

## **ABSTRACT**

### **UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND DISENGAGEMENT IN GLOBAL VIRTUAL TEAMS (GVTs): NATURE, CONDITIONS AND INTERFERENCES**

**Farheen Fathima Shaik**

The extant literature has been elaborate on multiple conceptualizations of employee engagement. However, there is dearth of literature which addresses employee engagement in varied organizational contexts, one such being the context of global virtual teams (GVTs). The practitioner literature reports reduced levels of employee engagement in members of GVTs. Furthermore, it has been proposed in scholarly literature that the drivers of employee engagement might change in the context of GVTs. One such significant driver influencing employee engagement in GVTs was found to be ‘cultural intelligence’ of the GVT members. This thesis research is a consolidation of two studies - Study A and Study B. In Study A, I intend to understand the conceptualization of employee engagement in the context of GVTs and seek answers to the broad question of "*What is the nature of employee engagement in context of a GVT?*" In Study B, I intend to study the influence of cultural intelligence on employee engagement by testing the relationship at GVT member level and team level.

The research site for both the studies was a global engineering, and digital technology solutions company, Cyient Ltd., headquartered in Hyderabad, India. Cyient uses GVTs to organize its work and at the time of study it had around 1500 GVTs functioning in diverse geographic locations. Study A is an ethnographic inquiry and was carried out in four phases across 21 months at the research site. Various types of data were collected during this inquiry which included, formal and informal interviews, focus group discussions, participant and non-participant observations, email trails, and field notes. All the recorded interviews were transcribed and validated. The field notes (both manual and electronic) were organized chronologically. Data for Study B was collected through a survey across Communications Business Unit of Cyient. The survey was administered to 3500 employees across several locations of which we received 827 valid responses from across 102 teams.

Study A indicated that due to blurred distinctions across time and space in GVTs, the GVT members perform multiple roles with various tasks in each role. Thus, to be able to perform these tasks and roles, the GVT members chose to invest energies from their repertoire of energies, i.e., cognitive, emotional, and physical. However, due to the overlapping nature of tasks, it was found that the GVT members choose to invest their energies either exclusively or in various combinations. Due to the distributed nature in which the energies were invested either exclusively or in varied combinations, I characterize such engagement by the GVT member in context of GVTs as ‘*Distributed Engagement*’. It was found that distributed engagement of a GVT member ranged from the GVT member being ‘highly engaged’ to being ‘least engaged’. However, the disengagement was found to be a state, where the GVT members withdrew all their energies from their roles either momentarily or for a sustained period of time. I denote disengagement in context of GVTs by the GVT member as ‘*Distributed Disengagement*’. I also identified the conditions of distributed engagement at individual, team, organizational, and contextual level. At individual

level, it was found that apart from the existing conditions of engagement as given by Kahn (1990), as psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability, 'psychological belongingness' was also a condition for GVT member distributed engagement. I found that, in the process of being engaged in GVTs, the GVT members face several momentary or temporary interferences, which I term as 'Transient Interferences', which effect the ways in which distributed engagement and disengagement is experienced and hence displayed.

At team level, it was found that the GVT members identify at varied levels with the multiple roles they play, and the teams they belong to. This was categorized as self-identification with the roles, and team identification with the teams. It was found that, GVT member self-identification with their roles and GVT member team-identification (self and across the team) feed into each other thereby forming a cyclic process. In scenarios where the GVT members have a choice to identify with multiple organizations (client and parent), it was found that organizational identification also feeds into the ways in which GVT members identified with their teams. The various ways in which GVT members identified with their roles, teams, and organizations aided in the creation of either an 'Identity based Engagement Contagion' or an 'Identity based Disengagement Contagion' based on an overall positive team identification of GVT members or negative identification of the GVT members respectively. Therefore, this study identifies that engagement at team level as conventionally understood might not be an average of the engagement levels of all the GVT members of the team, but rather alleviate or deteriorate based on the type of identity based engagement/disengagement contagion experienced by the GVT members as a team.

In Study B, it was found that the levels of trust in a team (both at individual and team level) partially mediated the relationship between cultural intelligence and employee engagement. It meant that apart from cultural intelligence other factors might also be effecting employee engagement in GVTs both at individual and team levels.

This research aims to add to the existing body of knowledge on GVTs and employee engagement in five ways. First, through a systematic review of literature, this study contribute towards integrating the scholarly work on employee engagement (including all the conceptualizations of engagement) and GVTs; Second, this study elucidates the characteristics of distributed engagement and disengagement of GVT members at individual level; third, this study elucidates the conditions and interferences of distributed engagement for a GVT member; four, this study tries to understand the team level GVT engagement, and elucidate the identity based engagement/disengagement contagion; and finally, this study empirically evaluates the relationship between cultural intelligence and employee engagement both at GVT member and GVT levels using a multilevel modeling technique.

**Keywords:** *Distributed Engagement, Distributed Disengagement, Transient Interferences, Global Virtual Teams (GVTs), Ethnography, Cultural Intelligence*

### **References:**

Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of management journal*, 33(4), 692-724.