



Article Type: Research Paper

# HOW DOES THE RELIGION INFLUENCE THE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN INDONESIAN CONTEXT?

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**THIS ARTICLE IS AVAILABLE IN:**

<http://journal.umy.ac.id/index.php/mb>

**DOI:** [10.18196/mb.10180](https://doi.org/10.18196/mb.10180)

**CITATION:**

Febriansyah, H. (2019). How Does The Religion Influence the Employee Engagement in Indonesian Context?. *Jurnal Manajemen Bisnis*, 10(2), 221-233.

**Abstract:** The implementation of religion in the workplace exists; however, it needs more techniques to be explored and discussed. Therefore, this study was challenged and conducted in an emerging country which has very diverse on religion and cultures combining with a high diversity of companies and its level. This study used a qualitative method with interviews to examine the influence of religious factors on employee engagement in the context of the Indonesian companies. The findings indicate that employees feel more engaged when there is freedom to express religious faith in the workplace, besides the traditional human resources management system elements.

**Keywords:** Culture; Employee Engagement; Religion.

## Introduction

Employee engagement is more relevant to human resource management and employee relations than work engagement, but the study along with the construct dan definition related to it is still lack of understanding (Bethencourt, 2012; Purcell, 2014; Ruslan, Islam, & Noor, 2014). Confusion also emerged in the form of defining engagement as a trait, state, or behavior, while Macey and Schneider (2008) agreed that three of them could be accounted to explain employee engagement. A critical review of today's employee engagement suggested an actionable solution by understanding employee engagement in a broader framework. A refreshed model related to employee engagement comes in cognitive, emotional, and physical forms (Kumar & Sia, 2012). Also, an organization like Deloitte play a role in offering five elements drive engagement, which is (1) meaningful work, (2) hands-on management, (3) positive work environment, (4) growth opportunity, and (5) trust in leadership (Bersin, 2015).

Research also tried to explain employee engagement by its antecedents such as work-role fit, job enrichment and the availability of resources (Rothmann & Welsh, 2013), job satisfaction, health, safety, reward recognition (Nasima & Shalini, 2017), organizational justice (Palupi and

Tjahjono, 2016; Tusa'diah, Tjahjono, Fauziyah, & Palupi, 2017; Novianti, Tjahjono, Fauziyah, & Palupi, 2017), work environment (Kumar & Sia, 2012), psychological climate and leader behavior (Walker, 2011). A study by Rothmann and Welsh (2013) suggested the important role of psychological meaningfulness as a mediator of employee engagement and its antecedents. It can be implied that every determinant of employee engagement is subjectively perceived by personal meaning. Chan (2011) also noted that diversified individual values such as different races, genders, ethnicities, languages, colors, religions, and health statuses had been carried over to the workplace. Therefore, improving employee engagement in the workplace is a subject that continues to be of fundamental and interest to many social scientists and professionals who are involved in the field of human resources and industrial/organizational psychology (Hartman, 2015).

In particular, made up of more than 17,000 islands, the Indonesian population is made up of more than 740 ethnic backgrounds and 580 distinct languages and dialects (Hanifah, 2015). In fact, with a population of approximately 255 million (BPS, 2015), Indonesia is the fifth most populous country in the world. Moreover, Indonesia is the home of six formal religions practiced, which are: Islam, Catholicism, Christian Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. Thus, it is nearly impossible to separate Indonesian religious beliefs from the workplace. Another study showed that over the last twenty years, it had become a common practice in Indonesia to express one's personal views about religious and spiritual topics and to seek religious accommodation in the workplace (Morgan, 2004). Employees' religious commitments can impact organizations in the following five categories: job attitudes, organizational ethics and prosocial behavior, decision making, emotion and stress, and HRM's involvement in solving problems related to religious expression (Weaver, 2014). It is relevant to Messarra (2014) when workers perceive religious discrimination in their organization, their engagement is affected.

Organizations that positively encourage their employees to express religious beliefs are likely to become more successful (Oliveira, 2004; Mitroff & Denton, 1999; Cavanagh, 1999). Nevertheless, western literature remained relatively tacit regarding religious diversity in the workplace through some issues like gender, ethnicity, race, age, and sexual orientation diversity that have been tackling down (Messara, 2014). In 2008, Cooke had already identified religiosity as a socio-cultural context in the HR perspective to understand workforce behavior such as employee. Later on, Bakar (2013) suggested religiosity be investigated more on its impact on employee engagement, and then a new conceptual framework placed religiosity as a moderating variable in employee engagement.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how religion influences employee engagement in the Indonesian context. It is imperative to study this issue as a new challenge within a (potentially) diverse workforce, especially in the context of Indonesian organizations. Furthermore, the study of religion contributes to building a more profound understanding of the employee engagement concept and theoretical construct, as suggested in previous research. As a result, an engagement-friendly culture is

worthwhile as it emphasizes the importance of employee religious needs along with motivating each of them to pursue their individual goals.

## Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Research is still trying to construct the definition of employee engagement after it was first formally defined by Kahn in the mid of the 1990s. The stream among employee engagement practice has been emphasizing on its correlation to performance. However, bringing employee engagement together with performance, cannot be apart from the side of the HRM process. Engagement is linked to three essential aspects of HRM: turnover, productivity, and profitability. Furthermore, English (2010) found that a business organization with more engaged employees has 51% higher productivity, 3% higher revenue growth, 4% higher profitability, and 9% higher shareholder returns. Though report on Gallup's meta-analyses has shown how significant is employee engagement on key performances regardless of the organization's industry or company (Harter, Schmidt, Agrawal, & Plowman, 2013), critical review around employee engagement construct have continuously risen.

Mishra and Mohanty (2016) cited factors such as age, senior leadership, manager, colleagues, customers, work, resources, processes, career opportunities, learning and development, work-life balance, physical work environment, policies, people practices, performance assessment, diversity, company reputation, pay, benefits and recognition are correlated with employee engagement. However, a substantial question was raised by Truss, Shantz, Soane, and Rick (2013) about 'being engaged' and 'doing engagement.' They argued that employee engagement is not merely understood by only observing employee behavior but also has a more profound relevance to internal dynamics.

'Being engaged' is an individual level of engagement, and 'doing engagement' is more on an act of senior managers and professionals in developing and embedding engagement programs. It was linear with Jenkins and Delbrieger (2013), who examine context matters of employee engagement by extending existing literature of the importance incorporating the role and practice of managers with the insights derived from the psychological literature relating to job characteristics.

Critical reviewed from Shuck and Rose (2013) has been shifted the concept beyond "engagement as an outcome" to a more thorough "engagement as condition" construct. Engagement framed in the context of purpose more focus on outcome and factors such as pressures, demands as well as intrinsic motivation. However, engagement as a condition has interchangeability with the meaning and purpose of the term. Engagement framed in the context of meaning is related to the internal process in evaluating contribution, influence, and reward of individual work.

The contribution of the internal process was also supported by Eldor and Vigoda-Gadot (2016) that defined employee engagement as a work-related state of mind characterized by feelings of vigor, fulfillment, enthusiasm, absorption, and dedication.

Based on the explanation, it is acknowledged that the key advantages of employee engagement are linked to individual aspects (e.g., motivation, feeling, belief, emotion, attitude, belief, values, behaviors, experiences at work, and personal psychological states) called 'soft engagement' and non-individual aspects (e.g., role of manager, environment, job characteristic, etc.) called 'hard engagement' (Purcell, 2014; Truss et al., 2013).

Shuck, Osam, Zigarmi wisely reconstructed the various concept, and Nimon (2017) that engagement has a specific position in research; (1) engagement as an outcome, (2) engagement as a psychological state, and (3) engagement as a process. Positioning engagement in research was not meant for inhibiting practical application, nevertheless to put an engagement in clear line to be understood alongside several existing frameworks.

For further implications, Shuck and Rose (2013) suggested that HRM address more on organizational cultures and environment that is still underrepresented of rich research in the context of employee engagement. Nonetheless, Purcell (2012) argued that humans shared a belief, which is strongly related to culture, often neglected in understanding employee engagement. In Indonesia, culture and shared human beliefs are inseparable from religion. Religiosity was found to be a missing link in the employee engagement study. There are still limited arguments in which the relationship between religiosity and employee engagement in the international context (Iddagoda and Opatha, 2017). Moreover, the topic of employee engagement and religiosity have remained in developmental stages in Indonesia (Febriansyah, 2010; Febriansyah, Negara, & Welly, 2010).

Several scholars have developed other definitions of religion, see (Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi, 1975; p.1): "a system of beliefs in a divine or superhuman power, and practices of worship or other rituals directed towards such a power"; (Batson et al., 1993; p. 8): "whatever we as individuals do to come to grips personally with the questions that confront us because we are aware that we and others like us are alive and that we will die"; (Clark, 1958; p. 22): "the inner experience of the individual when he senses a beyond, especially as evidenced by the effect of this experience on his behavior when he actively attempts to harmonize his life with the beyond"; (James, 1997; p. 42): "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine".

For many, religion or spiritual beliefs provide the basis for finding meaning in life (Pargament, 1997) and serve as powerful sources of security, comfort, and direction when facing the trials of life or coping with uncertainty, death, and loss. Based on some definitions above, the author stated that religion is a belief system activated by individual senses, followed by a series of activities and indicated by worships to the power beyond human forces to achieve harmony in the meaning of life.

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Developing religious beliefs in Indonesia such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhist, etc are related to human nature that influences how people think and act (Bakar, 2013; Bloom, 2012; Dent and Bozeman, 2014). Research in Malay Muslim Organization showed that religiosity has a crucial role in engaging employees at work (Bakar, 2013). Review from Endot (1995) has shown that Islam has eleven principles (1) trustworthiness, (2) responsibility, (3) sincerity, (4) discipline, (5) dedication, (6) diligence, (7) cleanliness, (8) co-operation, (9) good conduct, (10) gratefulness and (11) moderation; in which relevant to support engagement in workplace.

Having in line with Islam's perspectives, Buddhist value of right livelihood "Sigalovada Sutta" emphasized on right work ethic that depicted a human internal process of character building (Iddagoda and Opatha, 2017; Inoue, 1997). Hence, modern management perspectives are also concurred to have an impact on most human living aspects, including religions (Dent & Bozeman, 2014). Without being in doubt with spirituality, Roof (2015) explained that religiosity has a significant association with engagement, vigor, and dedication. Practicing religion also have been evidently found, not deterring engagement in work (Abdelhadi, 2017).

According to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), religion attempts to conserve the fund of general human meaning within which the individual interprets his or her experiences and organizes his or her day-to-day conduct. Geertz stated that "the force of religion in supporting social values rests, then, on the ability of its symbols to formulate a world in which those values, as well as the forces opposing their realization, are fundamental ingredients" (p. 131).

The significant difference in religious practices was found related to accommodation accessibility in an organization size. Furthermore, formal religion practices have a more positive relationship to creativity and then informal religion practices. Formal religion encourages not only a relationship with God but also with others, extending social support, sharing universal values, respect, and benevolence. The universalism of formal religion practices growth in the form of employee internal motivation to self-development program (Loo, 2017).

Supporting study is from Kamau and SMA (2016), which was proposed religiosity be placed as a moderating variable between organization capability (e.g., leadership, job characteristics, etc.) and employee engagement. The evolution of religion may very well have preceded culture, in which religion has an effect on individuals in a society. The role of religious beliefs and practices was known to encourage cooperation and group feelings, as well as to motivate people to be kind and compassionate to other members of one's tribe (Bloom, 2012).

As Purcell (2012; 2014) stated that the future engagement should be concerned more in employee voice, organization, and managerial position are in responsibility to have their employees speaking up opinions, ideas, and be listened to. Purcell finds that linking employee through discussion and collaborative working will trigger engagement. In conclusion, understanding religion in the context of Indonesian organization can be a

great deal to unite and hear employee voice towards strengthening the pillar of employee engagement.

## Research Method

**Table 1** Interview Guidelines

Colleagues and cooperation	1	Do your employees know each other? Especially employees in cross departments?
	2	How does this company handle conflicts among your employees?
Meaningful work	1	What do you think about your job at this time? Is it important for your life?
	2	(If yes) how important is it? For whom do you dedicate your job?
Employee Engagement	1	Have you ever heard about a term of employee engagement?
	2	(If yes), please explain to me the definition based on your own perspective.
	3	What is/are the important variable(s) in employee engagement?

In this study, a qualitative approach was used for three reasons. First, the objective of this study was to discover and find a potential influence of religious factors on employee engagement in the context of the Indonesian companies. Second, earlier studies of employee engagement emphasized more on quantitative; therefore, the qualitative approach in this study aimed to explore more on the complexity and dynamics of employee engagement phenomenon. Third, the subjects in this study were limited to the group of people who had been selected based on some criteria. This small number of subjects was in accordance with the common practice of qualitative study (Baker et al., 2012).

This qualitative approach was implemented using interviews. The interview form emphasizes non-directive and general questions to allow interviewees to construct their interpretations of social phenomena or events (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). This study followed and referred the steps according to the seven stages of an interview investigation (Kvale, 1996); (1) the matizing, (2) designing, (3) interviewing, (4) transcribing, (5) analyzing, (6) verifying, and (7) reporting. Member checking and peer review methods verified the validity and reliability of the data. Re-checking the interview data (transcription) and re-confirmation to the interviewees were also done in this study. Validity and reliability checks were very important in order to avoid or minimize the bias/miss-interpretation between interviewer and interviewees.

The interview guideline was derived from the theoretical and empirical literature on employee engagement. The following table 1 represents the interview guidelines used in this study.

## Result and Discussion

Religion appears to have an essential role in influencing employee engagement in the Indonesian context, specifically regarding the handling and treatment of employees. Employees are the greatest assets and fundamental to the success of all organizations. The organizations must invest in both their personal and professional development (within reason) to assist them found optimal well-being and tolerate the individual to bring their “whole self” into the workplace (Hartman, 2015). Thus, the organizations should have given the freedom to express the employees’ religion. According to six of the ten interviewees, freedom of religious expression could be an essential instrument that influences and develops employee engagement in the workplace.

Ron, one of the interviewees, noted that if a company seeks to increase employee performance and level of engagement, it “should provide for freedom of religious expression in order to support the employee. It will create maximum performance, loyalty, and competitiveness”. In addition, two interviewees delivered the message that religious expression helps employees through metaphor: Pram believed that there is “something beyond the reasonable minds and inner self.” Similarly, Amr said, “...because it provides times to pray and a Mosque for Moslem employees.” These responses indicated that both interviewees need to express a connection between feeling religious and engaged at work. They offered the conclusion that feeling religious is a valuable element in developing employee engagement. As described above, organizations that positively encourage their employees to express their religious beliefs are likely to become more successful (Oliveira, 2004; Mitroff and Denton, 1999; Cavanagh, 1999).

Based on these summaries and interpretations, several important analytical results emerge. Notably, the factor of religion emerges as a hardly discussed but critical element for the development of employee engagement and as part of strategic HRM. First, to bridge the ideas of meaningful job, religiousness, and employee engagement in the workplace, the researcher addressed Maslow’s theory of motivation as a basic concept of analysis. Although Maslow’s motivation theory has been criticized for its basic concept of research (e.g., Wahba and Bridwell, 1976; Hofstede, 1984; Cianci and Gambrel, 2003), the researcher argued that using this theory as a starting point and extending beyond Maslow as a basic framework leads to a better understanding of these elements.

Maslow claims that “So far, I have been studying self-actualization via autonomy as if it were the only path. However, this is quite Western and even American” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 243). Maslow (1971) is concerned that the theory of self-actualization might not apply to countries of lower economic status, where many people are still struggling to find self-fulfillment through their livelihood. He also considered Czarist Russia, Batista’s Cuba, and Duvalier’s Haiti, concluding that people in those countries only partially express their highest qualities by transcending the social order (Maslow, 1971). Other scholars in Asian studies (i.e., Chang and Page, 1991; Rangaswami, 1994) support Maslow’s theories of self-actualization, finding universality in human experience.

The highest human values are associated with self-actualization. Employment can allow people to become self-actualized (Maslow, 1965). When businesses apply the hierarchy of needs model under conditions such as trustworthiness, responsibility, and accountability, the whole human being naturally strives to become self-actualized (Maslow, 1965). As Maslow's enlightened management theory and identified human understanding explains, increasingly more of the world is moving toward the ultimate end of mysticism, a fusion with the world, peak experience, cosmic consciousness, and a yearning for truth, beauty, justice, perfection, and so forth (1998).

In this world, humanity is a spiritual and physical creation. As a physical creature, a human cannot be separated from social life and affiliation. Meanwhile, as a spiritual being, a human is limited by laws and regulations within practical experiences of worship. On the other hand, worship of God is not "strictly" narrowed to the concept of religiousness. Nevertheless, even mundane employment or work practices can have meaning or provide a sense of worship. Har explains this belief: [...] "According to my religion, if I can work perfectly for my family and good social relationships, it will be counted as worship for my next life."

Hence, worship is associated not only with God (vertical direction) but also with human relationships and natural surroundings (horizontal relationships). These relations are illustrated by Rud when he explains, [...] "Each of us has specific roles and functions, based on life scenarios from God...". Therefore, a job has great values and meanings for life, while it reveals transcendental values and significant meaning for social relationships (i.e., regarding family, social-life activities, and professional colleagues). Regardless of the religion or beliefs, the role of a human in this world cannot be separated from the context of jobs and feelings of religiousness/spirituality. Life requires a balance and synergy between professionalism and personality.

Supporting this study, Messarra (2014) explored the effects of religious diversity in organizations based on an examination of the theoretical understanding of employee engagement. In particular, Messarra (2014) exploited a sample of 548 employees working in religiously diverse organizations to examine the perceptual effects of perceived religious discrimination on employee work-related behaviors (mainly commitment and engagement). The findings suggested that workers' commitment and engagement are affected when they perceive religious discrimination in their organization. Managers – and specifically those working in HRM – were given recommendations to devise strategies and develop management interventions that would mitigate the negative organizational and personal consequences of religious discrimination in the workplace.

However, humans often create a dichotomy or separation of priorities between the job and matters of the spirit or a dichotomy between worldly affairs and after-life affairs. In business conversations, humans regard job success as the main priority, one that is more important than affairs involving eternity. As a result, a competition of interests develops that leads to a psychological imbalance in the workplace and daily life. As suggested by Rud, this circumstance must be avoided: "You may work your hardest as if



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you will live forever; nevertheless, in contrast, through your work hard, you must prepare as if you will die tomorrow...". Also suggested by Amr: "A job is man-made, but the purposes of a job are many. You are free to have a job, for yourself, your family, your neighbors, and your religion or God..."

The present researcher argues that HRM practices would significantly impact the workplace by introducing an appreciation and manifestation of the values of religion or worship into the daily life of employees. As explained by Ron: "Employees will be engaged in their company if the company recognizes and rewards them by religion/worship aspects..." As a result, employees recognize and realize that working processes and experiences are manifestations of the life experiences that result from providing the best things for themselves, their families, their social lives and/or their corporate environment.

Further, a company can reward its employees in many ways, such as "...a reward for the performance of employees such as a religious journey to holy cities (based on own religion), not only remuneration for housing, fun, traveling, money, career promotion, etc." Therefore, employees will work with a sense of joy and pleasure, without the target expectancy of external motivations (i.e., money). They will prefer to be rewarded by internal motivations for doing what is best for the company. In addition, employees will treat co-workers/colleagues with equality and fairness, as if they were siblings. Finally, employees will recognize their company's workplace as a second home. However, there was an interesting and important explanation from Ron, who argued that supernatural laws and untouchable powers exist beyond human life that influences and organize the universe.

The final result of the manifestation and practice of religion or worship in the workplace is an increased sense of belongingness and togetherness between employees and the company. As argued by Rum, "[a] company should provide freedom of religious expression in order to support its employees. In this way, the company will contribute to maximum performance, loyalty, and competitiveness". Religiosity seems to be evident in the moral reasoning and management of employee behavior. Mitroff and Denton (1999) studied religiosity and spirituality in the workplace and found that those who believe in the higher power of God feel more empowered while at work. In essence, employees who view religion as integral to their identity tend to have a holistic view of life; that is, their faith is related to everything they do in life, including at the workplace. According to Brewer (2001), individuals attain the highest nature of work when they work because of God and express their true selves at work, as opposed to working to earn fame or money.

## Conclusion

Religion has a vital role in influencing employee engagement in the Indonesian context. The freedom of employees to express religion will affect their personal, social, and environmental conditions at work, and will create maximum performance, loyalty, and

competitiveness in their work. Working or business activities in the workplace relate not only to material or tangible exchanges but also to bounties and gratification from God. Employees who involve religion in daily work activities will be aware that this life is never-ending and that life continues after this life. Job is something that God gives to humans, but jobs can have positive effects on humans (as we all know, all religions had and also have bad outcomes). Employees must be responsible for their actions, which are taken either for themselves, their families, or others around them and for which they will be accountable in the "next day." Thus, employees will act and react carefully, avoiding hasty actions and decisions.

### Suggestion

Indonesia's diverse conditions for religion and culture must be considered for every company to implement religion in the work environment so that it can create social tolerance in it. For companies in Indonesia, they must provide more freedom, space, and facilities for employees to express their religion so that it can help in developing employee involvement in their work, colleagues, and workplaces, which will have an impact on improving employee performance.

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