework of with a customer focus and those impacting the customer experience. Kleinaltenkamp et al. (2019) defined collective engagement as comprising the individual, collective (i.e., size, and organizational occupation), tasks, and inter-organizational relationships such external entities such as supply chain individuals, vendors, and other strategic alliance groups. Al Mehrzi and Singh (2016) proposed their framework as necessary for practitioners to engage employees and motivate them toward organizational growth and sustainability through understanding the underlying causes of disengagement that have a connection to individuals' emotions, cognitive processes, and or physical or outward influences. Kleinaltenkamp et al. (2019) argued that organizational employees and teams working on projects interact and engage within and across internal and external entities at the individual and collective levels through their interactions, thoughts, and enthusiasm, significantly influencing innovative organizational project overall success.

Moreover, Kleinaltenkamp et al. (2019) research result shows propositions of the multidirectional nature of engagement and offers mechanisms to consider emotions in organizational business actors' engagement as its emerging central concept, which depends on their social connections with other actors and the roles

that link them. Understanding of factors affecting employee engagement from emotional, cognitive, and physical aspects by organizational leadership will help to devise a framework, strategies, and mechanisms and implement clearly defined engaging strategies through employees and their interaction with other individuals and teams towards organizational growth and sustainability in exchange to individual goal success. Therefore, understanding factors causing employee disengagement and defining and implementing leadership strategies will help employees engage fully and be productive.

Employee engagement at a group and individual level is a compelling motivation for increased productivity and organizational success through inter-related work and group characteristics like organizational cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors. Sunyoto et al. (2021) examined the effect of engagement on group belongingness and attachment to their organization based on SET and how to improve productivity, showing that the perception of organizational support directly predicted group engagement and organizational productivity. To provide insight concerning the associations of job crafting and workplace civility with work engagement and its corresponding outcomes, such as change perception, general life satisfaction, and intention to quit, Gupta and Singh (2020) argued that organizational leadership should design employee-related strategies to boost engagement and subsequent outcomes like the feeling of belongingness, achieving productivity, and organizational goal. When employees perceive organizational and leadership support at the individual or group level, it creates a feeling of belongingness, appreciation,

and obligation to care about the organization in achieving its goal and increase their productivity, coupled with organizational loyalty and attachment. Organizational leadership should have a strategy to support employees' engagement, improve their productivity, attach themselves to their organization, and be willing to change their perception of the organization in exchange for the benefit and reward coming from their efforts.

Organizational leadership style coupled with employee sense of deservingness affects their contribution and engagement to the organization. Joplin et al. (2019) investigated the implications of employee entitlement in organizational settings under conditions of low ethical leadership and how reductions in engagement explain hindered job productivity and demonstrate that employee entitlement interferes with work engagement, resulting in lower job productivity. Eldor (2021) presented a value-creation organizational leadership model that could help address the low level of engagement caused by employee entitlement discussed by Joplin et al. (2019) through organizational leadership, like leading by example, as a strategy to motivate and improve employee engagement, productivity, and service quality. When employees feel entitled to special or unique treatment, there needs to be a clear leadership style like high ethical leadership or leadership through an example for employees to feel compelled and motivated to work hard for their organization based on their role. Leaders should consider factors that may reduce employee engagement and design strategies to understand whether and why employee entitlement negatively affects

employee engagement and productivity and how organizations can prevent its unhealthy consequences.

Types of Employee Engagement

With fierce competition and ever-changing business practices, the business environmental requirements for organizations are to implement various engagement and survival strategies. Okazaki et al. (2019) examined the association between working hours, work engagement, and productivity, and the findings indicated a positive relationship between work engagement and work productivity. This research finding suggests that highly engaged employees tend to be more productive and highlights the importance of sound and appropriate organizational leadership in supporting work engagement and productivity. Effective leadership strategies are crucial for creating a work environment that fosters engagement and maximizes productivity. Furthermore, Anwar and Abdullah (2021) studied the impact of human resource management strategy on employee productivity in a rapidly changing economic environment coupled with factors such as globalization, stakeholder demands, and increased competition. Anwar and Abdullah (2021) found that decentralization, which involves distributing decision-making authority and associated strategies throughout the organization, is positively associated with engaged employee productivity and organizational success. This finding implies that empowering employees by engaging them in decision-making autonomy can increase motivation and belonging and improve productivity and organizational outcomes. Overall, valuable insight is needed into strategies and factors influencing employee

productivity and organizational success. Okazaki et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of work engagement and effective leadership, while Anwar and Abdullah (2021) highlighted the positive impact of decentralization on engaged employee productivity. Combining these findings suggests that organizations that prioritize strategies that foster work engagement, provide sound and appropriate leadership, and consider decentralization to empower employees and drive productivity in a rapidly changing economic landscape may increase their organizational success, however, these elements (i.e., effective work engagement, effective leadership, and decentralization related to employee productivity) are absent in many organizational strategies.

Swift and effective work engagement processes can positively affect individual and organizational outcomes. An expeditious engagement process often helps fuel engagement levels and the transition of employee engagement toward work productivity. Vogel et al. (2022) investigated and explained the rate of engagement in terms of how quickly an employee gets engaged and starts working and its impact on productivity and employee psychological processes. Vogel et al. (2022) found that organizations that capitalize on a quick transition and engagement to work through proactive steps that reattach employees to their work, increase engagement speed, and often lead to productive days at work. Similarly, Riyanto et al. (2021) argued that organizations need the active engagement of employees through motivational encouragement and job satisfaction and improve their productivity towards achieving an organizational competitive advantage when they

obtain support from their leadership who have clearly defined their strategy. The studies by Vogel et al. (2022) and Riyanto et al. (2021) underlined the significance of employee engagement in driving productivity and organizational success. These researchers emphasized the importance of organizations prioritizing strategies and initiatives to facilitate a rapid and effective transition to work, promoting employee motivation and job satisfaction, and providing leadership support. By doing so, organizations may enhance employee engagement, productivity, and competitiveness. A leadership strategy that facilitates and plays a significant role in motivating and encouraging employees' engagement with a speedy transition to optimum work productivity that helps to achieve an organization's goal is invaluable.

Researchers found other factors that may help leaders prioritize initiatives that foster employee engagement, create supportive and engaging work environments, and may lead to organizational success. Raza and Hasan (2021) focused on how an employee's demographic profile influences their engagement with the organization and the leadership's ability to implement effective strategies to increase productivity. Raza and Hasan found that employee commitment and productivity tend to increase with factors such as age, education, position, seniority, and compensation and suggested that older employees, more educated, hold higher positions, have more experience, and receive better compensation exhibit higher levels of engagement and productivity. It is crucial to track and understand employee engagement in daily activities to create an environment where engaged employees feel connected and work with passion, dedication, and innovation. Instead, Nu Ngoc Ton et al. (2021)

investigated the factors driving employee engagement in organizational brand value co-creation that are crucial in driving customer satisfaction and loyalty. Engaged employees contribute positively to generating and creating brand values during service encounters. Engaged employees who feel included in company decision-making processes show improved productivity it is essential to engage employees in building brand values, as their knowledge about the brand and active contribution are critical to successfully delivering the brand promise to customers and contributing to overall organizational success. Raza and Hasan focused on how demographic factors influence employee commitment and productivity. In contrast, Nu Ngoc Ton et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of engaged employees in driving brand value co-creation and customer satisfaction. However, both arrived at a similar conclusion: employee engagement's importance in organizational success. There is growing discourse and the need for organizational leaders to underscore the importance of fostering employee engagement, creating a supportive work environment, and involving employees in building brand values for organizational success. Employees' perception of the benefits they gain from participating in organization-wide activities and leader-member relationships can influence their level of engagement. Koch et al. (2019) investigated employees' perceived benefits from participating in an organization's corporate social responsibility (CSR) SR activities shedding light on the direct relationship between perceived benefits and engagement in organization-wide activities like CSR. Also, Koch et al. (2019) examined the level of engagement and the reciprocal relationship between the perception of benefits and participation at

different cognitive and behavioral levels. Koch et al. (2019) found that employees perceived their participation and benefits differently at various participation levels. Xie et al. (2020) examined the effects of the leader-member relationship on creative productivity and explored the attitudinal and emotional processes through which this relationship impacts creative productivity. Xie et al. uncovered that a high-quality leader-member relationship increased positive employee mood, improved creative productivity, and stimulated intrinsic motivation for engagement and productivity improvement. Organizations that strategically train their leaders to demonstrate high-quality leader-member exchange and foster positive leader-member relationships tend to enhance employee engagement, creativity, and work productivity.

Koch et al. (2019) and Xie et al. studies highlighted employee engagement through activities that build relationships using other factors. Koch et al.'s (2019) study focuses on the perceived benefits and engagement levels of employees participating in CSR activities, emphasizing the importance of employees' perception of the benefits they receive. Xie et al.'s study accentuated the significance of leader-member relationships in influencing employee mood, creative productivity, and intrinsic motivation. Organizations may need to consider promoting employee engagement through strategic approaches, such as enhancing the perceived benefits of participation in CSR activities and fostering positive leader-member relationships.

Fostering positive social relationships and organizational interactions can impact employee engagement and productivity, creating a constructive reciprocal exchange. Zoller and Muldoon (2019) propose SET as a management theory based on

the findings of Hawthorne's experiments which demonstrated the effect of social situations on productivity and productivity. Zoller and Muldoon (2019) suggest that SET creates sincere feelings of affiliation and trust between groups and individuals with mutual dependencies. When individuals perceive positive social exchanges in the workplace, such as trust and support, they are more likely to be engaged and productive. Similarly, Žnidaršič and Bernik (2021) investigated the impact of work-life balance on employee engagement and productivity, describing that a work-life balance principle, when defined in leadership strategies and principles, positively affects work-life balance. Žnidaršič and Bernik (2021) also suggested that work-life balance as a leadership strategy may lead to increased employee engagement and a positive perception of the organization's work-family balance support. Organizational leaders can strengthen employee engagement by implementing policies and practices defined in the strategic plan for employee engagement and work-family balance support, positively influencing employee behavior, enhancing productivity, and creating a constructive reciprocal exchange. Zoller and Muldoon (2019) and Žnidaršič and Bernik (2021) recognized the importance of positive organizational factors influencing employee engagement and productivity. Zoller and Muldoon (2019) focused on the role of SET and how it creates feelings of affiliation and trust. At the same time, Žnidaršič and Bernik (2021) emphasized the impact of work-life balance and leadership strategies. These are other factors researchers found that enhanced employee engagement and productivity.

Successful Employee Engagement

Engaged employees with dedication, absorption, and vigor contribute to organizational success. This organizational success was obtained by leveraging the positive relationship between employee engagement and productivity. At the same time, leadership strategies fostered job meaningfulness, and enhanced emotional, psychological, and cognitive engagement, which resulted in improved productivity. Obuobisa-Darko (2020) highlighted the significance of engaged employees and their positive impact on organizational success. Dedication, absorption, and vigor characterized engaged employees at their workplace. Using the SET as the lens to understand the relationship between engagement and productivity, Obuobisa-Darko found that the complex and positive relationship between employee engagement and productivity, contributed significantly to an organization's success. The researchers found that the key constructs of trust, loyalty, and mutual commitments were significant factors. Conversely, using SET, Panda et al. (2021) examined the effect of leadership strategies and employee engagement on the relationship between job meaningfulness and productivity. Panda et al. found leadership strategies crucial in creating a motivating context for employees. When employees perceived their jobs as meaningful and their leaders supported their perception, they were more likely to be emotionally, psychologically, and cognitively engaged, which improved organizational productivity. Obuobisa-Darko (2020) and Panda et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of employee engagement for organizational success. Obuobisa-Darko (2020) focused on the key constructs of the SET and the impact on

employees' productivity, emphasizing the role of trust and loyalty in the employee-organization relationship.

While Obuobisa-Darko (2020) presented a broader perspective on employee engagement through tangible and non-tangible aspects of relationships and their connection to organizational productivity, Panda et al. (2021) highlighted the specific role of leadership strategies and the meaningfulness of work. Both researchers emphasized the need for leadership support and a motivating context to foster employee engagement and enhance productivity. Obuobisa-Darko (2020) and Panda et al. (2021) found the importance of employee engagement, trust, meaningful work, and effective leadership strategies in driving productivity and organizational success. Employee engagement, trust, meaningful work, and effective leadership strategies are necessary for organizations explicitly highlighting the need to comprehensively understand these factors influencing engagement and its consequences for successful organizational outcomes. While these factors tend to influence employee engagement and the work of Obuobisa-Darko (2020) validated the key constructs of the SET, no emphasis was placed on intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors.

Pay for productivity and factors such as training, development, work environment, and job satisfaction directly and positively impact employee engagement, retention, and productivity, improving organizational productivity and perception. Purnama et al. (2022) examined the relationship between employee engagement and pay for productivity using the SET lens and found that when their participant organizations provided compensation and rewards for high performers, it

directly correlated with increased employee engagement and productivity. It further explained that when employees feel valued through reward systems, they are more likely to reciprocate by remaining in the organization for extended periods and producing higher output. Similarly, Xuecheng et al. (2022) focused on the relationship between training and development, work environment, job satisfaction, employee retention, and engagement using SET and highlighted the direct and positive relationship between these factors. Xuecheng et al. (2022) argued that providing training and development opportunities fostered a positive work environment, and enhanced job satisfaction, thus contributing to increased employee engagement, retention, and productivity, leading to an improved perception of the organization within the industry it is competing and participating. Purnama et al. (2022) and Xuecheng et al. (2022) explained the importance of analyzing the relationship between various factors and employee engagement through the SET conceptual framework. However, they differed in their specific focus. Purnama et al. (2022) emphasized the impact of productivity pay and the role of rewards in fostering employee engagement and productivity; while, Xuecheng et al. (2022) explored the effects of training and development, work environment, and job satisfaction on employee retention, engagement, and productivity. More research may provide valuable insights into how organizations can enhance engagement and improve productivity and industry perception through theories such as the SET or similar theories.

Employee entitlement and low ethical leadership negatively impact employee engagement and job productivity. Adopting a value-creation organizational leadership style that prioritizes alignment with the organization's core values, and leading by example can positively influence employee engagement, productivity, and service quality. Joplin et al. (2019) conducted an extensive investigation into the consequences of employee entitlement within organizations that lack ethical leadership, focusing on how reduced engagement hindered job productivity, revealing a significant negative relationship between employee entitlement and work engagement, resulting in lower overall employee productivity. Joplin et al. (2019) found that when employees felt entitled and their entitled behaviors were unaddressed, their engagement levels diminished, adversely affecting their productivity. In contrast, Eldor (2021) presented a value-creation organizational leadership model with the premise of leading by example as a strategic approach to enhance employee engagement, productivity, and service quality. The researcher emphasized the importance of organizational core values, indicating that when leaders exemplify and promote them, it positively influences employee engagement and subsequent outcomes. By aligning leadership actions with the organization's core values, Eldor's model aimed to foster a work environment that motivated the employees to be more engaged, productive, and service-oriented. Comparatively, Joplin et al. focused on the detrimental impact of employee entitlement, highlighting the negative relationship between entitlement and work engagement. Both studies provide insights into employee outcomes, with Joplin et al. shedding light on the

consequences of entitlement and Eldor highlighting the benefits of leading by example and value-driven leadership. These studies offer contrasting perspectives on the factors influencing employee engagement and productivity within organizational settings that may need further research to identify aligning factors as part of organizational leadership strategies leading toward successful goal achievements.

Organizations focusing on IT-based solutions and service delivery recognize the critical role of skilled and engaged employees in driving project success and productivity. Alsunki et al. (2020) identified and categorized various factors contributing to project success. These factors include organizational development, organization environment, personal and group characteristics, and process and project characteristics that collectively shape employee engagement, participation, and skills required for effective project outcomes. Consistent with Alsunki et al. (2020), Mutsuddi and Sinha (2021) emphasized the importance of managing IT employees using personal and group characteristics through leadership skills and team strategies. The researchers highlighted the significance of digital skills, adaptability, teamwork, and collaboration in motivating and engaging employees to acquire and adopt new digital technologies. By cultivating subject matter expertise and embracing emerging technologies, IT organizations can gain a competitive edge in the dynamic IT industry. When comparing these two studies, both Alsunki et al. (2020) and Mutsuddi and Sinha (2021) recognize the crucial role of employees in IT organizations and the need for their engagement and skill development. Alsunki et al. (2020) provide a comprehensive framework of factors influencing project success, encompassing

various organizational and individual aspects. Differing slightly, Mutsuddi and Sinha (2021) focused on leadership skills, teamwork, and digital competencies as drivers of employee motivation and engagement. While Alsunki et al. (2020) consider a broader range of factors, Mutsuddi and Sinha (2021) focused on the specific competencies and strategies needed for IT organizations to thrive in a competitive environment. Both studies highlight the significance of employee engagement and skill development but approach the topic differently. Organizational leadership research insight into the multifaceted nature of managing and motivating employees in IT organizations, emphasizing the importance of a comprehensive approach to foster success in the industry is critically needed.

Goswami et al. (2020) studied ethical leadership within IT organizations, examining how employees perceive this leadership style based on individual characteristics and revealed that perceptions of ethical leadership varied across age, work experience, management level, industry, and sector, but not across gender or member qualification arguing that individual attributes such as age and work experience influence employees' understanding of ethical leadership. In contrast, Moro et al. (2021) focused on identifying factors that encourage and satisfy employees in the United States IT organizations to guide leadership in aligning strategies to meet employees' desires and expectations and found that positive coworker attitudes and supportive leadership strategies contribute to a positive work environment, job satisfaction, and employee engagement. While Goswami et al. (2020) specifically explored perceptions of ethical leadership with a focus on individual characteristics, Moro et al. (2021) examined factors

that encouraged and satisfied IT employees and emphasized the role of coworker attitudes and leadership strategies. Goswami et al. (2020) delved into the nuances of ethical leadership perception; in contrast, Moro et al. (2021) took a broader perspective by considering multiple factors contributing to employee satisfaction and engagement. Both studies shed light on the importance of leadership in IT organizations highlighting the need to consider individual characteristics when understanding ethical leadership perceptions, positive coworker attitudes, and supportive leadership strategies. Additional research is needed to address organizations' need to create suitable leadership practices, foster a positive work environment, and address employee desires and expectations to enhance their engagement and satisfaction within their industry.

Factors Influencing Employee Engagement

Some researchers found a positive cultural relationship between leaders and employees and a supportive organizational culture contributed to employees' adherence to organizational procedures and rules, enhancing their work engagement and employee productivity. Insan and Masmarulan (2021) conducted a study to examine how the cultural relationship between organizational leaders and employees enhances employee productivity aiming to analyze factors influencing work engagement, such as organizational culture and leader-member exchange. Insan and Masmarulan (2021) found that a quality relationship between leaders and employees, combined with a positive organizational culture, significantly impacts work engagement and employee productivity, attributing to the employees' enthusiastic adherence to organizational procedures and rules when carrying out work-related

tasks. Similarly, Mohanty and P (2020) explored applying SET to gain insights into employee engagement, investigating the influence of organizational culture, co-worker trust, supervisor trust, and organizational trust on employee engagement. The researchers revealed that these four factors affect organizational resources, which, in turn, have varying effects on employee engagement and organizational culture. Mohanty and P emphasized the importance of creating an environment of trust between leadership and employees to establish a supportive organizational culture fostering employee engagement. Insan and Masmarulan (2021) emphasized the significance of the cultural relationship between leaders and employees and the role of organizational culture in enhancing work engagement and employee productivity. Consistent with Insan and Masmarulan (2021), Mohanty and P (2020) highlighted the importance of organizational culture and differed slightly by examining key factors such as co-worker trust, supervisor trust, and organizational trust in influencing employee engagement and organizational resources. Both studies underscored the necessity of establishing a trusting environment between leadership and employees to cultivate a supportive organizational culture that effectively supports employee engagement which some organizations lack, and my study is going to identify from organizational leadership who successfully implemented engagement strategies and improved productivity.

Organizations must understand factors that motivate employees and cultivate a supportive environment to encourage commitment and engagement. Sahni (2021) employed the SET to explore the impact of employee engagement on job satisfaction,

organizational commitment, and employees' intentions to quit, recognizing its crucial role in organizational sustainability and success. Sahni (2021) argued that leadership strategies fostering effective employee engagement create a mutually beneficial dynamic, as employees experience a positive sense of meaningful work and are inspired to dedicate their energy and effort toward achieving organizational goals. Similarly, Tan et al. (2021) utilized the SET framework to construct a model that examined the relationship between abusive peer leadership, external perceptions of organizational support, creativity, and the impact of organizational leadership strategies in addressing these factors. The study revealed that a solid supervisory embodiment within the organization could mitigate the adverse effects of abusive leadership on employee engagement, creativity, and organizational perception. Tan et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of organizational leadership in managing these dynamics to promote a positive work environment and foster employee engagement, creativity, and a positive perception of the organization. Both Sahni (2021) and Tan et al. (2021) utilized the SET to explore different aspects of employee engagement and its relationship with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intentions to quit, abusive peer leadership, external perceptions of organizational support, creativity, and organizational perception. Conducting studies underscoring the critical role of effective leadership strategies and organizational support in fostering employee engagement, commitment, creativity, and positive organizational perceptions through leadership strategies is critical. There may be opportunities for their studies to be replicated in different sectors to validate similar outcomes.

Organizational transparency, strategic planning, proper systems, and monetary incentives significantly impact employee engagement, motivation, and overall business effectiveness. Nu Ngoc Ton et al. (2021) focused on organizational transparency as a critical factor that could positively and significantly affect employee engagement, life satisfaction, work-life balance, and productivity. The researchers emphasized how different groups within an organization can effectively collaborate to achieve goals and objectives through internal public relations, gradually fostering employee engagement and a sense of connection to their tasks and the organization. Uka and Prendi (2021) contrastingly examined the role of organizational leadership in developing a strategic plan and system to identify factors. The factors that positively influenced employee motivation and engagement, that led to improved engagement and productivity were related to monetary value and allowances, higher salaries, bonuses, and role promotions. While Nu Ngoc Ton et al. (2021) and Uka and Prendi (2021) explored factors related to employee engagement, Nu Ngoc Ton et al. (2021) focused on organizational transparency. In contrast, Uka and Prendi concentrate on the role of leadership and monetary incentives. Nu Ngoc Ton et al. (2021) and Uka and Prendi (2021) suggested more research on how organizations can enhance employee engagement through transparent practices and a strategic approach considering motivational factors and monetary rewards.

Better leadership styles and approaches foster solid emotional attachment, motivation, and trust between leaders and employees, promoting healthy relationships and creating a supportive work environment that encourages employee commitment,

engagement, productivity, and innovation. Geibel and Otto (2022) and Zhou et al. (2022) conducted separate studies on leadership styles and their impact on employee engagement and productivity. Geibel and Otto focused on transformational leadership, emphasizing its role in enhancing employee engagement and productivity. They highlighted the importance of practical commitment and transformational behavior driven by an organization's sense of belonging and emotional attachment. The researchers emphasized that practical commitment and engagement are crucial in promoting transformational leadership, as they foster healthy relationships and motivation and inspire employees to align their beliefs, needs, and values toward organizational change, high productivity, and innovation. Unlike Geibel and Otto, Zhou et al. examined positive leadership and its influence on work engagement. They explored the impact of leadership style on work engagement using the SET and demonstrated a positive and trust-based relationship between leadership and employee engagement. Zhou et al. argued that leadership styles such as servant leadership enhance employee belongingness, motivation, engagement, and productivity. They emphasized the importance of organizational strategies focused on building trust, creating a sense of safety, comfortable engagement, and acknowledging employees' needs. Both studies highlight the significance of leadership in driving employee engagement, productivity, and organizational success, with Geibel and Otto focusing on transformational leadership and Zhou et al. emphasizing positive leadership and the importance of trust in the leader-employee relationship. There are opportunities for organizational leaders to identify and implement suitable leadership styles to

enhance employee engagement and productivity that foster trust, belongingness, and motivation, leading to increased engagement, productivity, and organizational success.

Leadership styles like ethical leadership, supervisor support, and flexible leadership strategies positively impact employee engagement, organizational commitment, and productivity while reducing adverse outcomes such as employee withdrawal behavior, low commitment, and reduced competitiveness. Alam et al. (2021) investigated the impact of perceived supervisor support on the relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement, focusing on the IT industry, and found that ethical leadership, coupled with supervisor support, plays a crucial role in fostering organizational commitment and employee engagement, leading to improved productivity. Positive perceptions of leadership accurately correlate with increased employee engagement, organizational commitment, efficiency, inventiveness, and competitiveness, while negatively relating to employee withdrawal behavior, low organizational commitment, and reduced competitiveness. Alam et al. (2021) emphasized the significance of ethical leadership and the need to pay attention to the perception of leaders by their employees. Similarly, Aun et al. (2019) examined how different leadership styles impact employee productivity and commitment to address the challenges posed by poor innovation and productivity resulting from inadequate leadership interventions. They revealed a positive and significant relationship between leadership style and employee productivity. Aun et al. suggested that flexible leadership strategies that effectively engage employees have a more

significant impact on increasing employee engagement and productivity. Both studies underscore the importance of leadership style, with Alam et al. emphasizing the role of ethical leadership and supervisor support. Likewise, Aun et al. highlighted the effectiveness of flexible leadership strategies in enhancing employee engagement and productivity. Transformational leadership enhances employee engagement and productivity by fostering commitment, healthy relationships, motivation, and alignment with organizational goals. Meanwhile, positive leadership styles like servant leadership increased employee belongingness, motivation, engagement, and productivity through trust, safety, and support for employees' needs.

Work-family-supporting leadership strategies and organizational culture positively impact work-family balance, job satisfaction, employee engagement, and commitment. Han and McLean (2020) and Sabastian (2021) explored the impact of leadership strategies on various aspects of employee well-being and productivity. Han and McLean (2020) focused on the effect of family-supporting leadership strategy and organizational culture on work-family balance, job satisfaction, employee engagement, and commitment in IT-based organizations. Their findings demonstrate that a family-supportive leadership strategy positively influences work-to-family balance, organizational work-family climate, job satisfaction, and employee engagement, increasing employee attraction, retention, and satisfaction. Contrasting with the research of Han and McLean, Sabastian (2021) investigated the influence of leadership strategy and motivation on employee productivity in business organizations. Leadership strategies, specifically family-supporting and work-life-based organizational leadership

styles, positively impact work-family balance, job satisfaction, employee engagement, commitment, and employee motivation and productivity in business organizations. Han and McLean's (2020) and Sabastian's (2021) findings emphasize the significance of effective leadership strategies in promoting employee well-being, engagement, and productivity and the need for more research on leadership strategies to motivate employee engagement and productivity which needs additional research and using different conceptual frameworks as a lens.

Transition

Section 1's objective was to introduce the problem's research background, purpose statement, research and interview questions, and the study's conceptual framework. I validated the use of SET as a framework for the study to investigate the successful strategies of IT organizations in the Washington DC metro area of the United States that successfully increased employee engagement following the implementation of their leadership strategies through the literature review. I reviewed professional and academic literature on employee engagement-related topics in the literature review and critically analyzed and synthesized the study's conceptual framework. I identified common themes related to employee engagement. I reviewed the potential implications of employee engagement in IT-based organizations on employee and organizational productivity. In addition, I discussed the study's assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and significance.

Section 2 describes the study's purpose, researcher's role, credible participants, research method, design, data collection instruments, organization techniques, and analysis process. In this qualitative multiple case study, I also discussed population,

sampling, ethical research, data saturation, and steps for ensuring research reliability, validity, dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

In section 3, I reiterate the purpose of the study and provide a summary of the findings of this study. I present this study's specific findings, discuss their applicability to professional business practice, and describe the implications for social change. I also include recommendations for action, further research, reflections, and conclusions.

Section 2: The Project

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore leadership strategies that some IT organization leaders use to increase employee engagement and improve productivity. The targeted population comprised three business leaders from three IT organizations in the Washington DC metro area of the United States, who successfully increased employee engagement following the implementation of their leadership strategies. The implications for positive social change include the potential for business leaders to gain knowledge to implement strategies for employee engagement, which could reduce the cost of training new employees, ensure quality products, and, through consistency of workers, improve customer relations of the communities they serve.

Role of the Researcher

In a qualitative research study, researchers do not use formal instruments to collect data; instead, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument (Silverman, 2019). The critical role of the researcher is to generate data by obtaining access to participants, assembling data, organizing the research study, collecting and analyzing data, maintaining the data, and reporting the findings through interviews with study participants and following appropriate interview protocols (Chen et al., 2020). The role of the researcher begins by reviewing the earlier literature to gain a deeper understanding of the research topic and ensure the ethical conduct of the research process (Cumyn et al., 2018). I was the primary data collection instrument. Furthermore, I interviewed IT

leaders in the Washington DC metro area, selected appropriate research methods and design for the study, and chose study participants regarding strategies to increase employee engagement and improve productivity in the IT sector. As a researcher in the study with a clearly defined role, I conducted and controlled all phases of the study, including: (a) collecting and analyzing professional and peer-reviewed literature on employee engagement, productivity, successful IT leaders strategies, and conceptual theories related to SET (b) formulating interview questions and conducting the semistructured interview with selected study participants (c) synthesizing, transcribing, coding, analyzing collected data, conducting follow up meetings with participants (d) and immersing myself with all the processes related to the study and its topic. I ensured that the correct data was collected and interpreted correctly using member checking to validate my interpretation of the participants' data.

I worked for over 20 years in the IT sector at multiple levels, including ten-plus years in a leadership role. I have relevant experience related to IT, leadership strategies, and employee engagement related to my study topic. However, the participants were not those with whom I had a personal or professional relationship. My experience and familiarity with the Washington DC metro area aided in finding organizations for identifying leaders meeting the study's criteria. A researcher should follow an ethical guide while conducting social research in privacy laws, data protection, regulations enforced in guidance and codes and the researcher's moral obligation to participants to ensure data integrity and security of sensitive data (Mallia, 2019).

Regarding ethical principles of research studies, Mallia (2019) discussed The Belmont Report protocol as a guide for ethical research on humans with three identified central tenets (respect for persons, beneficence, and justice); respect for person refers to informed consent (Appendix B), beneficence refers to the principle of doing what is respectable in a way that causes no harm and increases the possible benefits while lessening possible adverse events, and justice requires equal treatment and fairness for all individuals that all researchers should adhere to. As an ethical researcher, I followed and respected the ethical standards in The Belmont Report, starting with getting participants' consent, exercising fairness in selecting participants, and assessing their participation's benefits and risks.

Researchers may have personal biases or previous experiences that they need to mitigate and may influence how they interpret research data (Silverman, 2019). Silverman also discussed that preconceptions might lead to swaying toward supporting evidence and away from evidence contrary to the study's purpose, which can be avoided by conducting ethical research. Furthermore, trustworthy researchers should have credibility, dependability, conformity, transferability, and authenticity as characteristics (Ellsworth, 2021). In addition, using data collection techniques from existing and case studies with related topics further reduces the risk of researcher bias (Romano et al., 2021). To maintain objectivity and mitigate bias, I ensured that research data was not interpreted through a personal worldview and that all data collected during the study collection was accepted. I also selected participants with no current or previous personal or professional relationships to reduce personal bias. In addition, I incorporated member

checking into my study by providing participants with my interpretation of their responses to interview questions and asking participants to verify the accuracy of my interpretations. Assumptions and limitations of the study are documented to allow the reader to evaluate the reliability and validity of the study.

Researchers use interview protocol tools to promote continuity, reduce bias, and allow a researcher to process each participant with the same questions and guidelines and create reliability and validity based on the view and experience of the participant (Silverman, 2019). An interview protocol as a procedural guide may include information such as interview procedures, a script of the introduction and the conclusion, and prompts for extending the conversation (Merlo et al., 2020). As a researcher, I ensured that I consistently and accurately provided each participant with the same information and used an interview protocol (Appendix C) to guarantee that the steps I followed were the same for each participant.

Participants

Identifying credible participants who could provide appropriate, honest, and suitable responses should happen before the data collection. Participants are the subject of the study, providing critical information on a research topic based on informed consent to participate in the research (Rainer & Wohlin, 2022). In addition, the researcher should identify suitable organizations to work with and participants willing to share their views on the research study topic. Obtaining participant viewpoints and accurately portraying their experiences are essential to qualitative research (Slettebø, 2020). The Belmont Report (1979) strongly emphasizes the researcher's role in data gathering to protect study

participants. People should be free to decide whether to participate in the study (Wendler, 2020). The researcher is responsible for letting the participant know whether there could be any adverse effects from providing information or participating in the research study.

Data were collected from three purposefully sampled IT organization leaders from three organizations in the Washington DC metro area of the United States who had successfully implemented strategies to increase employee engagement and improve productivity. The eligibility criteria for selecting participants were: (a) over the age of 18 years; (b) IT leaders who had at least worked for five years; (c) had leadership experience and implemented strategies that improved employee engagement; (d) strategic decision makers in roles like project managers, program managers, or IT directors; (e) willing to participate; and (f) able to sign the consent form. I shared the study participation invitations to a Washington DC metro area-based IT professional group and asked the group members to share the invitation with those who successfully implemented IT employee engagement strategies. I selected IT organizational leaders in the Washington DC metro area to participate in the study. The selected IT organizational leaders fulfilled the criteria to participate in the study and were willing to share their experiences to benefit the study.

After obtaining pre-approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB; approval no. 08-18-23-1114647), I used the Washington DC Metro area-based IT professional group to gain access to research participants. I posted the research participation invitation letter to the group. As the IRB pre-approval allows people or groups to share the invitation letter with others, I also asked all members to share it with

their circles. According to Chambers et al. (2020), utilizing social media and group recruitment provides a targeted approach to accessing specific audience segments. In addition, I asked some members personally over the phone and email to share the invitation letter with others.

According to Webber-Ritchey et al. (2021), trusted social networks and private learning groups have been found to reduce recruitment time effectively. Furthermore, Wong et al. (2020) suggested that social media and groups are viable methods for locating research participants. These findings highlighted the potential benefits of utilizing social networks and online platforms in recruitment. Once I got some volunteers for participation from multiple IT organizational leaders, I distributed the invitation letter (Appendix A) and informed consent forms (Appendix B) from Walden IRB to the volunteers. The informed consent (Appendix B) includes the purpose of the study, the privacy of research individuals, possible risks and benefits, and withdrawal rights, making it a vital part of ethical research. Glegg (2018) explained that it is essential to safeguard participants' well-being by adhering to standard ethical principles and respecting the participant's privacy and confidentiality.

In the current study, it was essential to inform each participant that the information shared would be confidential and that any shared organizational data and personal information would be protected to avoid harm to the participant and the company. I maintained honest, respectful, and professional communication with each participant and avoided infusing personal bias. I established trust by providing each participant with detailed information before the interviews took place about the research

through the informed consent form (Appendix B), allowing the participants to clarify any questions before consenting to be part of the research. The selected participants met the eligibility criteria and were objectively selected to align with and answer the overarching research question: What strategies do some IT leaders in the Washington DC Metro area of the United States use to increase employee engagement and improve productivity?

A researcher should establish a good working relationship with the participants. The research should build transparency and trust and help participants understand their roles, identity, and confidentiality through open and honest communication about the study's intent (Kraft et al., 2020). In this regard, I introduced my study topic, research goal, and the process to the participants clearly and concisely using email and Microsoft Teams with audio recording. In addition, I acted professionally, was not judgmental, patient, honest, and respectful. I ensured that all participants were given sufficient time to thoroughly review and answer verbally using the words “Yes” as noted in the informed consent form (Appendix B), with the utmost priority placed on safeguarding their confidentiality and rights throughout the study. Additionally, I collaborated with participants to create a safe, distraction-free interview environment.

Research Method and Design

The purpose of the qualitative multiple case study was to explore leadership strategies that IT organization leaders in the Washington DC Metro area, United States, used to increase employee engagement and improve productivity. Researchers had to select their study's research method and design and support its purpose. The three research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed (Guetterman, 2020). I

summarized and explained the rationale for selecting this study's research method and design in the following subsections.

Research Method

Researchers use the qualitative method to explore a phenomenon by finding solutions to why, what, and how open-ended questions (Fu, 2019). In qualitative research, researchers seek to understand and explain phenomena through inquiry and produce qualitative data non-numerically (Draper et al., 2021). As Roulston and Halpin (2020) discussed, using the qualitative research method, researchers seek to identify study participants' themes, understanding, and experiences about the study topic. Lanka et al. (2021) described the qualitative study method as a way for researchers to collect data and gain insights into participants' perceptions and experiences about a set of events, actions, or processes in a social context. The qualitative method was appropriate for my study because I used what, why, and how questions formatted with open-ended interview questions to explore the phenomenon based on participants' experiences. In addition, the qualitative research method helped me generate in-depth data concerning the strategies of some IT leaders in the Washington DC Metro area of the United States to increase employee engagement and improve productivity that would otherwise have been difficult to capture. In addition, the qualitative method was more appropriate for my study than the other quantitative or mixed methods because I aimed to identify and explore successful strategies IT organizational leaders used to improve employee engagement.

In contrast, quantitative researchers measure variables and test hypotheses by examining variables' characteristics, relationships, or group differences to address the

research question quantitatively (Zyphur & Pierides, 2019). Quantitative researchers use statistics to objectively establish the phenomena's relevance without allowing participants to openly explain cases related to the research questions (Barnham, 2015). Since I did not try to prove if IT leaders' strategies improved employee engagement, instead asking leaders to share their successful strategies to improve employee engagement, the quantitative research method was inappropriate. I collected data using semistructured, open-ended interview questions in which IT leaders provided insight and answers to the overarching research questions in a nonquantifiable manner.

Instead, a mixed research method integrates quantitative and qualitative analysis by combining the power of numbers and stories. Mixed-method researchers use quantitative and qualitative methods in the same study (Gunasekara & Zheng, 2019). The mixed research method combines quantitative and qualitative data to support research questions (Saunders et al., 2019). Researchers use the quantitative component to explore the relationship between variables; therefore, this method will not apply to a qualitative study (Gilad, 2021). Because I did not explore the relationship between variables, I did not use a mixed method in my study. In addition, the mixed research method was unsuitable since there were no variables to compare, relationships to examine, or hypotheses to test and answer.

Research Design

I considered four qualitative research designs: narrative, phenomenological, ethnographic, and case studies. According to Yin (2018), the narrative design involves participants' personal stories being told in an open, interpretive manner that is often

nonstructural and sequential. My study will not focus on an individual's life experience; therefore, the narrative design was inappropriate. In the phenomenological research design, the researcher focuses on the participants' lived experiences to gain insight into phenomena and to build analysis from the personal worldview of the participants (Ghafoury et al., 2020). A phenomenology approach to my study would not have been appropriate because I did not collect data from participants' lived experiences.

Ethnographic research involves an in-depth explanation of the life stories and participants' study in a specific community's social and cultural organization (Cadena-Camargo et al., 2020). The ethnographic study design was deemed inappropriate because a comprehensive study of a particular group or culture was not conducted. Conversely, the case study approach allows researchers to emphasize real-world business challenges, analyze the topic in depth within the participants' contextual setting, and validate conclusions using multiple direct data as part of the data-gathering process (Yin, 2018). Researchers may use single and multiple case studies.

A qualitative case study supports the exploration of a distinct and dynamic phenomenon within the case's context. Vergel et al. (2018) described the two possible types of case study designs: single and multiple case study designs. A single case study is the most basic form of qualitative research design, which involves repeated measures and manipulation of an independent variable. In addition, a single case study explores and describes a phenomenon rather than determining the cause and effect of a variable or making predictions about the case in consideration. The multiple case study involves several instrumental cases to explore multiple data collection methods; it is more

powerful than the single case study because it provides a more extensive description and explanation of the problem (Mishra et al., 2014). A multiple case study is helpful when a researcher compares and explores a phenomenon between several cases (Leão & Santos, 2021). The multiple case study was the best choice to explore the current problem from a broader perspective and support researchers comparing and exploring a phenomenon between several cases. Therefore, my qualitative multiple-case study aimed to explore leadership strategies that IT organization leaders used to increase employee engagement and improve productivity, which was more than just observing a phenomenon.

I used semistructured interviews to collect data for my qualitative multiple case study. I took notes from each participant during the interview to explore what, how, and why of employee engagement and IT leaders' strategies to improve productivity. As a methodological principle, saturation is used widely in qualitative research. Saturation is a condition where further data collection and analysis are unnecessary in a research study (Saunders et al., 2018).

Conceptualizing and maintaining consistencies in saturation is necessary to clarify its nature, purpose, and uses. Saunders et al. (2018) described that it is essential to operationalize saturation according to the research question(s), the chosen theoretical stance, and the analytic framework. As Hennink and Kaiser (2022) highlighted, a homogeneous study population and narrowly focused research aim necessitate a modest sample size to achieve saturation. To derive conclusive findings, a researcher needs to reach data saturation (Farrugia, 2019). My research had a homogeneous population and sampling; thus, a semistructured interview was conducted with three IT organizational

executives from three organizations that had successfully implemented a strategy to engage an acceptable sample size to achieve saturation.

Population and Sampling

Population

Data were collected from three purposefully sampled IT organization leaders in the Washington DC metro area, the United States. They were interviewed using a semistructured interview to elicit their successful strategy implementation to increase employee engagement and improve productivity. The target population for this study consisted of three IT organizational leaders from three IT organizations who had successfully implemented strategies that had increased employee engagement. The study criteria for selecting participants were: (a) IT leaders who had at least worked for five years; (b) had leadership experience and followed strategies that supported employee engagement; and (c) strategic decision makers with roles like project managers, program managers, or directors in IT organizations. I identified and selected three IT organizational leaders from three IT organizations, both private and non-private IT-based organizations, selected from those willing to participate in the study based on an invitation letter distributed from a Washington DC metro area-based professional IT group and members. In addition, participants are mixed in gender and age demography. I also reviewed organizational documents from participants' company public websites and other publicly available relevant information from social media and other documents participants were willing to share like organizational mission and vision documents, employee engagements, collaboration meeting agendas, knowledge group and brown bag

sessions details, leadership to employee and peer-to-peer award and recognition programs.

Sampling

In qualitative research, groups of people, environments, and situations that will participate in a study to produce data and link to saturation are called samples. According to Saunders et al. (2019), sampling techniques are probability, where the researcher randomly selects samplings, and non-probability sampling, which allows convenience or non-random selection. As Yin (2018) suggested, purposive sampling allows an appropriate method to select information-rich cases related to the study's research question. I used a purposive sampling technique.

Through purposive sampling, participants from the IT organization that aligned with the participant eligibility criteria were selected and asked to participate willingly. The aim was to use purposeful sampling using pre-selected participant criteria based on the research question. Purposeful sampling was appropriate for this case study because the objective was to interview IT organizational leaders in the Washington DC metro area who meet the study participant eligibility criteria of individuals with at least five years of experience in leadership roles and in-depth knowledge of engagement strategies. As a result, the selected participants provided information-rich responses that aligned with the study's purpose. The sample size I used was appropriate to provide data and information on strategically engaging IT organization employees. I did not conduct additional interviews because no new

information emerged. At that point, I stopped the interview process. I arranged interviews with each participant where there was privacy; no one could overhear the interview or see who was involved in the study. I also ensured that the meeting was convenient. The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams remote meeting tools. Which was the participant's preference, too, and no video recordings were created with audio recordings. I followed the interview protocol (Appendix C).

According to Gray et al. (2020), interviews for a recent study were conducted outside of typical working hours for both the researcher and participants and were conducted remotely rather than face-to-face. Gray et al. (2020) found that both parties reported positive experiences with remote interviews and preferred them over traditional in-person interviews. The interviews were kept to a maximum of 60 minutes and concluded once the participant had answered all interview and probing questions. I asked the interview questions culminating with the final question, "What other information will you share concerning employee engagement and job satisfaction in the IT industry?"

Data Saturation

As a methodological principle, saturation is used widely in qualitative research. Saturation is a condition where further data collection and analysis are unnecessary in a research study (Saunders et al., 2018). Conceptualizing and maintaining consistencies in saturation is necessary to clarify its nature, purpose, and uses. Saunders et al. (2018) stated that it is essential to operationalize saturation according to the research question(s), the chosen theoretical stance, and the analytic framework. Additionally, its scope should be

controlled not to lose saturation coherence and effectiveness. As Hennink and Kaiser (2022) discussed, a homogenous study population and scoped research objectives require a small size to reach saturation. Therefore, my research comprised a homogenous population and sampling. I had a semistructured interview with three IT organizational leaders from three companies who successfully implemented a strategy to engage. An adequate sample size was reached to reach saturation. I interpreted the participant's interview responses, documented their responses, and sent their responses via email for accuracy. If there was a misinterpretation of their responses, I made the appropriate changes and sent it back for confirmation of accuracy again. I continued this process until no new information was shared and data saturation was achieved.

Ethical Research

Business research ethics should consider compliance with standardized ethical norms and the chosen methodology's ethical implications. Good ethical research practice and methodological quality are mutually reinforcing goals toward protecting participants' rights and the credibility of the research process (Deps et al., 2022). As a researcher, I ensured that research participants were aware of any potential harm by participating in the research. I provided an informed consent form (Appendix B) for three organizational leaders, asked each participant to agree voluntarily, and assisted them with maintaining integrity, safeguarding, and protecting their rights, providing the case study background, my contact information, and contact information on behalf of the Walden University institutional review board (IRB) Office. An informed consent form is in the study document appendix (Appendix B) and listed in the Table of Contents. Because of the

Walden University IRB requirements concerning ethical principles to guide doctoral research, I submitted my research study required documents and forms to the IRB for approval before data collection.

While protecting the research participants was very important, ethical research also involved all aspects of the research process from the start to the end of the case study. I followed Walden University's ethical standards and The Belmont Report guidelines and principles used as a guide to ensure the ethical principles and protection of participants: (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (Office for Human Research Protections, 2022). I ensured transparency in the research, contacted them through email, and sent informed consent forms (Appendix B), informing them that I would not offer an incentive to participants, that participation was on a volunteer basis, and that they had the right to withdraw at any stage of the research. Islam and Greenwood (2022) emphasized the importance of ensuring participants know that there are no incentives offered for their participation, that participation is voluntary, and that they may withdraw at any time during the research study. I conducted ethical research and protected study participants' privacy throughout the research process.

Collected participants' and business organizations' data and kept them confidential with a unique identification code. For example, I assigned each participant P1, P2, P3, and C1, C2, and C3 for the company's unique identification codes. All collected data is stored securely with password-protected means for five years and afterward forwarded to safeguard the participant's confidentiality (Domingo-Ferrer et al., 2019). Collected data and processed information were shared with participants to check the accuracy and

validity of their interview responses. As qualitative research study results could be affected by the researcher's bias, I remained focused on analyzing collected data without preconceived ideas and my leadership experience. To avoid such biasedness, I asked predefined semistructured interview questions, explored the research topic in detail, and administered the same interview protocol (Appendix C) for each participant as a mental framework to create reliability and validity.

Upon approval of Walden's University IRB, approval # is 08-18-23-1114647, I followed all the guidance and principles in ensuring participants' confidentiality and transparency, submitted the informed consent form (Appendix B), collected data, secured collected data, stored the protected password, and I will destroy the research information after five years. Walden IRB approval number was part of the final doctoral study document. In addition, I complied with Walden University's ethical standards and The Belmont Report by respecting and protecting participants' opinions, minimizing risks, and treating each person equally and with justice.

Data Collection Instruments

As a researcher, I served as a primary data collection instrument to have better insight and personal access to the research study's data. I used open-ended semistructured interview questions with participants to elicit sufficient data for analysis. The semistructured interview method helps to collect data because it includes a clear set of instructions for the participants, which results in reliable and comparable qualitative data (Buist et al., 2019). While conducting semistructured interviews through audio calls and recordings, I took notes. I listened to the participant's voice during the audio-recording

calls and followed protocol (Appendix C). Researchers include the introduction, purpose, confidentiality process, permission to record, and perform notetaking to increase participants' confidence (Durdella, 2019). I followed the interview protocol (Appendix C), went through the introduction, purpose, and confidentiality process, and gained permission to record the participant's responses to the interview questions and notetaking.

I ensured the validity and reliability of the data collected from participants by member checking the information on audio recordings and the interview data transcripts using the Microsoft Teams tool. Merlo et al. (2020) and Yin (2018) suggested member checking to ensure the validity and reliability of the data collected. While qualitative validity means ensuring the accuracy of a study's findings, reliability, on the other hand, refers to the appropriateness of the researcher's tool and the exact replicability of the process and results (Lukyanenko et al., 2019). Member checking is a method of verification by participants of their summarized interview responses for accuracy verification through a follow-up appointment with each participant (Yin, 2018). I conducted member checking to ensure and strengthen the validity and verify the accuracy of the interview summary. To ensure consistency, I asked participants questions in the same order and followed the specified interview protocol (Appendix C).

Data Collection Technique

In my qualitative multiple case study, I explored leadership strategies that some IT organization leaders use to increase employee engagement and improve productivity successfully in the Washington DC metro area. Researchers use the research design to determine the data collection technique that will provide the necessary data to answer the

research question (Yin, 2018). Crick (2020) described data collection as a well-planned set of activities to collect raw data and information from selected research participants and help answer the study question.

Qualitative study researchers may use interviews and other data collection techniques or document analysis to collect data (Yin, 2018). The data collection technique for this study was a semistructured, open-ended virtual interview using Microsoft Teams audio calls, following the interview protocol defined and included in the Appendix (Appendix C). Microsoft Teams remote audio interviews took place in a comfortable and private setting for me and the participants, and the tool transcribing features were used. Audio, notes, and other related documents collected during the interview were stored in multiple secured storage devices and locations like an external and password-protected Google Drive. I included three IT organizational leaders from three different IT organizations in the Washington DC metro area as participants who met the eligibility criteria for this study and provided them with the consent form (Appendix B). Their contact information, like email addresses and other necessary data, was collected and stored securely.

I used interviews for a data collection technique with a predefined interview protocol (Appendix C). I asked participants for the pre-prepared interview and follow-up questions unbiasedly, following interview protocol scripts (Appendix C), and audio recorded after getting their consent to proceed. In addition, I took notes to support the data collection and formulate points to summarize to the interviewee to assess understanding and interpretation of the participant's response. For data collection,

organization, and analysis of my study semistructured interviews, I utilized Yin's (2018) data collection and analysis phases: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding. I conducted a comprehensive review of organizational documents obtained from the participants' organization's public websites, along with other relevant information from social media and other shared documents such as organizational mission and vision documents, employee engagement strategies, collaboration meeting agendas, details of knowledge group and brown bag session details, as well as leadership to employee and peer-to-peer award and recognition programs.

I emailed each participant the invitation letter (Appendix A) and consent form (Appendix B) to prepare for the interviews. I got their willingness by responding to the consent form with words that they agreed and consented to be part of the research study. The consent form (Appendix B) includes information about the study's purpose and scope, the interview process, that participation is voluntary and without compensation, how the participant can withdraw from the study, and the confidentiality of the research study. I conducted audio-based semistructured interviews with three participants from three different IT organizations to find strategies IT leaders use to increase employee engagement and improve productivity in the Washington DC Metro area of the United States. The audio-recorded interview session audio and transcript file was downloaded, cleaned for unnecessary words within the transcript, and saved from Microsoft Teams to password-protected local and Google Drive storage, which is essential to refer to when needed quickly and easily.

Different data collection techniques could have advantages and disadvantages depending on the type of research method and design the researcher wanted to follow. The data collection technique for this study was semistructured interviews with open-ended interview questions. The advantage of the semistructured interview is that it allows two-way communication between the researcher and selected participants for the freedom to express participants' views on the research topic and collect trustworthy data (Buist et al., 2019). In addition, the semistructured interview will allow an in-depth understanding of the research topic, pose questions during the interview with probing questions into the research problem, and increase understanding of the participant's views (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). As Wang and Ruiz (2021) discussed, semistructured face-to-face or audio call data collection will help researchers to collect and document meaningful non-verbal gestures with clues of the participant on the topic that could have been missed by conducting some techniques. Cairns-Lee et al. (2022) explained some of the disadvantages of conducting semistructured interviews: it may lead to biasedness by researchers, as it is a subconscious desire to obtain favorable outcomes. The planned data collection technique may also be time-consuming (Yin, 2018). I used Microsoft Teams audio transcribing features for the virtual meeting when preferred by participants, which was the study's intent and preference to use and conduct the semistructured interview.

Researchers in qualitative research must ensure that they accurately capture the participants' intent in response to semistructured, open-ended interview questions. Member checking is the process of sharing the interview results with participants and allowing them to verify for flaws in interpretation to ensure the research's legitimacy

(Candela, 2019). I used member checking by sharing my interpretations of the participants' responses for their review and validation and asking them to forward their feedback to ensure the accuracy of their responses and that no inconsistencies existed in the interpretation. As Yin (2018) noted, during the transcript review, the participant certifies that the researcher correctly transcribed the interview. I shared my interpretations of the draft interview data with participants through their email addresses and asked them to review it, pinpoint any misinterpretations, and correct them. Pilot studies are used by researchers to examine data analysis for potential difficulties and to estimate what resources would be required (Frączek et al., 2021). A pilot study enables the researcher to train before a more extensive study and acquire early psychometric data on a freshly constructed instrument (Spodarczyk, 2019). The size and breadth of this geographically confined investigation made the pilot study unnecessary. Furthermore, I consulted with my doctorate committee team to assess the quality and appropriateness of my research approach, and I made changes depending on their expert opinions and recommendations.

Data Organization Technique

Techniques for efficient data management are essential to map out a clear and transparent process of organizing codes and themes to reflect interviewees' perspectives. The researcher uses the qualitative methodology to produce data based on information collected from participants' interview sessions, their responses to the interview questions, and analysis of publicly available documents shared by the participants that require organization into substantial categories. According to Yin (2018), the researcher can

organize the data effectively by coding the relationships between data using an electronic database to store and categorize documents and other software tools such as Microsoft Word. I used tools to organize collected data, such as Microsoft Word, Excel, and NVivo, a software program to analyze the unstructured text, audio, and image data from interviews to categorize the data by themes and patterning using a coding process. Coding increases qualitative research's rigor, transparency, and validity (Bergeron & Gaboury, 2019). I used NVivo to transfer the transcribed file from the audio files into an appropriate format, create codes based on participant's responses, and group interview results under each major and minor theme. Interview results were kept in a password-protected and secure laptop, and backup is kept in a secured Google drive in the cloud. After transcribing, interpreting the interview responses, and validating the accuracy of the interview data, I used NVivo, Microsoft Word, and Excel as a backup. I manually disassembled, reassembled, and analyzed the data to identify keywords, codes, essential themes, and organizing themes.

NVivo was valuable for data analysis, managing, labeling, coding, and navigating data. The data was organized by grouping the responses using the research questions as a guide. I used a research log to segregate into sections identifying personal reflection of the interview, emerging themes, corrections, and additional information gathered through member checking in tools like Microsoft Word and Excel for each participant. In a qualitative study, data coding and organization are ways for a researcher to collect data, quickly locate the information, find relations between the collected data, and then organize them under themes. I organized the data by reviewing the entire participant's

responses multiple times, creating a list of codes under major and minor themes, and separating them into groups for better understanding and analysis. To ensure the anonymity of participants participating in the qualitative research study, they were identified as P1, P2, and P3 and C1, C2, and C3 to maintain the confidentiality of each organization by masking their names. As Mayernik (2019) described, participants and their organization names will not be displayed in any research document. I kept all documents and data created during interviews, including audio, personal notes, and transcriptions, in a fireproof, safe place in my home office, where I was the only one with access physically. Softcopies were kept in a password-protected external drive and Google Drive on the cloud. I will destroy all software copies, paper printouts, and Microsoft Teams audio files after the study's completion of five years.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis process provides value and understanding of non-numerically collected data and the application of critical thinking by following steps to drive meaningful information from a qualitative research study (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) suggested that researchers use triangulation in a qualitative case study to collect data for analysis, compare the results from each method or source, and study the phenomenon. In methodological triangulation, data can be collected from documents, interviews, and notetakings to confirm whether the same findings are attainable through different sources so that the researcher can test the level of research reality (Abdalla et al., 2018; Hasselt, 2021). I used a methodological triangulation approach in interviewing IT organizational leaders about their strategies to increase employee engagement and improve productivity.

I also analyzed publicly available organizational data from organizational documents, websites, and social media outlets. In this regard, I reviewed organizational documents related to mission, vision, and core values, employee engagement strategies like knowledge sharing and brown bag sessions, and organizational recognition programs.

Qualitative researchers use thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report patterns from collected data (Ben-Hador et al., 2020). In addition, researchers code, label, and manipulate words in non-numerical data collected by following a qualitative studies process (Locke et al., 2020). Yin (2018) describes a five-step approach to analyzing collected qualitative study data: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting the meaning, and concluding the data. I used Yin's five-step approach to analyze the collected data. The compiling step comprised placing data from the study source into a central database and preparing it for processing. The transcribed participant's interview results were stored in a database. Disassembling data was the second step that, divided the compiled data into fragments and labeled them into meaningful units. I used NVivo to code and label the transcribed Microsoft Teams interview audio data. While the third step, reassembling data step, involved grouping the fragmented and labeled data into groups for comparison across participants, the fourth interpreting data step in Yin's five steps process checked the data pattern to interpret the meaning of the collected data. The final step was drawing a conclusion based on interpreting meaning derived from collected and analyzed data. Researchers use software tools to code, map, and identify themes in qualitative studies. There are multiple software tools with pros and cons to support qualitative research data collection, analysis, and interpretations, primarily different only

in their interface and nomenclature (Wilk et al., 2019). I used NVivo software to support my study in visualizing the collected data and identifying connections between concepts and themes.

I thematically analyzed the data following some phases as a researcher to adequately analyze the data and discover themes, patterns, and codes relatable to my research study. Lester et al. (2020) suggested using thematic analysis to analyze data and identify common themes, patterns, and phrases related to a research study's overarching question. After collecting data from the research study participants, as a thematic procedure, I became familiar with the collected data by reading the interview summaries, reviewing my notes from the interview session multiple times, and starting to develop potential initial ideas for coding. I also reviewed organizational documents, employee engagement strategies, and leadership recognition programs. Using NVivo software, I conducted initial coding of the interview session responses provided by the research participants. I then focused on specific details within the collected data that directly relate to my research study's conceptual framework and research question. The next step was to categorize themes into major and minor themes based on their similarity and frequencies mentioned by each participant. According to Campbell (2020), connecting the major and minor themes identified during data analysis with existing theoretical or conceptual frameworks relevant to the research questions is optimal. This helps to determine whether the identified themes can be applied to real-world business practices. The primary and minor themes from the collected data analysis process correlate with the research question and IT organizational leaders' strategies to increase employee engagement and

improve productivity. As a next step, I listed minor themes under major ones and discarded those that do not align with my research study research question: What strategies do some IT leaders in the Washington DC Metro area of the United States use to increase employee engagement and improve productivity? As a final step of the data analysis, I have categorized, described, and labeled all the themes and subthemes and have analyzed how they are connected to the literature review, conceptual framework, and primary research question. Moreover, I have included pertinent details regarding aligning findings based on each participant's response to the literature review and conceptual framework under each theme.

The thematic analysis aids the researcher in discovering hidden relevant themes within the data (Yin, 2018). To explore leadership strategies to increase employee engagement and improve productivity, I used SET as the conceptual framework for my research study, analyzed and interpreted data, and developed themes. To identify these themes while retaining rigor and validity, the researcher must follow guiding principles like openness, probing to understand better, and mindfully allowing the ideas to evolve (Sundler et al., 2019). I used the identified themes to compare previous studies' results and related them to my study literature review and conceptual framework. During the data analysis, I utilized the SET framework as the basis for this case study. This framework proposes that individuals will engage in social contracts only if they benefit mutually. By applying SET, I was able to assess the factors that contribute to successful employee engagement strategies, as well as the dynamics between employees and their organizational leaders. I interpreted codes and themes to create meaningful findings

during my data analysis process. I used a conceptual framework as a guide to correlate all analyzed data with the research purpose and to provide an infrastructure for the study. This allowed me to group ideas and concepts and explore the research problem. To ensure the accuracy and relevance of my research findings, I utilized SET and recent literature within a five-year timeframe of completing my doctoral study. This approach allowed me to stay up-to-date and informed on the latest developments in the field, ultimately contributing to the credibility of my research. I created a final report with the interpretations of the data to support the central research question. To enhance the credibility of the findings, I implemented member checking in the final report to verify the accuracy of my interpretation of the research study interview session participants' responses. I critically assessed the research process's pros and cons, evaluated the research study's implications, and how the findings could support future research studies. The grouping of the themes aided with the presentation of findings, recommendations for future studies, and conclusion of my research study. In addition, I continued researching and reviewing any newly published literature on identifying leadership strategies for increasing employee engagement and improving productivity in IT organizations.

Reliability and Validity

Ensuring outstanding reliability and validity of a research result is a qualitative researcher's responsibility in all research steps and processes, checking the result through criteria. Achieving qualitative research results' trustworthiness requires researchers to consider credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Langtree et al., 2019). Researchers implement a consistent process throughout research interviews, data

collection, and analysis to establish consistency and dependability of the research and ensure reliability and credibility (Yin, 2018). Reliability and validity are closely related but differ in meaning related to the quality of the collected data; reliability is about the research's consistency, and validity is about the research's accuracy (Yeong et al., 2018). To ensure the reliability and validity of the research result, I incorporated dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability as a criterion. Additionally, I ensured reliability, identified reliability criteria. I validated the findings of my qualitative multiple case study, exploring leadership strategies that some IT organization leaders use to increase employee engagement and improve productivity. To establish reliability in my research and the data collected, it was imperative to remain unbiased by setting aside personal experience and avoiding favoritism. Methodological triangulation and member checking were utilized to ensure a more valid interpretation of the collected data. Reporting precise participant interview responses to maintain reliability and validity was crucial. To ensure the reliability and validity of my research findings, I utilized various methods, including an activity log, member checking, and triangulation. These techniques allowed me to continuously measure the research process and demonstrate the trustworthiness of my research study.

Reliability

Reliability ensures the consistency of data collected from research participants and the research outcome, rooted in data adequacy and faith in the data obtained, which involves organizing the research's data and consistency. Yin (2018) described that there are four steps to achieve research result reliability and trustworthiness: (a) dependability,

(b) creditability, (c) confirmability, and (d) transferability. In reliability, the dependability step should ensure that the research result would be the same if the research is repeated in the same context, with the same methods and participants (FitzPatrick, 2019; Nassaji, 2020). Researchers use member checking and data saturation to improve the dependability of the findings, assess trust, and confirm the worthiness of a study (Caretta & Pérez, 2019). A researcher can use an interview protocol to record data collected during qualitative interview-based research and establish dependability (Yin, 2018). To ensure the reliability of my research study and establish dependability, I used an interview protocol (Appendix C) that included the steps that I recorded, double-checked my interpretations of the participant's response to the interview questions for errors through member checking, engaged in data saturation, and applied data triangulation. I conducted each interview session with participants using the interview protocol (Appendix C) and asked the same questions in order. I shared a copy of the interview draft document and my interpretation and summary with the participants for review. After reviewing the responses with the research participants, I made the necessary changes and ensured the authenticity of the information collected and interpreted. Achieving data saturation by conducting interviews with three IT organizational leaders and research study participants from three IT organizations in the Washington DC metropolitan region enhanced the study's dependability. I have achieved data saturation by demonstrating that the data collected from additional research participants yield no new themes.

Validity

Research validity implies that the research result is without errors or biasedness. Validity in qualitative research centered on the credibility of the tools, process, and the ability to use accurate results to make decisions and measure the degree of accuracy in the analysis of the findings associated with the study. Yin (2018) listed four requirements to validate qualitative research: dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability. I ensured the participants reviewed my interpretation of their responses to ensure validity. For any reported misinterpretation from participants, I made the appropriate changes. I did this by emailing my interpretations of the responses from the interview session to each participant and collecting their feedback. I continued this process until the information was accurate and no new information was shared, which showed reaching data saturation.

Dependability

A researcher should ensure that replicating the systematic study process would produce similar results. In qualitative research, dependability is a way to demonstrate that the research findings will be the same despite any changes within the research setting or participants during data collection (FitzPatrick, 2019). Researchers define and conduct in such a way as to ensure the study's replicability (Rose & Johnson, 2020). I achieved dependability by discussing the systematic research process, maintaining a clear audit trail, and having members check to verify that I accurately interpreted each participant's interview responses and reached data saturation. In order to ensure dependability in the

research study, I elaborated on the systematic coding and analysis procedure used to identify relevant themes from the raw data.

Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility refers to data integrity from all sources and the researcher's truthful representation (Langtree et al., 2019). Researchers ensure consistency and transparency in data interpretations and avoid personal biases against the research objective, aiming to achieve factual research findings (Stahl & King, 2020). I ensured credibility by following an interview protocol (Appendix C), member checking, and allowing participants to verify that their interview responses were accurate. I continuously evaluated the relevant assumptions and biases and documented critical reflections on the research process.

Transferability

A qualitative research finding should be transferable to another research and context. Research transferability refers to the capability of the research process and findings transferred by other researchers and readers and benefits or teaches them the application of its findings in other contexts or settings (McGinley et al., 2020). Thick research finding descriptions, including accounts of the context and examples of raw data, can improve transferability so that other researchers and readers can consider its interpretations. Researchers establish transferability by ensuring that study results can apply to other research studies (Yin, 2018). Researchers should provide sufficient details about their research study activities and assumptions, and readers may find these details applicable to other research phenomena (Nassaji, 2020). In section 3, I gave a thorough

description of the research context and the study's assumptions and limitations to allow the transferability of the study.

Confirmability

Qualitative study researchers should accurately collect data free of researcher bias, document the research process in detail, and ensure confirmability. Confirmability refers to verifying that the research finding will be that of participants more than the researcher's view of the study (Laumann, 2020). The researcher ensures the study's confirmability by verifying the findings with the participants' words rather than the researchers' biases (Langtree et al., 2019). A researcher maintains confirmability by concentrating on collected data and interpreting the data from the participants' perspective without the researcher's bias or prejudice while recognizing assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes, which may reduce the researcher's bias within a study (Laumann, 2020). I enhanced the confirmability of my study by using member checking to demonstrate that each participant accurately captured and confirmed the findings, following structured protocol, maintaining audit trails, and acknowledging personal assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes. I also ensured confirmability by following the interview protocol (Appendix C), probing the interview participants beyond the interview questions, and using member checking.

Transition and Summary

In Section 2, I discussed the study's purpose, the researcher's role, credible research participants, the research method, and the research design. Section 2 also included the descriptions of the data collection instruments, data organization techniques,

data collection techniques, and the analysis process. I explained that I would conduct semistructured interviews with three IT organizations in the Washington DC metro area of the United States that had successfully increased employee engagement following the implementation of their leadership strategies. The details of the population and sampling, ethical research, data saturation, and the steps to ensure the research reliability, validity, dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability of the data collected for this qualitative multiple case study were also included. In section 3, I will present the findings of my study, including the analysis of the participant's responses to interview questions. I reiterated the purpose of the study, its applicability to professional practice, and the implications for social change. Additionally, I made recommendations for action and further study. Finally, I culminated section 3 by identifying limitations to this study and providing personal reflections and the study conclusion.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore leadership strategies that some IT organization leaders use to increase employee engagement and improve productivity. The targeted population comprised three IT organization leaders from three IT organizations in the Washington DC metro area of the United States who successfully increased employee engagement following the implementation of their leadership engagement strategies. The data came from semistructured virtual interviews using Microsoft Teams and publicly available organization-related documents. Each participant provided in-depth information about their experience and the issues they experienced in developing and implementing employee engagement strategies, increasing productivity, and achieving organizational goals. I explored employee engagement through the lens of SET developed by Homans (1961). I transcribed and interpreted the collected data and conducted the member checking process to decrease bias and increase the validity and reliability of the study's findings. I used NVivo software to organize, code, and analyze data to find themes from participants' responses collected during the semistructured interview sessions. Privacy and confidentiality were maintained by conducting semistructured interviews through audio-only Microsoft Teams-based virtual interviews and masking participants' identities with codes. Participants' names were replaced with identifier codes (e.g., P1, P2, and P3). Triangulation was achieved by reviewing data collected from the interviews, notes, websites, and publicly available documents provided by participants.

In addition to conducting semistructured interviews via Microsoft Teams, I reviewed organizational documents, including publicly available information from their websites regarding the participants' organization's mission, vision, and core business values. Additionally, participants shared some documents related to their engagement strategies, masking their basic organizational information. For instance, P1 provided documents on training and certification plans, employee career development procedures, and survey forms used to collect and analyze the technical capabilities of their employees. Furthermore, P1 also shared insights into their awards and recognition systems, featuring different award types such as 'stars' and 'going the extra mile' (GEM). P3, instead, shared meeting-related documents, including different meeting types and corresponding agendas. These materials were integral to their organization's communication and feedback strategy, aimed at actively engaging employees through initiatives such as brown bag sessions, knowledge sharing, and various team-level meetings. P3 shared the employee viewpoint survey (EVS) form and the recent survey result, offering unique insights into employees' perceptions of satisfaction, engagement, and leadership. The information on the survey form stated that P3's organization values its employees and respects their perceptions. The core survey document from the P3 organization included multiple items that measured employees' perceptions about how effectively the organization leads through strategies, like improving engagement and productivity through leadership style, work environment, communication, and diversity and inclusion.

All participants of this research study indicated several strategies that improved employee engagement and productivity. The collected data analysis revealed four major

themes that IT organization leaders use to engage their employees for the achievement of personal and organizational goals: (a) leadership style and behaviors, (b) conducive and inclusive organizational culture and environment, (c) effective communication and feedback, and (d) rewards, recognition, appreciation, empowerment, training, and career development.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question for this qualitative multiple case study was: What strategies do some IT organization leaders in the Washington DC Metro area of the United States use to increase employee engagement and improve productivity? After receiving IRB approval from Walden University, I reviewed the interview process and followed the interview protocol defined in my research proposal section. After sending invitation letters (Appendix A) and consent forms (Appendix B) to possible participants and getting their agreement to participate in the research, I conducted semistructured interviews with three participants whose titles were IT leaders in the Washington DC Metro area of the United States. Participants responded to 12 interview questions, including follow-up questions about leadership strategies to promote employee engagement in the IT sector.

After obtaining pre-approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB; approval no. 08-18-23-1114647), I sent the invitation (Appendix A) to a Washington DC metro area-based IT professional group and asked the group members to share the invitation with those who fulfilled the research study participants criteria of: (a) over the age of 18 years; (b) IT leaders who had at least worked for five years; (c) had

leadership experience and implemented strategies that improved employee engagement; (d) strategic decision makers in roles like project managers, program managers, or IT directors; (e) willing to participate; and (f) able to verbally consent to an audio recording their agreement to details listed in the informed consent form (Appendix B). According to Chambers et al. (2020), utilizing social media and group recruitment provides a targeted approach to accessing specific audience segments. In addition, I asked some members personally over the phone and email to share the invitation letter (Appendix A) with others. Using the snowball process, I received eight responses from the professional group.

According to Webber-Ritchey et al. (2021), trusted social networks and private learning groups can effectively reduce recruitment time. Furthermore, Wong et al. (2020) suggested that social media and groups can be viable methods for locating research participants. These researchers' findings highlighted the potential benefits of utilizing social networks and online platforms for research participant recruitment. After obtaining referrals, I collected potential candidates' contact information: email address and phone number. I sent the invitation letter (Appendix A) and the informed consent form (Appendix B) through separate emails. I asked potential candidates to agree to participate in the study willingly through their email responses. The informed consent form (Appendix B) included the purpose of the study, the privacy of research individuals, possible risks and benefits, and withdrawal rights, making it a vital part of ethical research. Glegg (2018) explained that it is essential to safeguard participants' well-being by adhering to standard ethical principles and respecting the participant's privacy and confidentiality.

After obtaining responses from volunteer participants who agreed to participate in the research study, I scheduled MS Teams meetings based on participants' availability and conducted the interview session. I used the MS team's audio recording feature and transcribed the audio-only recording. The three IT organizational leaders were 67% male and 33% female, with titles of IT leaders, chief information officer, and principal. Each interview session took between 25 – 51 minutes. During the interview sessions, I followed the interview protocol (Appendix C). I started by introducing myself, the purpose of my study, and the goal of the interview as it is scripted in the interview protocol (Appendix C). Each interview participant provided valuable data for each pre-prepared interview question and follow-up questions I asked to get clarification concerning some of their responses. I concluded the interview process by asking each participant if they had anything else that they wanted to tell me about their employee engagement strategy. I thanked each participant for their time and participation. I informed them that I would get back to them with my summarized interpretation of their response so they could confirm the accuracy of my interpretation. This is known as member checking. I also told each participant that upon approval of the research study, I would share a summary of the research findings.

After transcribing the recordings, each participant engaged in member checking to validate my interpretation of their responses to ensure accuracy and establish the credibility of the findings. The interview session was recorded on Microsoft Teams, transferred to a password-protected folder on my laptop, and stored on Google Drive with all required security settings. Data saturation was attained after completing the three interview sessions and reviewing relevant and publicly available organizational documents, and no new

information, patterns, or themes emerged. I employed NVivo version 14 software to meticulously structure and categorize my research study interview session participants' response data, following Yin's (2018) comprehensive five-step methodology for data analysis: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding the data with insights from the data. The research study data was compiled into themes using NVivo 14, and the identified recurring significant themes included: (a) leadership style and behaviors; (b) conducive and inclusive organizational culture and environment; (c) effective communication and feedback; and (d) rewards, recognition, appreciation, empowerment, training, and career development.

The identified themes were relevant to the IT leaders' leadership strategies to improve employee engagement and productivity. The research study participants' interview responses align with the key constructs of my conceptual framework. Using SET, founded by Homans (1961), helped explain the logical connections between it and my study topic. I found that the mutual psycho-sociological benefit built on the employee and organizational relationships had relevance to employee engagement. SET key constructs also helped me answer the research question: What strategies do some IT organizational leaders use to increase employee engagement and improve productivity? Table 1 has the themes and frequencies from the interview data collection and analysis process. Within Table 2, the topic most frequently shared was leadership behaviors, with 27 frequencies comprising 36 percent of the total interview topics. Also exhibited in Table 2 are the other themes (i.e., developing relationships, effective communication, and productivity management) along with their respective subthemes (i.e., trust and respect, get to know them, and team

building; open door policy, communicate expectations, and feedback loop; and training, measuring productivity and profitability, and challenges to engagement).

Table 2

Emerging Themes and Frequencies: Strategies for Promoting Employee Engagement in the Information Technology Sector

Themes	Frequency	Percentage of total
Leadership style and behaviors	27	36 %
Conducive and inclusive organizational culture and environment	20	26.7 %
Effective communication and feedback	16	21.3 %
Rewards, recognition, appreciation, empowerment, training, and career development	12	16 %
Total	75	100 %

Theme 1: Leadership Style and Behavior

The first theme that emerged from the data collection and analysis process was leadership style and behavior. All research study participants mentioned leadership style and behavior as critical factors influencing employee engagement and productivity. Leadership is a process of influence by an individual over another individual or group, facilitating the follower's direction and contribution toward a common goal (Rabiul & Yean, 2021). The participants expressed the importance of ensuring employees were always included in organizational activities, aware of their roles and responsibilities, and the organizational expectations in all organizational processes. The confirmed interpretation here was that employees are more productive when they clearly understand what is expected from them and when their leaders know what they expect from their

organization. Employees engage more, increase productivity, and contribute toward achieving goals willingly when the organizational mission, vision, and core values are communicated and practiced through the organization's leadership style and behavior (Alagarsamy et al., 2020). IT organizational leaders can support improving employee engagement, productivity, and success of organizational goals by understanding factors influencing employee engagement, motivation, and productivity and adopting a supportive leadership style and behavior (Riyanto et al., 2021). A leadership style based on a supportive and reciprocal benefit between organizational leaders and employees is crucial in fulfilling organizational and personal goals (Alsunki et al., 2020). IT organization leaders who participated in this research study acknowledged that employees could achieve personal and organizational goals when planned activities are communicated clearly at all stages, included in all activities, supported with adequate resources, and their contributions are recognized. Supportive leadership style and employee-perceived benefits lead employees to contribute to sustained organizational engagement and productivity. Table 3 has the central theme and subthemes of leadership style and behavior with frequency based on the research study participants' responses and the study data analysis.

Table 3*Participants' Reference and Frequency to Theme 1: Leadership style and Behaviors*

Participants	Themes/Subthemes	Frequency	Percentage of total
P1, P2, P3	Leadership style and behaviors	19	70.4 %
P1, P3	Effective and commonly understood strategic planning	8	29.6 %
Total		27	100 %

According to all research participants of this study, leadership style and behavior emerged as a crucial engagement strategy that significantly improved employee engagement and organizational productivity. P1 included and practiced engagement strategies as part of leadership style and behavior. P1 supported employees to ensure they felt part of the organization's overall activities, recognized their contributions, and supported them with the required resources. P1 stated, "I apply engagement strategies like appreciation, reward, and motivation to make the employees feel included and belong to the organization." In addition, P1 stated, "I learn about people, knowing their weaknesses and strengths, and then putting the team together and supporting them as a leader."

For employees to align their engagement and overall activities with the organizational mission and engagement strategy, organizational leaders' support plays a significant role. Employees who feel disconnected from the organization's mission and vision will require micromanagement and will not be engaged and productive (Eldor, 2021). Instead, when employees feel a sense of belonging to the organization, leaders need not worry about engagement and productivity but make sure employees get the

support they need. Leaders who recognize and appreciate employees' outstanding contributions tend to increase engagement. P2 stated, "The first line of defense for employee successful engagement is a strategy related to recognition, trust in the process and teams, which in turn may have impacts on employee and organizational leadership relationships and loyalty." An open-door policy, playing a supportive role, and considering the value of each employee's contributions towards organizational and project-level goals equally are some of the leadership styles mentioned by the research study participants. P1 and P3 shared similar leadership styles and P3 stated,

I provide feedback when they do a good job. I have routine meetings. If they face any challenges, we work through them as a team. I like to keep a level of informality around my accessibility and how I engage with them. Being a true partner, I do not consider myself their supervisor per se, but more of their partner in whatever we are trying to achieve collectively.

All participants' collective responses confirmed my interpretation that the organization's policy promotes leading by example and managing by setting goals with employees as a team. They also acknowledged the importance of utilizing various leadership styles to effectively influence employees and achieve agreed-upon and well-planned goals aligned with the organization's strategic vision, mission, and core values.

Leaders employ strategies such as efficient task delegation to guide employees toward success in line with the organization's goals and equip themselves with the necessary skills and resources. Hospodková et al. (2021) found that leaders of their study

used strategies to direct, guide, and inspire employees toward increased engagement, productivity, and organizational goals and achievements and had more tremendous success.

While I worked on coding, categorizing, and analyzing collected interview data and generating themes, I found common themes related to leadership style and behavior as a significant strategy for employee engagement and productivity. All research study participants explained that they incorporated and practiced employee engagement strategies throughout the planning, execution, and leadership processes. P1 stated, “I make employees feel included and appreciated in all organization activities and feel a sense of belongingness.” Participants confirmed the importance of leading by example so that employees follow their lead and achieve their expectations. P1 shared, “I communicate with employees openly and well, get their buy-ins, and the employees will follow.” P3 shared,

I dedicate time and resources and pay attention to what employees need to get engaged. It is very important to slow down, stop, look back, look within, and check employees. Build the base, build the employees, and create a proper engagement strategy.

I found evidence from these participants that leaders who exhibit a leadership style and behavior that offer support and guidance to their employees tend to motivate them, encourage engagement, increase productivity, and avoid disengagement. When emphasized in their strategy, they will improve employee engagement and productivity.

Additionally, leaders who deeply understand their organization and employees, follow effective leadership styles and work to foster a supportive, cohesive, and collaborative team environment tend to increase employee engagement and improve productivity.

Theme 1 Correlation to the Literature Review

The leadership style and behavior theme aligned with the literature review discussed in this research study. Leadership strategy impacts employee engagement, motivation, innovation, creativity, and productivity. Leaders facilitate the fulfillment of organizational and personal goals based on a social exchange and reciprocal benefit between organizational leaders and employees. Implementing engagement and productivity strategies, adopting a supportive leadership style, and understanding the factors influencing employee engagement can foster employee motivation, improve employee engagement and productivity, and enhance the success of organizational objectives (Riyanto et al., 2021). According to Alsunki et al. (2020), a supportive leadership strategy and employee-perceived benefit per the social exchange principle can contribute to developing and sustaining organizational commitment, employee engagement, and improved productivity, confirming this research study's theme's findings and its correlation to the literature review. The lead-by-example mentioned by P1, P2, and P3 aligned with Joplin et al. (2019), finding that the organizational leadership style, leading by example, motivates and improves employee engagement, productivity, and quality service and helps organizations to sustain a competitive business world.

This leadership style and behavior theme also align with Goswami et al. (2020) finding that IT organizational leaders who evaluate how their employees perceive their

leadership style and follow their lead can improve employee engagement and productivity. Also, Goswami et al. found that it is essential for organizational leaders to note that leadership style and behavior perceptions can differ based on age, gender, work experience, role level, and cultural background of the employee.

Therefore, it is a good practice for leaders to carefully consider these factors in their leadership style and behavior when managing their teams to optimize employee engagement, productivity, and effectiveness toward organizational goal achievements. In addition, this finding aligns with the literature reviewed in this research study that IT organizational leaders must possess the leadership style and behavior demonstrated through the execution of engagement strategies that will keep their employees motivated and engaged toward accomplishing their organizational goals.

Theme 1 Correlation to the SET

I explored IT organization leadership strategies some IT organization leaders use to increase employee engagement and improve productivity grounded on the SET framework developed by Homans (1961). All the research study participants described leadership style and behavior themes that aligned with the constructs of SET, as Imam and Chambel (2020) specified in terms of employee engagement, commitment, and empowerment, leading to increased engagement and productivity through reciprocity norms and interpersonal relationships between two parties. Although different elements of engagement were shared through the findings of Nachmias et al. (2021), who discussed SET's physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions and the positive relationship between organizational leadership and employees, each was a component of

my research leading to higher employee engagement and productivity. When employees feel valued and supported by their organization, they are more likely to be actively engaged and perform their best.

The first finding of this research study is the leadership style and behavior theme, particularly a leader's ability to establish a culture that promotes engagement, influences how employees perceive their work environment and contributes to employee engagement and personal and organizational goals achievement. Employees evaluate the benefits and costs associated with their participation based on the principle of SET, which posits that interacting parties assess the reciprocity of their interactions (Sabastian, 2021). The interaction and relationship between organizational leaders and employees will be evaluated based on what each is putting into the relationship and what each is gaining in the transaction as an exchange of benefits or values. Leadership style and behavior supporting employee participation in organizational activities, recognizing employee contribution, promoting work-life balance, and motivation through well-defined engagement strategies helps employees stay motivated and engaged as an exchange defined in SET constructs.

The participants also emphasized the necessity for leaders to establish a positive, trust-based, and reciprocal relationship between leadership and employees and apply it through an engagement strategy that correlates with the SET framework. This finding aligns with Sabastian's (2021) research findings, highlighting the use of SET in understanding leadership style and strategies and prioritizing supporting employees' physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions, leading to mutual benefits, perceived

support, and fulfillment of expectations, which ultimately enhances employee engagement, productivity, and positive behavior. The leadership style and behavior theme emphasized the importance of leadership behavior and approach in positively impacting employee engagement and productivity based on the reciprocal benefit assumed between employees and organizational leadership.

Furthermore, the leadership style theme finding correlates with the study's conceptual framework, SET, with a premise that if the leader creates a favorable work environment, it will likely foster engaged and productive employees through positive social exchange between employees and organizational leadership, a balanced work-life result, and other benefits (Jais & Suat, 2022; Simbula et al., 2023). Therefore, many IT organizational employee engagement strategies are led by leadership through a supportive leadership style and behavior. IT organizational leadership has the potential to keep and influence employees towards increased engagement, productivity, and organizational goal achievements.

Theme 2: Conducive and Inclusive Organizational Culture and Environment

Upon conducting a thorough analysis of the data collected from research study participants, it became evident that a conducive and inclusive organizational culture and environment is the second theme that emerged as a strategy for improving employee engagement. P1, P2, and P3 shared that understanding employee differences in age, gender, interest, and cultural and ethnic backgrounds and building solid relationships with employees significantly improved employee engagement and productivity. Another

effective way of improving employee engagement within IT organizations is by taking appropriate measures to enhance the work environment's overall quality and ensuring it is conducive for employees to get engaged and be productive. Organizational leaders are successful when they ensure the physiological needs of employees and create a conducive work environment to enable employees to meet their needs. The leaders can do this through a strategic plan described as a component of their employee engagement plan (McLeod et al., 2021). My confirmed interpretation of the research study participant's responses was that they needed to support employee diversity in terms of culture, ethnicity, ideology, gender, and age, and they have well-planned and executed engagement strategies that enabled their employees to perform effectively, leading to their improved overall organization productivity. For example, P3 stated the importance of correctly understanding and managing employee's cultural, ethnic, and ideological differences within an engagement strategy. P2 highlighted the importance of having an organizational culture and environment that increased employee interest in what they were doing and made them feel valued in their contribution. Table 4 displays the conducive and inclusive organizational culture and environment theme with frequency from the research study participants' responses and data analysis.

Table 4

Participants' Reference and Frequency to Theme 2: Conducive and Inclusive Organizational Culture and Environment

Participants Themes/Subthemes	Frequency	Percentage of total
P1, P2, P3 Inclusive organizational culture	15	75 %
P2, P3 Conducive work environment	5	25 %
Total	20	100 %

Creating a work environment that fosters comfort and enables employees to excel is crucial. Leadership in organizations plays a crucial role in facilitating a work-life balance culture and creating a positive work environment, directly impacting employee engagement, productivity, and the achievement of organizational goals. Employees who perceive that their leaders support explicit and implicit socioeconomic values reciprocate by working effectively toward achieving shared goals (Jais & Suat, 2022). Participants shared their strategy to provide work-life balance with a flexible work schedule during the pandemic and post-pandemic era without compromising organizational goal achievements. Similarly, Simbula et al. (2023) found that creating a favorable work environment, advocating work-life balance, and addressing diversity in organizational engagement strategy helps improve employee engagement and productivity. According to Mishra and Bharti's (2020) findings, implementing flexible schedules that support work-life balance significantly benefits employees and organizations by improving employee engagement. Research study participants explained that creating a work environment that suits employees' interests improves their feelings toward their organization, increases

productivity, and reduces disengagement. However, organizational leaders still need to address the challenge of changing work environments as more and more IT employees are working remotely, and engagement strategies need to address how to go about this change in work patterns. P3 stated, "Remote work is a blessing and a curse. Out of sight, out of mind is a human mentality." P3 continued, "Great contributors can be disengaged because wherever they sit, they may see something else." P3 stated that working from the office contributes to face-to-face interaction among leaders and employees, but remote work took this interaction away. P3 shared, "Being out of sight is a considerable danger, and I think that is one of the most significant causes of employee disengagement."

A conducive and inclusive work environment and culture makes employees feel included, comfortable, engaged, and productive. P1 and P2 expressed similar viewpoints on inclusiveness and the importance of embracing organizational culture, which creates a conducive work environment that benefits both the employee and the organization. P1 stated, "Get everybody included from the beginning. Employees will have to buy into it from the beginning." In addition, P1 stated, "Inclusive engagement strategy implementation in every aspect of the project and organizational stages makes them part of the organization and feel included. Employees who feel included and feel a sense of belonging will be engaged and productive. An inclusive work environment enhances employee engagement, commitment, job satisfaction, and productivity. Han and McLean (2020) examined how a leadership strategy that supports families and an organization's culture can impact work-life balance, job satisfaction, employee engagement, and commitment in IT-based organizations. The researcher found that an approach that

promotes a supportive family environment and inclusiveness in leadership strategy positively affected work-life balance, the work-family climate within the organization, job satisfaction, and employee engagement. P2 stated the importance of an inclusive work culture that embraces employee engagement and recognition and said, “Employees will not tend to stay but to leave or jump into another job very quickly. There is a great deal in engaging all employees, keeping them interested in the work they are doing and the value they are contributing.” P1 also shared, “Employees should feel they are part of that organization and valuable for organizational goal achievements. Their heart should be with the organization and the strategy the organization is following.”

A vital leadership engagement strategy is ensuring a conducive and inclusive work culture and environment for employees. Organizational leaders prioritizing inclusive culture and work-life balance and creating a positive environment directly impact employee engagement, productivity, and organizational goal success. Sabastian (2021) explored the significance of effective leadership strategies in promoting employee well-being, inclusiveness, diversity, engagement, and productivity, and the findings demonstrate that a conducive and employee-supportive leadership strategy positively influences work-life balance, work environment, motivation, and employee engagement. P2 and P3 shared similar engagement strategies that they use. P2 stated, “Treating all the same and in fairness helps employee engagement improvements. Diversity in all aspects is important. Other aspects of diversity, in addition to gender and generation, that should be considered in organizational engagement strategy are culture, belief, and ethnicity.” As engagement strategies, P1, P2, and P3 include flexible working schedules and

environments, allowing employees to work remotely with varying daily starting and departure times. P2 discussed including flexible work hours, like starting the day early or late, working only a few days with the total required hours for the week, and with a remote or hybrid working schedule by following a well-defined and agreed-upon procedure. P2 shared,

Pre-pandemic, at work, we are social in nature with happy hour, coffee thing, and brown bag lunch thing where people could get together. Pre-pandemic, interact and engage during innovative idea/board sessions, where employees could suggest ideas on things that they want to build if they could or ideas to make things improved and better. We have monthly or bi-monthly all-hands meetings to inform employees about what is going on in the organization and share our goals for the year and how they might have shifted or changed. We do a lot of not just in manager-to-employee appreciation but also peer-to-peer recognition sessions within our conversations. All these things kept people engaged.

Olsen et al. (2023) examined stress and employee engagement in the COVID-19 era while working remotely, and the finding shows that managing work-life balance through leadership support and engagement strategies helps to avoid stress and improve engagement and productivity. P2 and P3 discussed the change in their engagement strategy post-COVID-19 pandemic work environment. P2 stated,

Postpandemic, we continued our meetings, but via Zoom. I do not think people might be as engaged from a paying attention perspective. So, we try to make it fun, do interactive quizzes or polls, and keep employees engaged in the conversation. Let them

know what is happening and ensure our employees' voices are heard. To ensure things are working, conduct formal surveys or less formal conversations with leadership.

P3 shared, “post-pandemic, there are so many distractions. Sitting remotely is one of the most significant challenges; even great contributors can be disengaged. I well-managed and addressed through detailed plans within engagement and other organizational strategies.”

After analyzing data collected from all participants, one identified theme was creating an all-inclusive organizational culture conducive to employee engagement and productivity improvement. Olsen et al. (2023) discussed that providing work-from-home options for employees positively impacts employees' well-being if the challenge is addressed through a well-planned employee engagement strategy. Strategies like work flexibility, understanding individual differences and backgrounds, understanding diversity, and the multicultural nature of employees may help engage employees. Also, strategies include actions that help employees feel a sense of belongingness, offer opportunities to become productive and provide autonomy that includes decision-making and plans for understanding age, gender, cultural, and societal differences. Plans for addressing these elements with an established engagement strategy can improve employee commitment and productivity. In addition, participants expressed that a diverse workforce requires an organizational strategy that will help to understand individual and organizational needs clearly. The organizational strategy must also include aligning the engagement strategy to the employees' different backgrounds to help them achieve their personal and organizational goals.

Theme 2 Correlation to the Literature Review

The findings within the theme of a conducive and inclusive organizational culture and environment aligned with several findings from the literature review included in this research study, particularly with the work of Insan and Masmarulan (2021). Engagement strategies used by the participants of this research study to create an inclusive and conducive work environment theme mirrored that of Insan and Masmarulan (2021). Understanding the cultural dynamics within an organization and between organizational leaders and employees will help determine how these organizational cultures can be used to improve employee engagement and organizational productivity (Insan & Masmarulan, 2021). The findings from this study suggest that IT organizational leaders need to analyze several factors influencing employee engagement, including organizational culture inclusiveness and a conducive work environment through a well-defined engagement strategy. The conducive and inclusive organizational culture and environment theme aligned with existing literature that it can contribute to employee engagement and productivity (Sahni, 2021). Specifically, employees who feel connected to their leaders and workplace culture tend to adhere enthusiastically to organizational strategies and goal achievement.

In addition, other literature review content also aligns with this theme and includes factors that motivate employees and cultivate a supportive environment to encourage commitment and engagement (Sahni, 2021; Tan et al., 2021). According to Sahni (2021), effective leadership strategies that promote employee engagement can create a mutually beneficial dynamic where employees feel valued and included in a

meaningful work environment and organizational culture. Employees getting valued and included, in turn, inspire them to put forth their best effort to achieve organizational goals and improve their engagement. Tan et al. (2021) also stressed the importance of organizational leadership in managing workplace dynamics in addressing diversity and promoting a positive atmosphere that fosters employee engagement, creativity, and a positive perception of the organization. Similarly, Han and McLean (2020) and Sabastian (2021) explored the impact of leadership strategies on employee well-being and productivity. Their findings revealed that a family-supportive leadership strategy positively influences work-life balance, organizational work-family climate, job satisfaction, and employee engagement in IT-based organizations, which leads to increased employee attraction, retention, and satisfaction. The second theme in my research study correlates with the literature review in that it is indisputable that the quality of organizational culture has a direct and strong correlation with employee engagement. It is imperative to acknowledge that culture plays a vital role in enhancing engagement.

Theme 2 Correlation to the SET

The conducive and inclusive organizational culture and environment theme relates to Homans's (1961) SET framework, a framework based upon the premise that employees experience a series of interactions with organizational leaders that determine their engagement and productivity. Creating a positive and welcoming culture and environment within an organization is crucial. Homans (1961) explained that SET suggests that employees' interactions with their leaders can significantly impact their

engagement and productivity. Homans (1961) further valued interpersonal relationships within the organization and explained how they significantly affect the physiological conditions of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement, highlighting its significance in fostering a productive and engaged workforce reciprocal exchange toward organizational goal achievement. It is essential to understand that a social exchange occurs when there is mutual benefit for both the employee and the organization. This exchange can lead to improved productivity for both parties, making it imperative to prioritize creating a positive work environment and inclusive culture (Homans, 1961).

SET was a relevant conceptual framework for this study to explore how organizational leaders successfully implement their engagement strategy. I found that by fostering a supportive, inclusive, conducive, and balanced work-life culture, the participants created positive work environments that directly influenced their employee engagement productivity and helped them meet their organizational goals. Sahni (2021) and Tan et al. (2021) utilized the SET to explore different aspects of employee engagement and its relationship to productivity and organizational goal achievements. Their findings revealed that leadership strategies fostering effective employee engagement created a mutually beneficial dynamic as employees experienced the inclusive culture. Sahni (2021) and Tan et al. (2021) found that employees felt the work environment was positive and meaningful, inspiring them to dedicate their energy and effort toward greater engagement and achieving the organizational goals. Similarly, the conducive and inclusive organizational culture and environment theme correlates with the core principle of SET that employees who feel valued and supported by their

organization and leadership are more likely to be actively involved and perform at their best. As per the findings of Nachmias et al. (2021) using SET as a conceptual framework, a positive relationship between organizational leadership and employees strongly increases engagement and productivity across physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. Nachmias et al. (2021) findings highlighted the importance of fostering a conducive work environment and inclusiveness and collaborative work culture where both parties feel valued and assume mutual benefit. Organizations can benefit from highly motivated and committed employees by prioritizing positive interactions and inclusiveness. Employee perception of their organization and leader's support for socioeconomic explicit and implicit value, in return, they will reciprocally support their leaders and organization by working efficiently towards achieving goals. The presence of positive social exchange between employees, organizations, and leadership supported through an inclusive culture and conducive work environment-based engagement strategy correlates to this research study's conceptual framework, SET. Employees' favorable cognitive perception of their work environment and organizational supporting culture leads them to engage toward productivity and organizational goal achievement.

Theme 3: Effective Communication and Feedback

The third emerging theme from this research study is fostering effective, open, transparent communication and feedback with a loop. Organizations need effective, open, and honest communication methods to maintain a good relationship with employees and avoid miscommunication, disengagement, or reduction in productivity. According to Santoso et al. (2022), practical, open communication and employee feedback promote

employee engagement and increase productivity toward organizational goal achievement. The findings from the effective communication and feedback theme align with research findings conducted by Govender and Bussin (2020) using SET as a conceptual framework to explain the importance of open and effective communication between IT leaders and employees in reaching a mutual understanding of the organizational and project-level goals and plans to achieve these goals. Communication through regular updates mechanisms to reduce workplace misunderstanding promotes the need to be on the same page on what is happening in the organization and avoid conflict. As Xuecheng et al. (2022) claimed, an effective communication plan will help employees understand the benefits and costs of their interaction, which is the core concept of this study's conceptual framework, SET. This research study finding also indicates that IT based organizational leaders with transparent and open communication strategies and plans with their employees' experience increased engagement, productivity, and better organizational outcomes.

Each participant expressed the importance of effective communication strategy and implementation as their tool for a quality relationship with employees, which, in turn, enhanced their employees' engagement and productivity. Through the work of Audenaert et al. (2020), the researchers found effective communication that included openness, trust, transparency, and feedback on comprehensive organizational activities engaged employees, and they found that it created opportunities for their IT organizational leaders to build high-quality relationships, confidence, and successful organizational goal achievements. Participants indicated that they promoted open-door, transparent, and trust-

based communication by setting up feedback loops, which can be considered in this research study as subthemes, through regular team and organization-level meetings and other update means like organizational communication methods and documents. This theme of effective communication and feedback and corresponding subthemes aligned with the study conducted by Nachmias et al. (2021), who found the significance of positive employee-organization relationships, communication, and feedback from strategic leadership fostered improved engagement, productivity, and organizational success. Positive relationships and effective communication between employers and employees can result in higher employee engagement and productivity across physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions and mitigates conflicts by reducing misunderstandings and miscommunication and being on the same page in all aspect of organizational and project-level communication and higher employee engagement, leading to organizational productivity.

Tan et al. (2021) emphasized the negative impact of an undermined reciprocity and organizational exchange relationship, not communicating the role and importance of each employee and not providing updates on the organizational status and activities to employees, which reduces motivation and engagement, leading to decreased engagement and productivity, matches the study's findings.

Conversely, audiovisual meetings, individual meetings, text messages, instant messages, emails, and regular meetings at team and leadership levels are some of the communication methods described by the participants of this research study. Table 5

contains the effective communication and feedback theme with the highest frequency placed on open and transparent communication from the research study participants.

Table 5

Participants' Reference and Frequency to Theme 3: Effective communication and Feedback

Participants	Themes/Subthemes	Frequency	Percentage of total
P1, P2, P3	Open and transparent communication	12	75 %
P2, P3	Effective feedback	4	25 %
	Total	16	100 %

All research study participants shared that effective organizational communication improves organizational outcomes as employees are aware of the organization's activities and become more committed and engaged, thus increasing their productivity. P1 stated that people will react more positively to organizational goal achievements if they know what they are getting involved in and understand the end goal through effective communication. P1 shared, "Leaders and organizations communicate with employees openly and well; then the employee will follow their leads." In addition, P1 said, "Employees should feel that they are part of that organization, valuable for organizational goal achievements, and kept in communication well." P2 stated that ongoing communication is the most critical strategy to engage employees, and communication is necessary for employees and organizations to succeed. P2 explained, "It is all about effective communication, and leadership needs to ensure things are happening as expected and conduct an all-hands meeting. Sharing knowledge is power. The more we engage people and share information, the more people will know things." Further, P3

stated that communication is the most vital engagement strategy to improve employee engagement and productivity. P3 said,

Communication is the most important one. The first and foremost point is, does every employee understand the mission and vision of the company? Why they are here? Everybody needs a job, and they need to join a company to earn money to make ends meet. But why this job? Why is this company right? The strategy we use to communicate with employees first and foremost is communication, where periodic and effective communication reaches each employee. Moreover, during specific training engagement training, especially when onboarding an employee, we give enough information to the employee to get the feel and understanding of the company.

P1, P2, and P3 also discussed the importance of communication as a strategy to engage employees as a partner in the organization and let them know where the organization is, where it plans to go, and how it plans to achieve the goals and be on the same page. While effective communication tools certainly play a crucial role in employee engagement and organizational goal achievements, the research study participants underscored the significance of the topic's leaders choose to communicate that promote a strong sense of community, engagement, and productivity. For instance, Participant 1 and Participant 2 highlighted the value of leaders actively engaging in conversations regarding employees' life events, such as weddings and birthdays, welcoming new additions to their families, and congratulating and celebrating.

All three participants noted the importance of the feedback loop as a strategy to engage an employee and help them feel included within an organization's communication strategy. Alam and Singh (2021) described how employee feedback on past activities and future desires could give organizational leaders the foundation for developing action plans to develop engagement strategies and improve productivity. P1 mentioned the significance of getting feedback and working on collected feedback results as part of an effective communication engagement strategy without being offensive, argumentative, and authoritative. P1 said, "It should be the leadership style and characteristics to communicate, make it clear, explain, get feedback, and answer their question so that they can get engaged." P3 also stated the importance of feedback with the statement below,

In addition to communications, we do periodic employee engagement activities. So that we get a measure of how each employee is engaged, tap on communication 360 feedback, and look for customer input in whoever is facing our employees. Every employee should be like a partner and should be part of the company, and that is the level of engagement that we are looking for and the point is how do we bring everybody to that level?

Audenaert et al. (2020) discussed that adequately collected and analyzed employee feedback helps establish quality relationships, higher levels of trust, and achieve organizational outcomes. P3 discussed feedback as a way of performing an organizational survey to understand employee satisfaction and capture employee feelings, which is given freely and anonymously with a value to use as input to check and redefine employee engagement strategy. "Feedback is a communication means as an

organizational survey to understand employee satisfaction. Conduct a satisfaction survey. The most important thing is enabling an environment where employees can think, speak, and share freely." Feedback loops help IT organizational leaders engage employees and create opportunities for leaders to build healthy relationships with their leaders and work together towards organizational goal achievements.

According to the study's participants, their responses, and my data analysis, fostering effective, transparent, and open communication with a feedback cycle as a core theme is vital for boosting employee engagement and enhancing productivity. P1, P2, and P3 respective organizations have implemented an organizational work process and strategy that provides multiple communication channels, including weekly and daily update meetings, emails, and tools like Microsoft Teams and Zoom. The participants stressed the importance of transparent communication in promoting employee engagement and keeping communication lines open. The key objective of this communication strategy is to keep everyone informed and on the same page through regular in-person and virtual meetings, workshops, and company-sponsored team-building events. Participants shared that they regularly hold team meetings, utilizing all available and efficient communication tools and strategies to enable employees to address any obstacles to creativity, innovation, and self-expression. They emphasized the value of employee feedback for obtaining insights into their thoughts and enhancing job satisfaction. Effective communication necessitates leaders possessing open door policy, active listening, inclusiveness, and other leadership skills.

Theme 3 Correlation to the Literature Review

Effective communication themes as an organizational culture, including openness, transparency, and feedback loop as subthemes of communication, are consistent with the existing literature on strategies to engage IT organizational employees. This theme aligned with the findings of Sunyoto et al. (2021) on how to improve engagement and productivity, showing that the perception of organizational leadership on communication and feedback directly affects employee engagement and organizational productivity. Sunyoto et al. (2021) examined the effect of employee engagement on their participants' belongingness and attachment to their organization through motivation for increased productivity, organizational success, and employee characteristics like organizational cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors. Sunyoto et al. (2021) also discussed organizational culture, including communication as a strategy for leaders to create engagement that offers a sense of organizational belongingness and willingness to change employees' perceptions of the organization in exchange for the benefits and rewards from employee productivity. Insan and Masmarulan (2021) emphasized the importance of organizational culture in improving work engagement and employee productivity in the context of the cultural relationship between leaders and employees, aligning the role of effective organizational communication theme in establishing a positive culture and fostering employee engagement and productivity. According to Geibel and Otto (2022) and Zhou et al. (2022), effective communication styles and approaches foster solid emotional attachment, motivation, and trust between leaders and employees and promote mutual understanding and healthy relationships. The authors also found that a supportive work

environment encourages employee commitment, engagement, and productivity, which correlated with the compelling communication theme in this research study.

Implementing effective organizational communication strategies can enhance employee engagement by providing quality information, eliminating communication barriers and misunderstandings, and being on the same page throughout the organizational process and activities toward common goal achievement. Effective communication, described by P1, P2, and P3 as a strategy to improve employee engagement in IT based organizations, is consistent with existing literature on increasing IT-based organization's employee engagement and productivity in the Washington DC Metro area. Effective organizational communication and feedback strategies that provide quality information offer the opportunity for comprehensive organizational mutual understanding, eliminating or minimizing communication barriers, and enhancing employee engagement and productivity.

Theme 3 Correlation to the SET

I used Homans's (1961) social exchange theory to explore IT organizational leaders' strategies to increase employee engagement and improve productivity. Based on the SET, employees experience a series of interactions with organizational leaders; when this relationship is positive, each will reciprocate the trust and respect they receive, which correlates to this research study's findings. Organizations that grasp the drivers that engage their employees may foster a nurturing atmosphere stimulating organizational belongingness, engagement, and productivity. Using SET as a conceptual framework, Sahni (2021) discussed the impact of employee engagement on job satisfaction,

organizational commitment, and employees' intentions to do more, recognizing its crucial role in organizational sustainability and success. Sahni's (2021) finding matches this study's core themes of effective communication. Effective communication and mutual understanding between employees and organizational leaders, based on the benefit and cost analysis of their relationship, will create a mutually beneficial dynamic that will improve employee engagement. My research findings align with those of Sahni (2021) aligned such an approach leads to a positive sense of meaningful work, inspiring employees to dedicate their energy and effort towards achieving organizational goals.

Within the communication and feedback theme context and the data analysis of participants' responses in this research study, the third theme findings affirm the fundamental principles of SET, highlighting mutual understanding, positive relationships, and the reciprocal nature of benefits. Participant 1 articulated that when leaders exhibit favorable treatment toward employees, it is probable that employees will reciprocate with increased motivation, engagement, and productivity. Furthermore, Participant 2 and Participant 3 observed that showing respect to employees fosters a heightened engagement in their daily work, fostering a solid commitment to the organization's success.

SET fosters a way to understand effective relationships and communication, work attitudes, and behaviors, leading to employee engagement, commitment, and empowerment in promoting personal responsibility, appreciation, and trust (Nachmias et al., 2021). Nachmias et al. (2021) used SET as a lens and described its findings concerning employees forming professional relationships and trust through effective

communication and understanding. These findings aligned with the findings of this research study. In addition, in reciprocal relations, Xuecheng et al. (2022) have contributed significantly with emphasis on the obligation aspect of SET; specifically, Xuecheng et al. (2022) explored how one party may feel a sense of duty to reciprocate when they receive benefits from another party through acts of positivity, communication, and devotion. This insight highlights the intricacies of social interactions and the importance of understanding the dynamics of reciprocity through effective communication and feedback strategy. Homans's (1961) theory, known as SET, is highly relevant in organizational leadership. According to SET, when management creates a platform for a two-way relationship through effective communication and feedback, employees are more likely to become positively engaged. This theory corresponds with a compelling communication and feedback theme identified in this study, where constant communication and feedback loop between managers and employees is a critical strategy for actively engaging IT employees in the Washington DC Metro area of the United States. Therefore, managers must include an effective communication and feedback strategy to improve employee engagement and productivity.

Theme 4: Rewards, Recognition, Empowerment, Training, Career Development, and Appreciation

Rewards, recognition, empowerment, training, career development, and appreciation are the fourth significant themes and subthemes identified through the collected research study data analysis. All participants used reward, recognition,

empowerment, training, and career development strategies in some way or form to improve employee engagement and increase productivity in their respective IT organizations. P1, P2, and P3 recognize that employee engagement may come from organizational leadership motivation and recognition strategy for those working towards organizational goals, and leaders need to provide the support needed for the employee's success. According to Jais and Suat (2022), an employee's perception of their manager's support for explicit and implicit socioeconomic values can lead to reciprocal support and engagement from employees toward their leaders and organization, resulting in more efficient work toward achieving goals. Using SET as a conceptual framework, Simbula et al. (2023) also emphasized investing in developing high-quality social exchange-based relationships, recognition, values, and contractual obligations for success in employee engagement and organizational goal achievements. The finding from this theme establishes a connection between both Simbula et al. (2023) and Jais and Suat's (2022) research result that it is essential to use theories like SET and identify strategies through employee recognition and reward-related activities in engaging employees and help them be productive. This research study participants mentioned that recognizing and appreciating employees will create a sense of belongingness in employees and serve their organization as part of the engine that moves the organization forward, not just passengers. Table 6 displays the rewards, recognition, appreciation, empowerment, training, and career development themes with frequency from the research study participants' responses and data analysis.

Table 6

Participants' Reference and Frequency to Theme 4: Rewards, Recognition, Appreciation, Empowerment, Training, and Career Development

Participants Themes/Subthemes	Frequency	Percentage of total
P1, P2, P3 Rewards, recognition, appreciation, empowerment	9	75 %
P2, P3 Training and career development	3	25 %
Total	12	100 %

Employees have different needs, and organizational leaders need to understand that this unique characteristic may require specific engagement strategies to ensure employees contribute toward productivity and organizational goal achievements. Effective leadership can leverage relationships to improve employee engagement and productivity by recognizing employees' benefits as rewards for their contributions toward engagement, productivity, and organizational success (Imam & Chambel, 2020). Employees are valuable resources for an organization, and leadership recognizing and rewarding their contribution will make them valid and increase their engagement. Alsunki et al. (2020) explained that employees perform much better when leaders acknowledge their efforts, hard work, and a job well done within the organization. All participants noted that organizational leaders who offer attractive benefits and appreciation motivate employees to remain engaged and productive. In addition, this research study participants emphasized that training and career development of employees have been instrumental in fostering an engaged and high-performing workforce. Organizational leaders need to have an effective engagement strategy to take

the necessary steps to understand and raise employee motivation factors and levels to determine the required strategy for achieving organizational goals. P1, P2, and P3 expressed employee engagement strategy and the importance of building relationships to understand employee desires and commitment and build a foundation for reward, motivation, and positive engagement. P1 stated, "Employees should feel they are part of that organization and valuable for organizational goal achievements. Their heart should be with the organization and the strategy the organization is following." In addition, P1 noted, "When employees feel not included in organizational activities, and they are not appreciated, they will get disengaged; leaders should apply engagement strategies like appreciation, reward, and motivation to make the employee feel included and belong to the organization."

All participants used a reward and recognition strategy to improve employee engagement. Employee recognition and award is the timely, informal, or formal acknowledgment of an employee's or group of employees' achievement, contribution, and value-adding results beyond reasonable expectations, supporting the organization's goals and values and initiating more engagement expectations from employees (Maslow, 1943). P2 stated, "Employees feel included and recognized for their contribution by different awards and recognition strategies, including cash awards, paid time off, pat on the back, and other intrinsic and extrinsic values." Moreover, P2 noted,

Sometimes, specific individuals may become disengaged due to a lack of recognition. This may occur if their work is no longer attractive to them or if they have been working on the same group of apps for many years and are seeking a

new experience. They may also feel pigeonholed if they are the only ones who know how to do a specific task. Poor leadership or a desire to explore new opportunities may also contribute to disengagement. It is essential for employees to feel valued and recognized for their efforts, contributions, and engagement in achieving organizational success.

Different employees may react to engagement based on the type of reward they get. Employees who perceive that their organization supports their economic and socioemotional needs are more likely to be engaged and committed in return (Jais & Suat, 2022; Simbula et al., 2023). This reciprocal exchange is motivated by the employees' perception of the value and fairness of the rewards system, which, in turn, strengthens their level of engagement and commitment to the organization. P3 also stated, “The level of compensation an employee receives has a direct impact on their sense of belonging within an organization. Failure to reward or acknowledge their contributions to the company can lead to disengagement and a sense of disconnect.” P1 shared, “It is important for employers to ensure that their employees are suitably recognized and compensated for their hard work and dedication.”

The results of this study theme support the concept of an exchange process between the organization and the employee, as employee rewards significantly predict employee engagement and organizational leadership needs to implement different engagement strategies to motivate and engage them towards organizational success. Training and professional career development are other engagement strategies mentioned by IT leaders to engage and improve employees' productivity under this theme.

Employees need direction for growth and a knowledge-gaining strategy within the organization to stay engaged. According to Xuecheng et al. (2022), offering training and development programs, cultivating a positive work atmosphere, and boosting job satisfaction can increase employee engagement, retention, and productivity, enhancing the organization's reputation within its industry. P2 noted, "lack of recognition and clearly defined career growth path, as an engagement strategy will make employees feel bored, disengage and become uninterested in working in the organization with full capability." All participants of the organizational leaders expressed the need for an engagement strategy to understand the weaknesses and strengths of each employee and design training and coaching accordingly towards employee training, engagement, and career growth. Leaders need to acknowledge and appreciate employees who go above and beyond expectations. Often, employees may not feel motivated to work harder if their efforts go unrecognized. Xiong and King (2019) suggest that leaders need to keep employees engaged by providing opportunities to expand their knowledge and skills and encourage them to be innovative.

P1, P2, and P3 recognize the need for organizational career paths and related training strategies, which differentiate the organization from competitors, attract and retain skillful employees, and generate higher employee engagement. P1 stated, "As a leader, I believe I should understand each employee personally, be a trainer, and coach them where they need training rather than being a taskmaster to engage employees toward productivity." P3 stated,

For an employee to increase job productivity, organizations should check if this is the job the employee wants. Is it the right job you want to do? Does your employee's career objective align with the job that they are doing? Otherwise, they may only be partially engaged because it aligns differently from their career interests, personal interests, or learning of the objectives or future growth objectives. Check to start the onboarding and if this fits the role and aligns with their profile perspective and future objectives.

IT organizational leaders need to understand the importance of employee engagement and help develop and implement effective and unique strategies addressing employee differences to increase employee engagement and improve productivity. Employees are more engaged when they receive rewards, recognition, empowerment, and appreciation. Different strategies need to be used for each employee and team to acknowledge their contributions, improve efficiency, and achieve organizational goals. Motivation and engagement with leaders' trust, recognition, and appreciation also improve employee productivity. Valued employees have higher satisfaction and productivity levels, and inspiring and praising employees fosters engagement and improved productivity. Empowered and valued employees are committed and ambassadors for their organization. Recognition as an individual or member of a group is essential, as employees want to feel a sense of achievement for their work. Reward, recognition, empowerment, and appreciation are fundamental human needs that help engage employees and improve their productivity.

Theme 4 Correlation to the Literature Review

Recognition and support themes discussed here as an organizational engagement strategy in the form of reward, recognition, appreciation, training, and supporting employee career development paths aligned with the findings of the literature reviewed in this research study with the like of Nu Ngoc Ton et al. (2021) and Uka and Prendi (2021). According to the findings of Nu Ngoc Ton et al. (2021) and Uka and Prendi (2021), there are different methods that organizations can employ to improve employee engagement. Their findings light on the importance of transparency in organizational practices and the need for a strategic approach considering motivational factors and monetary rewards. By implementing such recognition and appreciation practices, organizations can create a work environment that encourages employee engagement and ultimately improves overall employee and organizational productivity. In addition, other literature reviewed in this research study aligned with the findings. For example, according to Purnama et al. (2022), the impact of productivity pays and the role of rewards in fostering employee engagement and productivity has been strongly emphasized in the organizational engagement strategy list.

Meanwhile, Xuecheng et al. (2022) have extensively explored the effects of training and development, work environment, and job satisfaction on employee retention, engagement, and productivity. Purnama et al. (2022) further explained that establishing reward systems that make employees feel appreciated can lead to their reciprocation by staying with the organization for extended periods, improving engagement, and generating greater output, which aligned with this research study recognition and support

themes and subthemes. By implementing the recognition and support themes outlined by P1, P2, and P3, organizations in the IT sector can effectively boost employee engagement and productivity. Existing literature supports this strategy and has been successful in the Washington DC Metro area. In addition, Zhou et al. (2022) proposed that leadership styles can significantly improve employee belongingness, motivation, engagement, and productivity, aligning with the appreciation and recognition theme. They underscored the significance of organizational strategies that prioritize the cultivation of trust, the establishment of a sense of safety, the promotion of comfortable engagement, and the recognition of employees' needs. Investing in your employees' well-being and morale is critical to success in any industry, and IT is no exception. Organizations can create a positive and productive work environment that benefits organizational leadership and employees through a clearly defined strategy by prioritizing recognition and support.

Theme 4 Correlation to the SET

The conceptual framework for this study is SET. SET can be a lens to check for effective relationships, work attitudes, and behaviors, facilitating beneficial outcomes within an organization through sociological and psychological exchanges, leading to employee engagement, commitment, and empowerment. Leaders who use SET's constructs as a theory to define their leadership strategy promote personal responsibility, appreciation, and trust among employees. This approach also enables employees to form professional relationships, friendships, and organizational groupings based on social responsibility (Nachmias et al., 2021). Applying key constructs of social exchange theory contributes to employee engagement, commitment, and empowerment, leading to

strategic productivity through reciprocity norms and interpersonal relationships. The foundation of SET is based on the idea that organizations and employees have a mutual relationship. This relationship is strengthened when both parties feel supported, have their expectations fulfilled, and receive benefits. As a result, employee engagement, productivity, and positive behavior are increased. The study conducted by Akkermans et al. (2019) emphasized that employee perception of organizational expectations being met leads to increased productivity, which can have beneficial impacts on the organization. When employees feel compelled to reciprocate based on the benefits they received through recognition, appreciation, positivity, and devotion, they will engage more and be productive. The results of this research study about the recognition and appreciation themes and subthemes align with the underlying principles of SET's reciprocal relationship nature. According to SET, employees are more likely to become positively engaged when management creates an engagement strategy based on rewards, recognition, empowerment, training, career development, and appreciation corresponding with this research study's appreciation and recognition themes. Therefore, managers need to prioritize effective rewards, recognition, empowerment, training, career development, and appreciation to foster positive employee engagement and productivity.

Applications to Professional Practice

Organizational leaders use multiple strategies to improve employee engagement and increase productivity. This multiple case study explored IT organizational leaders' strategies to improve employee engagement in the Washington DC Metro area.

Organizational leaders can benefit from this research study's findings because it provides

crucial and critical strategies to enhance employee engagement within their organizations; specifically, IT organizational leaders can use the findings from this research study to improve employee engagement, which would, in turn, lead to increased productivity, improved organizational competitive advantage, and organizational goal achievements. The findings of this study aligned with previous research findings on different strategies to promote employee engagement and productivity. There is also a link between this research study's conceptual framework, SET, the literature review, and the findings of this study. Employee disengagement harms employee motivation and can significantly hinder organizational productivity and goal achievements (McCrae, 2020). To enhance employee engagement, IT organizational leaders should carefully assess factors that could help engage each employee and tailor their engagement strategies accordingly.

I presented the results from this study as practical strategies that successful IT organizational leaders use to engage employees. This research study's findings may benefit other domain organizational leaders looking to develop engagement strategies, improve productivity, and achieve organizational goals. Success in developing leadership strategies through research studies is achieved when other organizational leaders extract valuable lessons from their experiences (Hinduja et al., 2020). IT organizational leaders can use the findings of this research study to improve employee engagement and increase productivity toward organizational and employee goal achievements. The findings of this research study provide successful employee engagement strategies IT organizational leaders could use are: (a) leadership style and behaviors, (b) conducive and inclusive

organizational culture and environment, (c) effective communication and feedback, and (d) rewards, recognition, appreciation, empowerment, training, and career development.

This research study will describe the applicability of each identified engagement strategy within professional practice. Participants discussed the relevance of these themes as factors contributing to the enhancement of employee engagement and, subsequently, improved organizational productivity.

Leadership style and behaviors

All participants discussed that, in a professional context, it is evident that leadership style and behaviors play a pivotal role in shaping employee engagement and productivity while contributing to attaining organizational goals. Leadership style and behavioral, practical, and commonly understood strategic planning themes were identified as IT organizations' primary employee engagement strategy. The insights from IT leaders underscore the significance of actively involving employees in organizational activities and keeping them informed about individual and organizational strategy, plan, productivity, and expectations. As an expert in IT organizational leaders, all participants recommend that embracing a supportive leadership style and cultivating employee-centered strategic benefits can foster long-term organizational commitment, engagement, and productivity. In addition, based on the feedback gathered from these research participants, leaders should adopt a style and behavior that aligns with their employee's strengths and preferences so employees can feel recognized, valued, and feel a sense of belongingness.

Conducive And Inclusive Organizational Culture And Environment

Another theme identified by all participants was the presence of a conducive and inclusive organizational culture and environment as a necessary and critical factor that can influence employee engagement in contributing toward productivity and organizational goal achievements. In professional practice, it is universally acknowledged that establishing solid relationships and cultivating high-quality interactions with employees critically impact employee engagement. To effectively enhance employee engagement within IT organizations, a critical strategy involves implementing measures that enhance the overall quality of the work environment and make it conducive so employees can excel in their engagement and productivity toward organizational goal achievements. An ideal setting for leadership should encompass a conducive environment characterized by leaders who lead by example, promote and facilitate team building, objectively manage their employees with fairness, maintain an open-door policy, implement motivational practices, safeguard the interests of their employees, and welcome constructive criticism and feedback. Effective organizational leadership style and behavior should prioritize fulfilling employees' physiological needs and establishing a supportive work environment. These goals should be accomplished through a strategic plan outlined in the employee engagement strategy.

Effective Communication and Feedback

The third significant theme from this study pertains to the cultivation of effective, open, and transparent communication, supplemented by a feedback loop. Organizations must establish reliable and honest communication channels to foster a strong connection

with employees, as a lack of such communication can lead to misunderstanding, disengagement, and demotivation, which in turn may cause a decrease in productivity. The study participants emphasized that well-structured and effective communication and feedback systems are pivotal in enhancing employee engagement and stimulating the relationships between employees and leadership, ultimately contributing to improved productivity. In practice, effective communication encompasses traits like openness, trust, transparency, and feedback across all organizational operations. This approach fosters employee engagement and provides IT organizational leaders with opportunities to cultivate robust relationships, instill confidence, and effectively drive the attainment of organizational goals. From an IT organizational leadership perspective, cultivating positive relationships and establishing effective communication between employers and employees yields significant benefits, including heightened employee engagement and productivity across physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. Moreover, it mitigates conflicts by minimizing misunderstandings and miscommunications, ensuring alignment in all organizational and project-level communication aspects. Ultimately, this harmonious synergy promotes higher employee engagement and enhanced organizational productivity. According to the insights provided by all study participants, engaging employees has been instrumental in enabling every IT organization to foster trust, shape its unique culture, define its communication style, and refine its leadership approach. Open communication, feedback, and mutual understanding, in turn, profoundly influence motivating employees to participate in activities geared toward enhancing organizational productivity.

Rewards, Recognition, Appreciation, Empowerment, Training, and Career Development

The fourth theme and finding of this research study that organizations can apply as a strategy and help to improve employee engagement and productivity is rewards, recognition, empowerment, training, career development, and appreciation. In practice, employees represent invaluable assets to an organization. Recognizing and rewarding employee contributions validates their importance and amplifies their engagement and commitment. All participants employed rewards, recognition, empowerment, training, and career development strategies in their respective IT organizations to enhance employee engagement and boost productivity to varying degrees. Employees demonstrate enhanced productivity when leaders recognize and appreciate their dedication, diligence, and successful contributions to the organization. In the professional world, the idea of an exchange dynamics between the organization and its employees is evident, with employee rewards playing a crucial role in predicting employee engagement. Consequently, organizational leadership adopts diverse engagement strategies to incentivize and engage employees, ultimately steering them toward organizational productivity success. When IT organizational leaders apply such themes, employees who feel empowered and valued demonstrate strong commitment and often become enthusiastic advocates for their organization. Acknowledgment, whether as an individual or as part of a team, is vital as employees seek a sense of accomplishment in their work. Addressing fundamental human needs through rewards, recognition, empowerment, and appreciation is pivotal in engaging employees and enhancing their productivity.

This doctoral research study's findings provide strategies beneficial to IT organizational leaders who want to improve employee engagement and increase productivity. Also, IT organizational leaders may use these research study's findings to understand how employee engagement strategies increase motivation, productivity, and employee morale. Further, IT organizational leaders may use the findings to understand new, possible employee engagement strategies to improve employee productivity and employee and leadership relationships. The findings of this research study indicate that IT organizational leaders who implement essential employee engagement strategies encompassing leadership style, organizational culture, communication, rewards, recognition, appreciation, empowerment, training, and career development are more likely to achieve success in enhancing employee engagement and, as a result, drive improved organizational productivity and goal achievements. In summary, the participants highlighted the significance of employee recognition, development, and empowerment's impact on employee engagement and the pivotal role of communication across all leadership levels. In addition, this research study participants emphasized the importance of tailoring leadership strategies to address individual needs and fostering open, transparent communication to enhance employee engagement and organizational productivity. The strategies unveiled in this research study have the potential to drive positive and meaningful social change in the greater community.

Implications for Social Change

IT organizational leaders who foster and implement employee engagement strategies could positively contribute to social change by developing and investing in

their employees. Consequently, engaged and motivated employees are passionate about their work, resulting in productivity improvement and quality product delivery, contributing to positive outcomes for the employee, organization, and community around them. Engaged and productive employees show higher interest in their organization, continue high engagement, and quality personal lives supporting their families and the community around them. The research findings suggest that IT industry leaders can use effective employee engagement strategies to develop organizational leadership opportunities and programs for their employees and the community. This can positively impact the organization's competitiveness, profitability, and contribution to society and the surrounding community. Examples of such contributions could include event sponsorship and other related initiatives. When an IT organization's employees are engaged and productive, it can promote community development through the assistance and other tangible and intangible input from these employees to their families and society. IT organizational leaders can encourage employee engagement to bring about positive change in the community. Rohim and Budhiasa (2019) stated that employees feel more connected to their organizations when their leaders acknowledge their hard work, motivate them, and positively contribute to their community. By providing employment opportunities and actively participating in community development initiatives, IT organizations and their leaders can help improve the local economy, reduce unemployment rates, and increase volunteerism within the community. As individuals become increasingly involved in their workplace, they develop a heightened sense of commitment and investment in their organization's reputation and success and its impact

on the surrounding community. This dedication encompasses various aspects, including cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and psychological factors, all contributing to a more engaged and motivated workforce. By fostering the connection between employees and their community, organizations can cultivate a stronger sense of loyalty and dedication among their staff, build trust within the community, increase productivity, and work together toward organizational success.

Using the findings from this study to improve employee engagement strategies within IT organizations, organizational leaders could lead to positive social change by helping individuals, organizations, and communities achieve their goals and succeed together. The implications of positive social change are vast and far-reaching. It is incumbent upon organizational leaders to gain knowledge and insights that can help them implement effective strategies for employee engagement. By doing so, they can reduce the cost of training new employees and ensure their products and services are of the highest quality. Additionally, by fostering employee consistency, organizational leaders can improve customer relations within their communities. Ultimately, this can create a more harmonious and prosperous society for all and develop employees who want to stay in their organization. Higher employee retention can save organizations time and money by eliminating the need to recruit and train new employees. Encouraging employees to volunteer their time and share their knowledge and experience can lead to a mutual relationship between businesses and their staff. This can result in improved employee engagement, getting the best new employees from the community, increased productivity, and enhanced community benefits as more volunteers are inspired by their

organization's contribution to their local community (Nothwehr & Rohlman, 2019).

Successful engagement of employees by IT organizational leaders fosters solid organizational presence in the community, empowering engaged employees to contribute through volunteering and bringing about meaningful change. The findings, conclusions, and recommendations from this research study provide information to organizational leaders with an understanding of how to positively increase employees' engagement and productivity to achieve organizational goals and satisfy the needs of employees, their families, and the community.

Moreover, this research study and its findings demonstrate the potential to bring significant societal benefits by amplifying employee engagement, boosting motivation, and enhancing productivity and overall well-being of the employee, community, and the organization itself. Empowering employees can lead to heightened confidence in their professional and personal spheres. From a more extensive perspective, these findings could be pivotal in reducing unemployment rates and bracing local economies' mutual interest. Engaged employees are more likely to stay motivated, remain employed within their organizations, and contribute to income generation, supporting their families and the broader community. Engaged employees stand to gain from the values and rewards instituted through the organizational engagement strategy formulated and implemented by IT organizational leaders.

Recommendations for Action

This qualitative multiple-case study explored leadership strategies that some IT organization leaders in the Washington DC metro area of the USA use to increase

employee engagement and improve productivity. IT organizational leaders can implement various engagement strategies to improve employee engagement and increase organizational productivity toward success. The following recommendations for further action to improve employee engagement, increase organizational productivity, and achieve goals arise from the research study findings. While I have explored this research study focusing on IT organizational leaders working with the IT industry in the Washington DC metro area, leaders from various work environments and domains could benefit from the findings.

leadership style and behaviors

IT organizational leaders must invest in providing support to engaging employees through leadership style and behaviors, creating a conducive and inclusive organizational culture and environment, creating a system of effective communication and feedback, and defining strategies for rewards, recognition, appreciation, empowerment, training, and career development. Employee engagement is critical to the IT organizational leader's success (Alsunki et al., 2020). Employee engagement improvement strategies within an organization improve by applying factors like the ones identified as themes within this study. Based on the insights from this study, IT organizational leaders should take specific actions suitable for supporting and improving their employee engagement and productivity. It is clear from the participants' responses that effective engagement strategies foster improved employee engagement and productivity, resulting in tangible and intangible benefits for both the organization and its employees. To this end, IT organizational leaders should assess the alignment of these study findings with their

current organizational strategies to enhance employee engagement. Subsequently, they should take proactive steps to develop and implement the engagement strategies that have been identified, as doing so has the potential to have a positive impact on employee engagement and overall organizational goal achievements.

IT organizational leaders need to have a leadership style and behavior that enables the creation of mission, vision, and strategies that employees can understand and follow. According to Alagarsamy et al. (2020), employees are more productive when they clearly understand organizational expectations and are supported through engagement, motivation, and satisfaction towards achieving organizational goals freely. One of the recommendations is that IT organizational leaders influence others to follow their lead and support their employees in creating mutual understanding, building trust, and reciprocal benefit toward achieving the common goal. Employees who do not trust their leaders will lack organizational commitment and motivation, manifesting as disengagement (Rabiul & Yean, 2021). The leadership style and behavior should support increasing organizational productivity through employee development, leading by example, motivation, and appreciation to improve productivity. In addition, motivating employees to be more productive using the recognition and reward system, involving them in decision-making, and encouraging them to be self-starting and managing in completing their assigned work and tasks should be part of the leadership style and behavior. Drawing from the insights shared by all the participants in this research study, I strongly recommend that IT organizational leaders adopt an engaging leadership style that actively encourage employee participation in decision making during all phases of

project planning and execution. In addition, IT organizational leaders should ensure the provision of necessary resources to encourage employee productivity. Furthermore, they should institute a well-defined strategy to cultivate a culture that fosters a strong and collaborative relationship between employees and leadership, with a shared commitment to achieving organizational goals.

Conducive and inclusive organizational culture and environment

As a second recommendation, an IT organizational leader might create a conducive and inclusive work environment supported by an employee engagement strategy, building solid relationships and interactions and improving employee engagement levels within the organization. The work environment should promote safety, growth, balanced work-life, personal goal achievement, and diversity in employee culture, gender, age, and ethnicity. It should encourage employees to participate in work activities to improve organizational productivity and make them feel they belong. The employees participating fully in organizational activities will improve their engagement, become interested in their workplace, and improve organizational productivity. According to McLeod et al. (2021), organizational leadership needs to ensure the physiological needs of employees and create a conducive work environment to enable employees to meet their needs through a strategic plan detailed in the employee engagement plan. Work schedule and location flexibility can also enhance employee engagement in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era. IT organizational leadership is vital in fostering a culture that balances work and life while cultivating a positive workplace atmosphere. A conducive and inclusive work environment directly influences employee

engagement, productivity, and the attainment of organizational objectives. When employees sense that their leaders endorse explicit and implicit socioeconomic values, they tend to respond by working efficiently to collectively achieve these objectives (Jais & Suat, 2022). Organizations and their leaders must become increasingly aware of the importance of implementing employee engagement strategies, creating an environment conducive and inclusive, and making employees feel satisfied, motivated, engaged, and productive, contributing to organizational goal success.

Effective communication and feedback

The third recommendation is conveying communication effectively, openly, clearly, and concisely to all employees and supporting bidirectional communication through a well-designed and implemented organizational feedback system. Effective and open communication channels can be regular and ad-hoc meetings, brown bag sessions, and team building around organizational projects and objectives to allow employees to participate in all organization activities and know what is going on through effective communication and increase their engagement. It is advisable to prioritize open communication within the organization, as it enables employees to grasp the connection between their contributions and the organization's success. This kind of communication also reduces uncertainty and fosters trust, as Audenaert et al. (2020) highlighted. When open communication establishes trust, employees become more inclined to engage in strategies that benefit the organization and themselves actively. Allowing employees to participate in decision-making gives them a sense of control and further strengthens their commitment to the organization (Xuecheng et al., 2022). IT organizational leaders must

actively manage and support employees by implementing an open communication strategy, offering engaging feedback, and maintaining a reporting system that assesses the effectiveness and progress of the communication strategy. Additionally, they should identify any potential barriers affecting engagement and the communication strategy to take corrective actions as necessary, ensuring the achievement of the organization's goals.

Rewards, recognition, appreciation, empowerment, training, and career development

A leader creates an engaging work environment by providing opportunities and support strategies for employees through programs like rewards, recognition, appreciation, empowerment, training, and career development within the organization. The fourth recommendation is that Leaders should prioritize the development of a comprehensive compensation and benefits strategy that encompasses elements such as competitive salaries, enticing benefits packages, commission structures, robust skills training programs, clear pathways for advancement, and opportunities for promotions. This approach will significantly enhance employee engagement and retention. Drawing from their 2022 study, Purnama et al. shed light on the interplay of reward and recognition, training and development, conducive work environment, and job satisfaction in shaping employee retention, engagement, and productivity. The study underscores the importance of creating systems that cultivate employee appreciation through rewards, training, and development initiatives. Such measures will likely result in extended employee tenure, heightened engagement, and increased productivity, effectively reinforcing the study's recognition and support themes and subthemes while providing

actionable recommendations for organizations to consider. In addition, IT organizational leaders need to emphasize the significance of fostering employee engagement by establishing advancement and promotional avenues through practical training and educational initiatives (Nu Ngoc Ton et al., 2021). Promoting mentorship and coaching programs is essential for enabling continuous learning and skill development among employees while they work. These initiatives provide employees with opportunities to leverage their strengths and address their areas of improvement. Organizational leaders must recognize that employee engagement is pivotal in cultivating trust, shaping organizational culture, refining communication methods, and enhancing leadership approaches, collectively contributing to heightened organizational productivity.

The four recommendations align with the four themes identified in this research study: (a) leadership style and behaviors, (b) conducive and inclusive organizational culture and environment, (c) effective communication and feedback, and (d) rewards, recognition, appreciation, empowerment, training, and career development identified in this study. IT organizational leaders are critical to implementing engagement strategies that increase employee engagement and organizational productivity. Increased employee engagement directly results in increased productivity, a more decisive organizational competitive edge, elevated organizational commitment, organizational goal achievement, and employee personal growth.

The comprehensive dissemination plan aims to maximize the impact of the study's findings, including publishing in the ProQuest/UMI dissertation database, submitting articles to relevant journals in IT, leadership studies, and Management, and actively

engaging with business forums, organizational training, coaching, leadership, and technology conferences. Additionally, presenting the research at seminars and industry conferences is planned, along with sharing insights with leaders from various sectors through training and conferences. The strategy also includes submission to leadership and business journals and sending a summary of the study's findings to all research participants, allowing them to enhance their strategies and collectively work toward improved employee engagement and organizational productivity.

Recommendations for Further Research

This qualitative multiple case study aimed to explore leadership strategies that IT organization leaders used in the Washington DC metro area of the USA to increase employee engagement and improve productivity. The target population was three IT organizational leaders fulfilling participant criteria in the Washington DC metro area of the USA. In Section 1, I identified a list of assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, including participant's honest and objective responses to the interview questions, the small number of IT organization leaders I planned to include as participants in the study, and the limited study scope and boundaries, which encompass IT leaders in the Washington DC metro area. The trust objective participant's response assumption was addressed and confirmed by accessing publicly available information from the organization's websites and documents provided by research participants. I recommend that future researchers conduct additional research to address the limitations of this study related to the small sample size and the restricted geographical location. Expanding the study could result in different data because of global industries and social interactions in

the IT industries. A recommendation for future research is to use a larger sample size that includes more IT organizational leaders and cover other geographic locations beyond the Washington DC metro area of the USA to gain additional data on strategies used to improve the engagement of IT organizational employees.

Another valuable area for future research is exploring diversity-related factors within the IT industry, specifically in the industry's shift toward remote work and flexible schedules, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Investigating multigenerational and ethnic-based diversification and its impact on employee engagement can yield insights into developing more inclusive and effective organizational engagement strategies. With the workforce becoming increasingly diverse, spanning multiple generations, managers must adapt by fostering an environment that embraces diversity and inclusion. These study findings may offer practical and successful strategies for IT organizational leaders to enhance employee engagement in their respective organizations.

Expanding the eligibility criteria for participant selection and investigating various aspects of employee engagement is another recommendation for future research and researchers. Future researchers could investigate the connections between employee engagement and employee productivity, its impact on organizational profitability, and the influence of leadership styles on employee engagement within IT organizations. Moreover, future research endeavors could explore alternative research methods and designs beyond qualitative multiple case studies, particularly when examining employee engagement strategies across a broader population within the IT industry.

Reflections

Earning a doctoral degree has been one of my dreams since my childhood. After completing my master's degree, returning to school took me a long time. Thanks to God, my wife, children, family, and friends' support and encouragement, I pursued my doctoral degree in Doctor of Business Administration specializing in Leadership at Walden University. The process requires considerable commitment, discipline, time management, and balance between work, life, school, and social commitments; sometimes, it appears overwhelming and frustrating, but I never gave up. The knowledge, experience, and friendships I have formed are immeasurable. For anyone considering going back to school, go for it now; commitment, time management, and planning should be a part of your daily priorities. This journey taught me many things like determination, patience, painful situations, happy moments, celebrating milestones, and gaining and sharing experiences with my professors and other students with diverse experiences and cultures. The informal student group initiated by Marvin Foster and developed by many of us as a Saturday call group called Doctors of Determination (DoD) was another great memory in the journey, where we shared our experiences and helped each other on many topics. While on this academic journey to complete my research study, I have grown in several ways as a researcher and in life.

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore leadership strategies that some IT organization leaders used to increase employee engagement and improve productivity. In the process, I gained research skills and knowledge to apply to my professional and academic career. As a researcher, I learned that the result should be

different from my perspective but reflect the view and experience of the participants' perspective following approved interview protocols and Walden University's IRB guidelines, not to integrate personal bias into the study throughout the data collection and analysis phase. In this study, I found that organizational leaders use many strategies to engage employees and increase their engagement and productivity. Through in-depth analysis and research findings from the participants' responses and literature reviews, I gained many skills and strategies to improve employee engagement and productivity that I could use to advance my professional leadership career.

The interview process was great, and I was surprised by the willingness to help and share their experience and the active participation of the research participants, who are organizational leaders, and their time was much appreciated. Reflecting on the interview process, I found it a profoundly enriching experience. It was striking to witness the humility with which leaders discussed their employees' engagement and productivity. This experience left me equally humbled as I observed these leaders' profound respect for their employees. The strategies I gathered from this encounter are valuable insights I am eager to share with my colleagues and integrate into my future career endeavors. The findings from this study provide successful and practical strategies that organization leaders can use to improve employee engagement in their respective organizations.

Conclusion

This qualitative multiple-case study explored leadership strategies that some IT organization leaders use to increase employee engagement and improve productivity in the Washington DC metro area. Employee engagement is vital to an IT organization's

productivity and success. SET was the conceptual framework used for this research study. Data were collected from participant interviews, publicly available organizational documents, and the organization's website to explore IT organizational leaders' strategies to engage employees. Four themes emerged from the thematic analysis after analyzing and coding the collected data. The key themes included leadership style and behaviors, conducive and inclusive organizational culture and environment, effective communication and feedback, and rewards, recognition, appreciation, empowerment, training, and career development, which emerged as a strategy available to IT organizational leaders for implementation to improve employee engagement. In conclusion, the findings of this research study strongly resonate with Homans' (1961) theory, SET, as they illustrate the interconnectedness between two parties and how employees reciprocate engagement in the workplace. These results align with current and previous literature, highlighting crucial elements for the success of IT organizations. The finding includes strategies to improve employee engagement and productivity, creating a positive social change impact within the broader community. IT organizational leaders who implement these strategies can enhance employee engagement and effectively elevate overall organizational productivity and positive social impacts in their community.

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Appendix A: Invitation

There is a new study about strategies for promoting employee engagement in the information technology that could help information technology organizations better understand leadership strategies that some information technology leaders use to increase employee engagement and improve productivity. For this study, you are invited to describe your experience in successfully increasing employee engagement following the implementation of your leadership strategies.

About the study:

- One 30–60-minute phone interview that will be audio-recorded (no videorecording)
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you.

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- 18 years old or older
- Information technology organization leaders in the Washington DC metro area, the United States who have at least worked for five years.
- Have leadership experience and implemented strategies that improved employee engagement.
- strategic decision makers with roles like project managers, program managers, or IT directors
- Willing to participate.
- Able to sign the consent form.

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Ephrem Belete Zelelew, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during September 2023.

Please reach out Ephrem Belete Zelelew at ephrem.zelelew@waldenu.edu to let the researcher know of your interest. You are welcome to forward it to others who might be interested.

Appendix B: Consent Form

You are invited to take part in an interview for a research study that I am conducting as part of my doctoral program.

Interview Procedures:

I will be interviewing professionals (no more than 20) about their work and audio-recording their responses. Opportunities for clarifying statements will be available after I analyze the interviews (via a process called member checking).

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

This study is voluntary. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You are welcome to skip any interview questions you prefer to not answer.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this study will not pose any risks beyond those of typical daily life. This study's aim is to provide data and insights that could be valuable to those in professional roles related to yours. Once the analysis is complete, I will share the overall results by publishing the final study on the Scholarworks website.

Privacy:

I am required by my university to protect the identities of interviewees and their organizations. I am not permitted to share interviewee names, identifying details, contact info, or recordings with anyone outside of my Walden University supervisors (who are also required to protect your privacy). Any reports, presentations, or publications related to this study will share general patterns from the data, without sharing the identities of

individual interviewees or their organizations. Data will be kept secure by password protection. The interview transcripts will be kept for 5 years, as required by my university. The collected information will not be used for any purpose outside of this study.

Contacts and Questions:

If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Walden University's Research Participant Advocate at 612-312-1210. Walden University's ethics approval number for this study is (The IRB will provide the ethics approval number to the student after the appropriate documents have been received).

Please share any questions or concerns you might have at this time. If you agree to be interviewed as described above, please say "yes" for the audio-recording when I ask, "Do you agree to be interviewed for this study?"

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Date of Interview: _____

Interviewee Code Number: _____

Interview Protocol	
Research Question: -	
What strategies do some IT leaders in the Washington DC Metro area, of United States use to increase employee engagement and improve productivity?	
What I will do	What I will say
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I will welcome the interviewee, introduce myself, and describe the reason for the meeting. 	<p>[Greetings]. My name is Ephrem B. Zelelew, and I am a Doctoral degree student at Walden University. I am happy that you are willing to share your experience with me. I am conducting a research study to explore leadership strategies that some information technology leaders use to increase employee engagement and improve productivity. This interview process would take approximately 30 – 60 minutes of your time. All the information provided is confidential and would only be used for</p>

	<p>the proposed study. The study does not aim at evaluating your leadership strategies but to learn more about the strategies that information technology leaders like you use to increase employee engagement and improve productivity. Please share any questions or concerns you might have at this time. If you agree to be interviewed, please say “yes” for the audio-recording when I ask, “Do you agree to be interviewed for this study?”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask open-ended interview questions, paraphrase as needed, and audio-record the participant answers. • More probes with follow-up questions for in-depth answers. • Ask for any additional clarification regarding the 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Based on your experience, what are some consequences of not having strategies to engage employees in your organization? 2. What strategies are you using to engage employees? 3. How did you implement employee engagement strategies? 4. What strategies do you find employees see as the most

interview question and answers as needed.	meaningful for increasing job productivity?
	5. What strategy did you deploy to maintain employee engagement?
	6. Based on your experience, how and why do employees become disengaged at work?
	7. How do you measure the success of your employee engagement strategies?
	8. What were the key barriers to implementing your strategies to engage your employees?
	9. How did you successfully address the critical barriers to engaging employees?
	10. What other information will you share concerning employee engagement and job satisfaction in the information technology industry?

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wrap up interview and appreciate the participant	<p>Thank you for participating in the study and answering my interview questions.</p> <p>Your contribution will help other information technology leaders understand successful strategies to increase employee engagement and improve productivity.</p> <p>Your time is very much appreciated.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discuss follow-up and member checking process	<p>I will share a summarized interpretation of your interview responses to verify the interpretation of your response's accuracy.</p> <p>I will also be informing you if there will be a need for a session to clarify and discuss updates.</p>