

Assessing Employee Engagement in an ODL Context: Some Observation from the Zimbabwe Open University

Daniel Ndudzo
Zimbabwe Open University, Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

Employee engagement is the amount of discretionary effort exhibited by employees in their jobs; (Frank et al 2004). ODL institutions are characterised by numerous semi autonomous geographically dispersed centres which are administered from a central administration centre. Direct supervision of employees in the geographical dispersed centres is usually impossible or too expensive for most ODL institutions hence the need for high employee engagement. The importance of employee engagement is that it could be used as a yardstick to show the effectiveness of employees in the organisation. This study assesses the level of employee engagement at the Zimbabwe Open University. The University has 10 regional centres located in the 10 geographic regions in Zimbabwe, a Virtual region which serves international students and the National Centre which is responsible for supervising all University operations. Direct control and supervision by management therefore becomes difficult due to geographic dispersion, this then calls for highly engaged and committed employees. This study falls within the qualitative research paradigm and employs an anti-positivist philosophy. The case study research design was used and data was collected using questionnaires. The research revealed that the University's employees were highly committed and engaged in their work. They were knowledgeable and committed to the achievement of the institutional, departmental and their own individual goals. Employee engagement however was hampered by inadequate resources, perceived lack of consultation by management, lack of employee involvement and generally low empowerment. It is recommended that the institution take more risk in trusting the capabilities of its employees and grant them more autonomy in their operations. The University could enhance performance and engagement by providing employees with adequate modern, quality resources consistently so that employees are not inconvenienced and discouraged by lack of resources.

Key words

Employee engagement, Open and Distance learning, Effectiveness

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The level of employee engagement is one of the most important indicators of the effectiveness of an ODL institution. Employees in many ODL institutions enjoy more autonomy and less direct supervision because of the geographical dispersion of the ODL units. Success in ODL therefore requires highly disciplined employees who are willing and able to work under minimum supervision.

The Zimbabwe Open University has ten regional centres located in the different geographic regions in Zimbabwe. Previous studies in the University have show that ZOU employees were highly motivated and satisfied with their work. High levels of employee motivation and

satisfaction in the University however cannot be regarded as satisfactory indicators of the likelihood of effectiveness and performance in the institution.

Bernard Marr (2012) suggests that employee engagement surveys are more reliable indicators to predict employee productivity than traditional employee satisfaction and motivation surveys. He notes that employees may be satisfied with their work environment because they receive excellent benefits packages or have easy jobs and are not stretched. This however does not mean that the employees are committed to delivering the organisation's vision or mission. He notes that the most dissatisfied workers might as well be the ones that are performance-oriented and commit more towards the achievement of the institution's goals.

This study thus assesses the extent to which the Zimbabwe Open University employees are engaged in their work and thus contributing to the achievement of the University's goals. The study focused on the following aspects which are regarded as affecting employee engagement; knowledge of goals and roles, skills and resources, Passion, motivation, commitment, discretionary effort and the organisational climate.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Employee engagement is much more than employee satisfaction and motivation. It measures the actual contribution of employees towards organisational objectives. While several studies have revealed that employees at the Zimbabwe Open University are satisfied with their jobs and are motivated to work for the University, there is no evidence that reflects this and motivation has translated to significant productivity measured, for instance, by an increase in student enrolments.

1.2 Aim of the Study

The study aims to assess employee engagement at the Zimbabwe Open University. This would assist the University management to formulate strategies to improve employee effectiveness and contribution to the achievement of the University's goals and objectives.

1.3 Research Objectives

The study sought to achieve the following objectives

- To assess the level of employee engagement at the Zimbabwe Open University
- To establish possible factors limiting the level of employee engagement
- To establish possible ways of improving employee engagement

1.4 Research questions

The study answered the following questions

- How best could the level of employee engagement be described at the Zimbabwe Open University?
- What factors curtail employee engagement at the Zimbabwe Open University?
- How can the University increase employee engagement or contribution to organisational performance?

1.5 Justification of the Study

Studies carried out by D. Ndudzo (2013) on the Key factors that motivate employees at ZOU revealed that generally ZOU employees were satisfied with the working conditions and salaries. Statistics however show that enrolment has reduced significantly. It is usually expected that where employees are motivated, organisational performance also improves. This study thus measures the extent to which ZOU employees perform in line with key goals and objectives vis-à-vis the high level of motivation. It is hoped that this study will recommend practical and relevant ways to improve employee contribution to the overall effectiveness of the organisation.

2.0 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

According to Kahn (1990), engagement refers to an employee's psychological and physical presence when occupying and performing an organisational role. Kahn (1990:694) defines employee engagement as "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances".

Douglas Macgregor (1960s) in his theory of motivation argued that in organisations there is a class of workers who dislike work, are not willing to take responsibility, lazy and generally need to work under supervision with coercion to perform. These are the employees he classified as theory X workers. Satisfaction with working conditions and remuneration may not necessarily result in this class of employees performing effectively at work.

Macgregor (1960s) also identified a highly engaged class of workers, which he classified as theory Y workers. These employees are committed to their work; require minimum supervision to perform effectively and are willing to take responsibility.

It is important for the ODL institution to identify the general type of employees in its regional centres so as to improve their performance. This study thus fills this information gap by attempting to describe the current ZOU employee in the various regional centres and units.

A study on employee satisfaction in the ODL institution by Daniel Ndudzo, (2013) revealed that generally the Zimbabwe Open University employees are satisfied with their jobs and the work environment. Employee satisfaction alone however does not guarantee high commitment and productivity by employees. The study thus did not address the critical issues regarding the performance of employees and their contribution to the achievement of the ODL institution's goals.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employed the case study research design which falls under the qualitative research paradigm. The study is based on the interpretivism philosophy. The population of the study was composed of 824 ZOU employees. The sample was 100 ZOU employees selected using the simple random sampling technique.

Data collection was conducted using the questionnaire instrument. The questionnaire was based on Gallup's 12 questions model for assessing employee engagement. Other questions were added to address the specific issues at the Zimbabwe Open University.

4.0 RESULTS OF THE STUDY

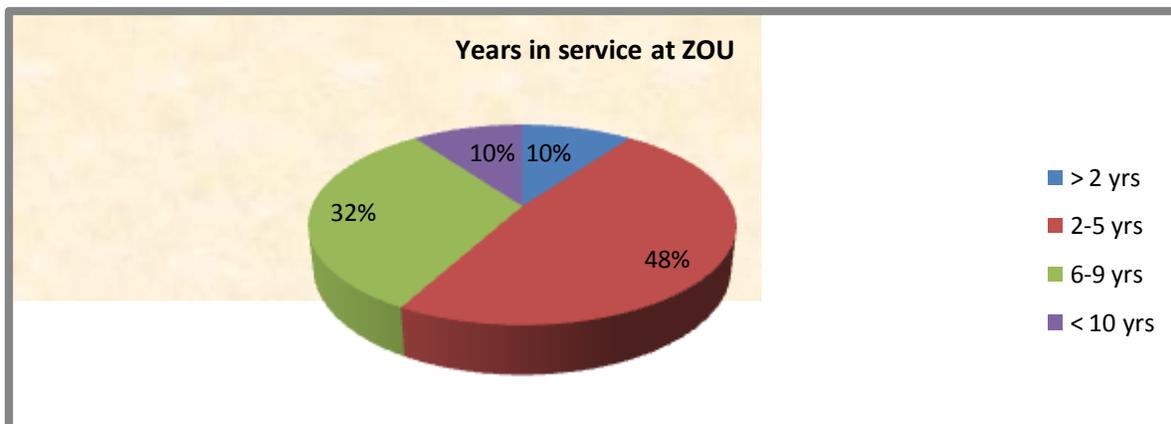
The research results in assessing employee engagement at the Zimbabwe Open University were as follows;

- **Background of ZOU employees**

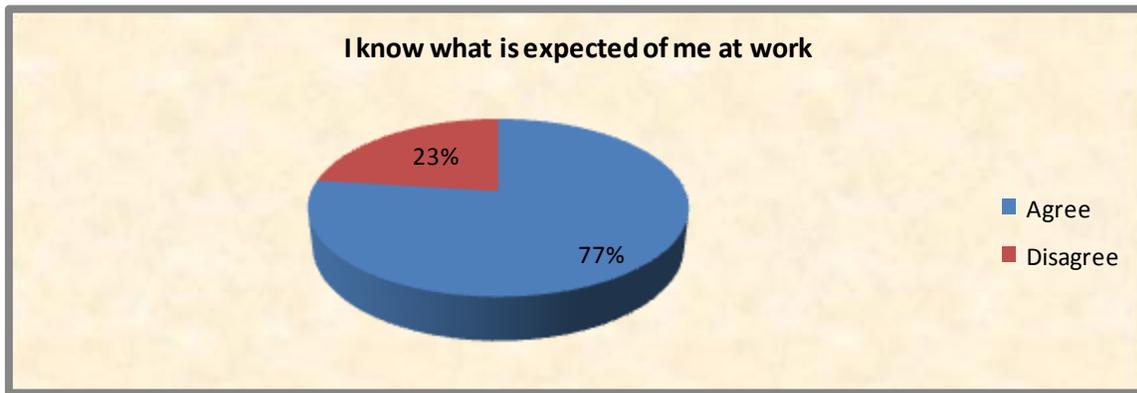
Sixty eight percent of respondents were male while 32% were female. Of these, respondents were married, 13% were single while 6% were either widowed or divorced.

The majority of respondents (35%) and (29%) were in the age ranges 31-40 years and 41-50 years respectively. 23% were below 30 years while 13% were above 51 years.

The findings showed that 48% of respondents had served the University for a period between 2 and 5 years, 32% had served between 6 and 9 years while 10% and 10% had served less than 2 years and more than 10 years respectively.



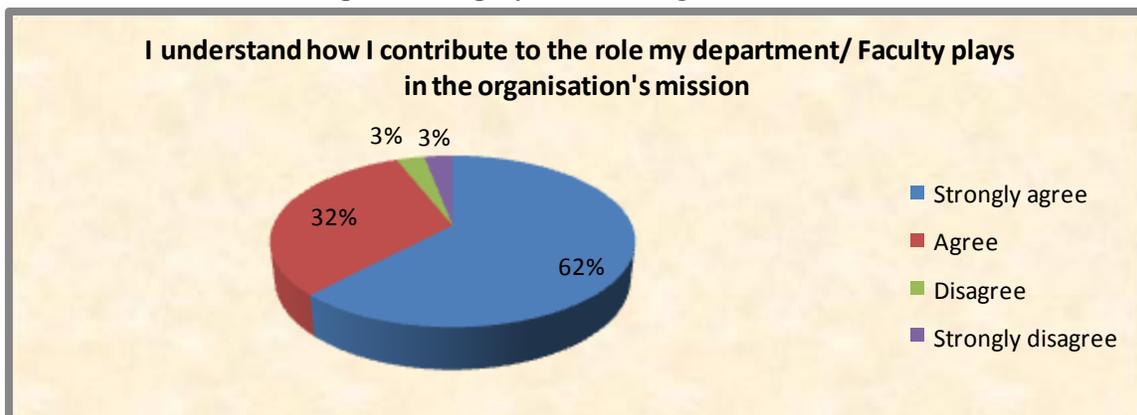
On being asked whether they knew what was expected of them at work, 77% of respondents agreed that they knew while 23% disagreed. This represents a high proportion of employees who were confident about their work and knew their responsibilities. It is however essential to constantly remind and refresh workers on their responsibilities and duties to cater for the other 23%.



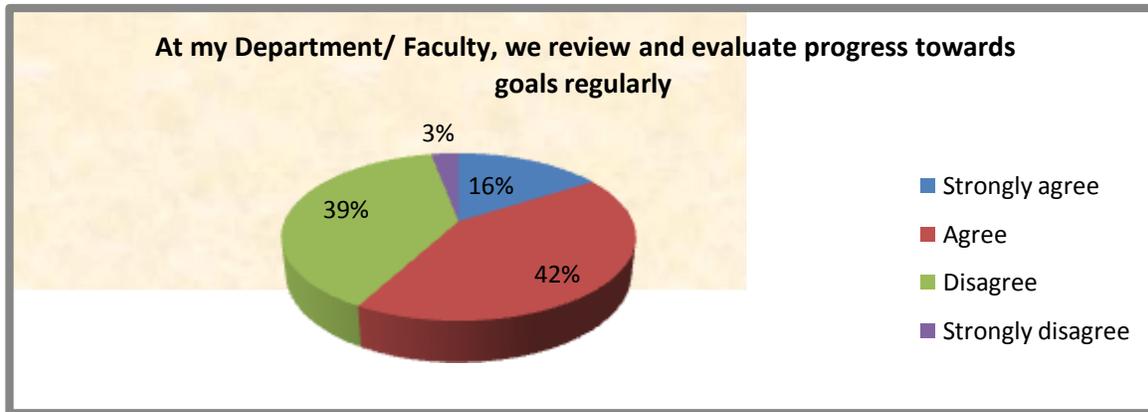
ZOU employees fully understood their departments' objectives and policies. 93% of respondents indicated that their departments/ faculties have goals with clear connections with the organisation's future. Employees were confident about the relevance of the organisation's goals to its future needs and vision.



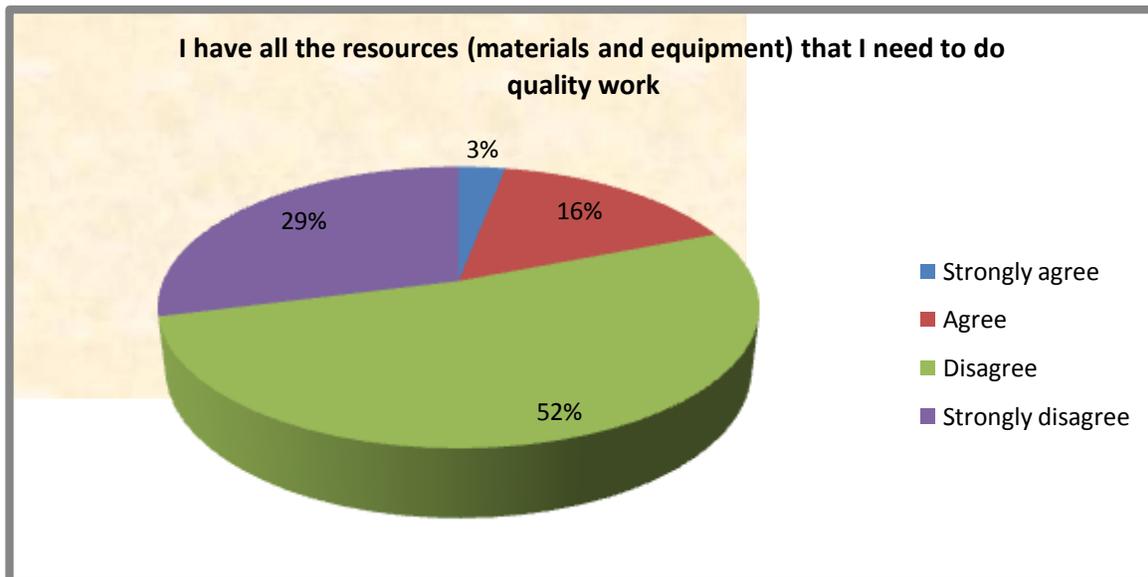
The study further revealed that ZOU employees fully understood how they could contribute to the organisation's mission. Findings showed that 94% of respondents understood how they contributed to the role their departments played in the organisation's mission.



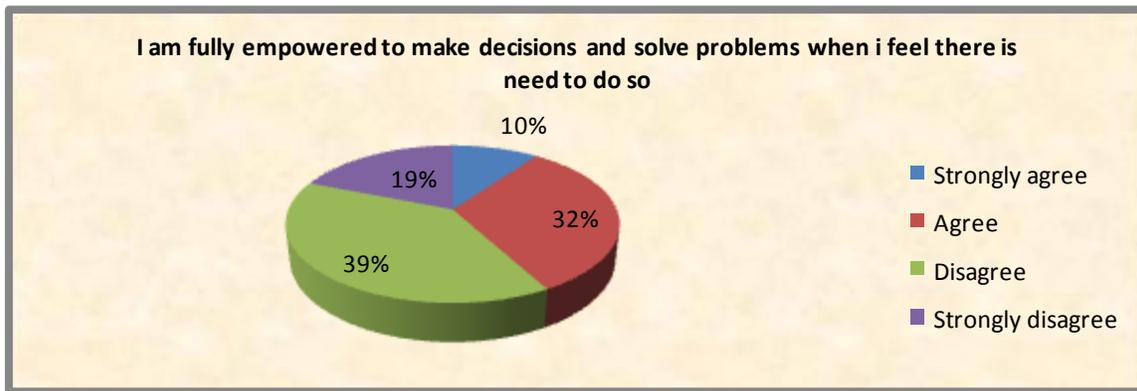
Though ZOU employees are well informed about goals, roles and other responsibilities, there is need to consolidate their involvement by involving them in reviewing departmental progress and goals. Only 58% of respondents indicated that they reviewed and evaluated progress towards achievement of goals regularly at their departments or faculties.



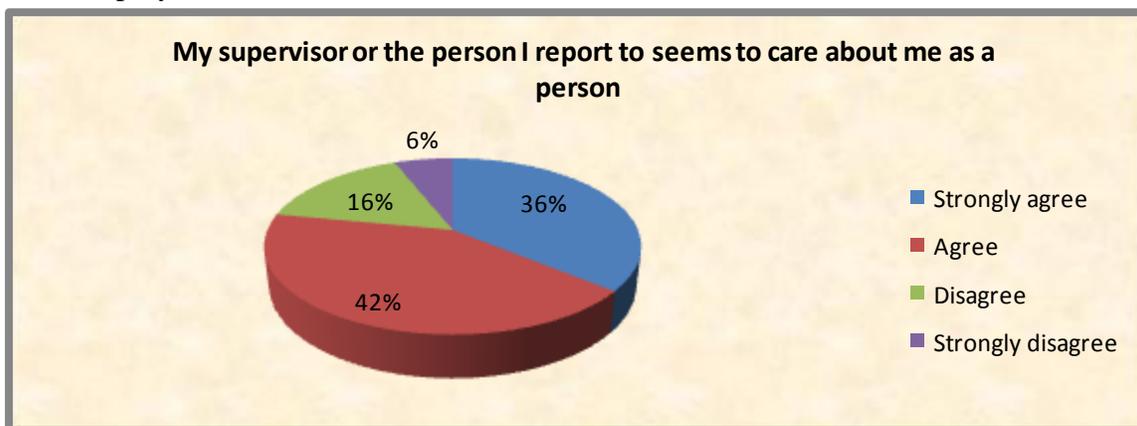
The greatest challenge facing the University in engaging its employees was its failure to provide adequate resources for day to day operations. When asked, 81% of respondents indicated that they do not have adequate resources to effectively carry out their duties.



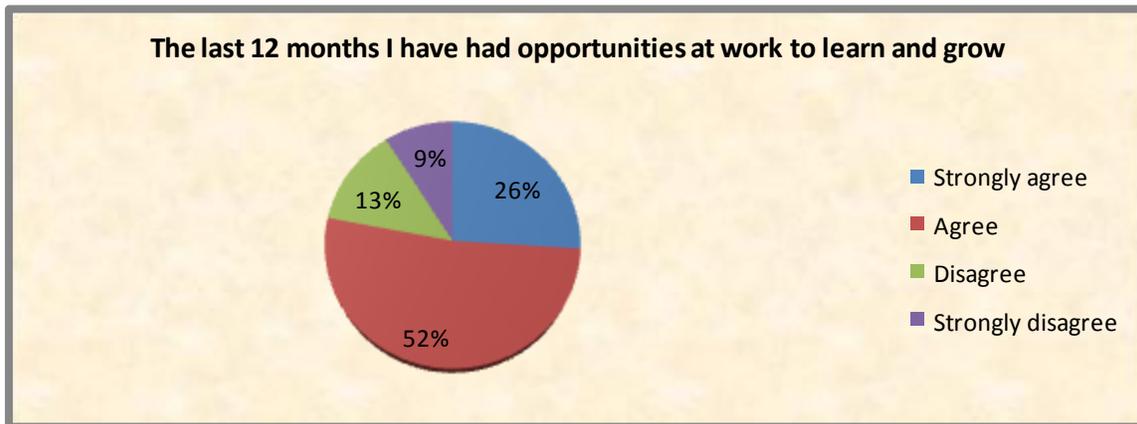
The study revealed that ZOU employees generally were not adequately empowered to make decisions. Only 42% of respondents indicated that they were empowered to make decisions on their work.



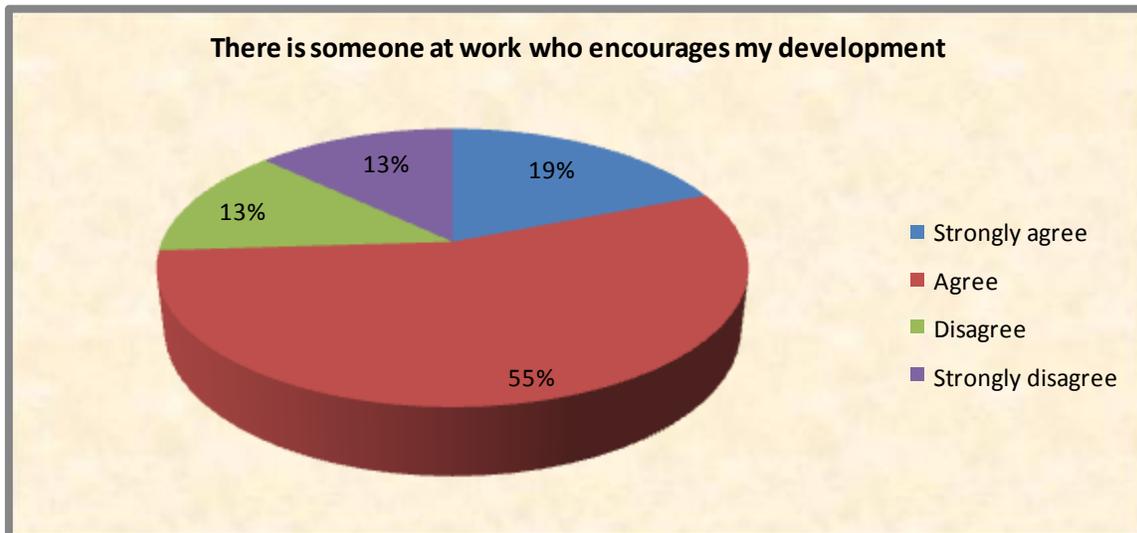
Supervisors in the University had good relationships with employees. The study revealed that about 78% of employees had good relationships with their supervisors who showed affection and cared for employees as individuals.



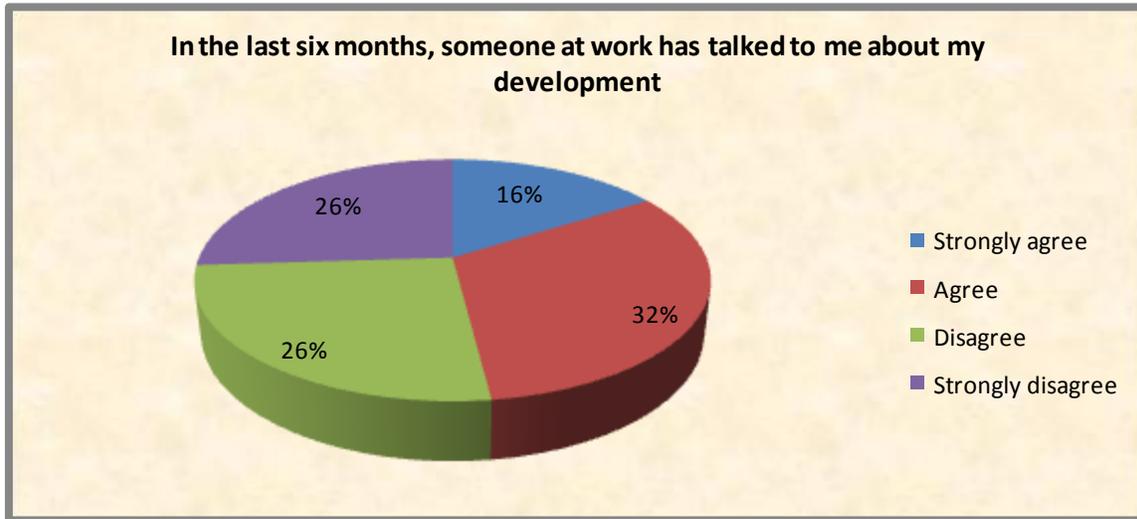
The University has made remarkable progress in availing opportunities for learning and growth at work. The study revealed that 78% of respondents had opportunities to learn and grow at work over the previous 12 months.



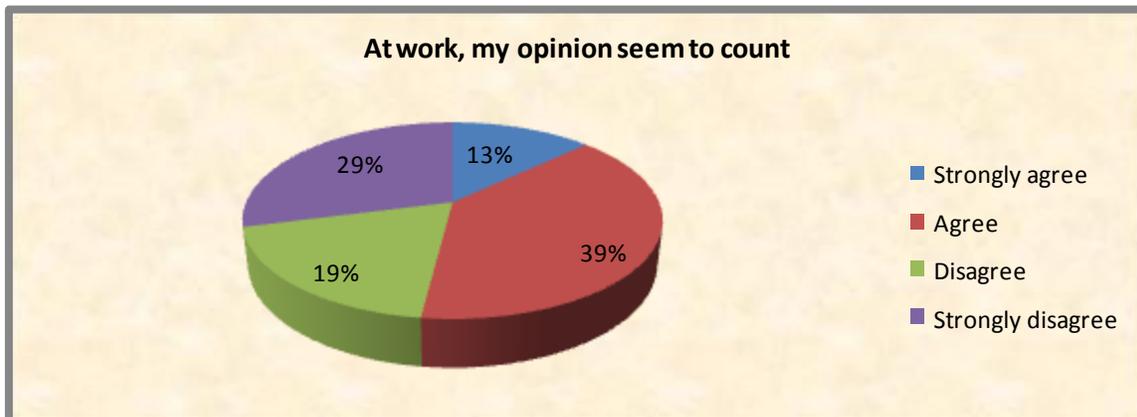
It is part of the University's culture that employees are mentored and encouraged to grow and develop as individuals in the University by their managers. 74% of respondents indicated that there was someone who encouraged their personal development.



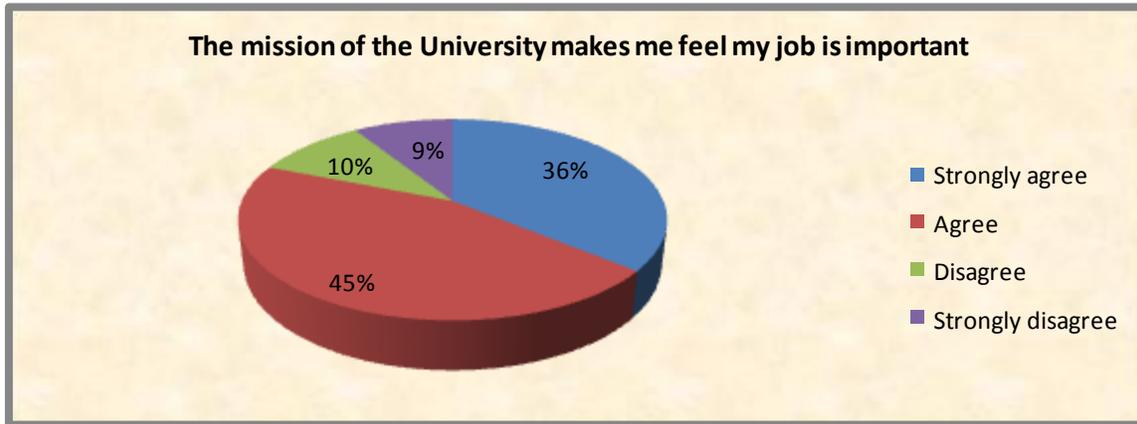
There is need to continue cultivating the tendency for mentorship in the University as only 48% of respondents indicated that in the past six months someone had talked to them about their personal development. 52% of respondents however indicated that they had not received mentorship in the past six months.



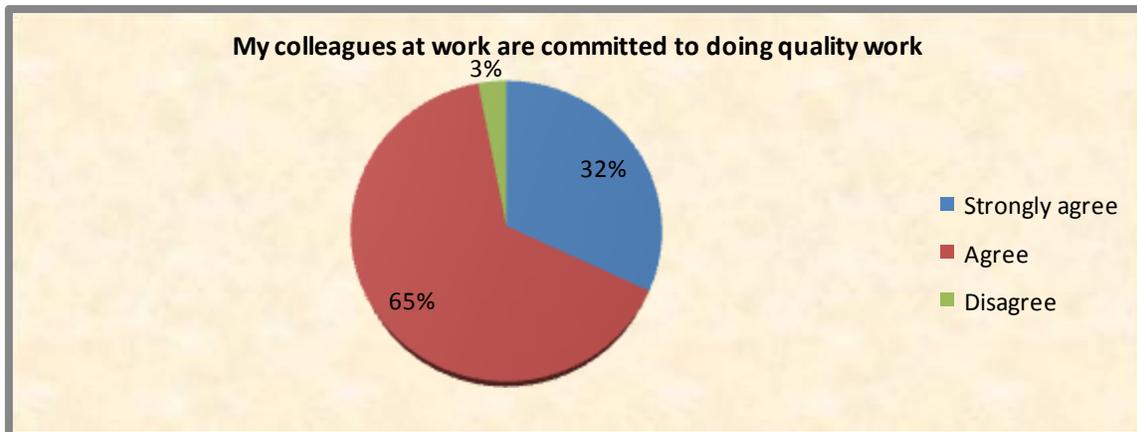
The University has not adequately put measures to accommodate employee suggestions; the study revealed that a significant proportion of employees (48%) were not convinced that their opinions were taken seriously at work.



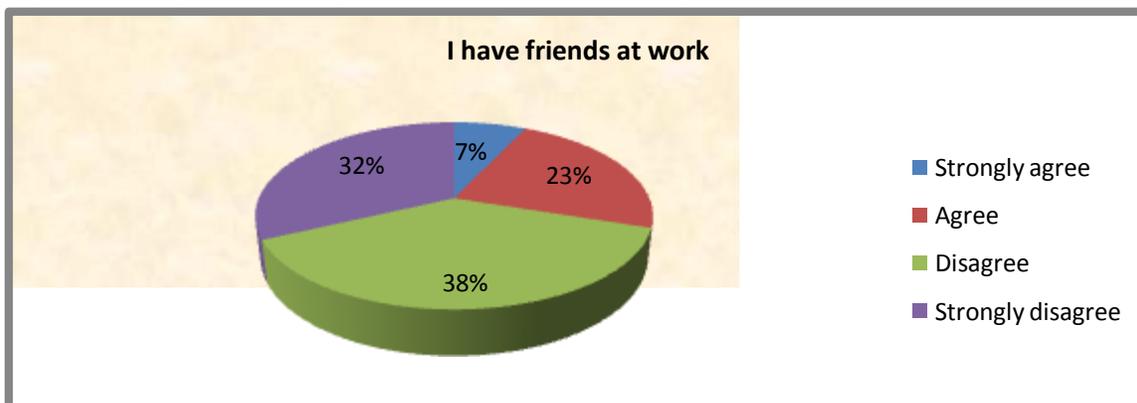
When asked whether the mission of the University makes them feel their jobs are important, 81% of respondents were in agreement while 19% disagreed. The study therefore reveals that the mission of the University connects with the work of individual employees and motivates them.



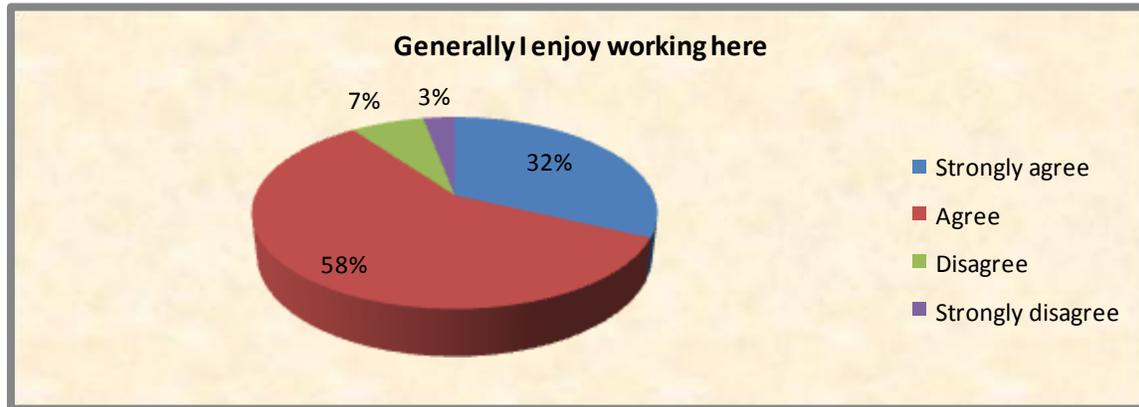
The study revealed that ZOU employees had high confidence and trust in each other regarding work related issues. When asked whether their work colleagues are committed to doing quality work, 97% of respondents were in agreement while only 3% disagreed.



Though employees respected and trusted each other on work related issues, the study indicated that the University had not done enough to build close personal relationships within its employees as only 28% of respondents indicated that they had close friends at work.



The study revealed that the University has made remarkable progress in creating an enabling work environment where employees are able to fully commit and concentrate on their duties. 90% of respondents indicated that they generally enjoy working at the Zimbabwe Open University.



5.0 CONCLUSIONS

Previous researches had revealed high levels of motivation within the Zimbabwe Open University employees. Motivation only however does not guarantee effectiveness in the institution. This study provided an essential insight into the University employees' attitude to work and the potential of the University to achieve its objectives.

This study concludes that the Zimbabwe Open University employees are satisfactorily engaged in their work. They are well informed of their responsibilities and goals. Commitment to achieving goals is high and employees are generally committed to doing quality work.

ZOU employees identify with the mission of the University. They see the significance of their individual jobs and their departments in achieving the organisation's mission. At the level of strategy and goal conception, the employees are fully apprised of their obligations and responsibilities. They are also motivated to ensure that the University succeeds.

Though generally employees are motivated and enjoy working for the University, this high level satisfaction has not fully contributed to the achievement of individual, departmental and organisational objectives due to shortage of resources, inadequate authority granted to employees to use their discretion and autonomously make decisions, and unavailability of clear channels to transmit employee ideas.

Cooperation at work can also be enhanced by building a platform for building understanding and friendship between employees. Employees in the University have not been able to build such relationships. It is thus another avenue to build and sustain cooperation between employees and departments thus building synergy within the institution.

The study thus concludes that ZOU employees were satisfied, engaged and fully committed to achieving the organisation's objectives. The gap between satisfaction and low organisational

performance cannot be attributed to low employee commitment towards work, or negative attitudes. Outside macro economic factors and other organisational factors thus have to be explored.

The potential of ZOU employees in executing their duties has not been fully exploited. This study recommends the following to enhance employee contribution to organisational effectiveness;

6.0 Recommendations

The study revealed some critical links and details which have not been adequately addressed by the institution to bridge the gap between employee satisfaction and engagement thus turning the satisfied workers into high performers. The study thus recommends the following;

- Provision of adequate work related resources to enable employees to fully utilise their capacity and potential in executing their duties for example stationery, computers and internet connection at all work stations
- Availing platforms for employees to interact and develop friendships and bonds outside the working environment to enhance understanding and cooperation at work for example ZOU employee dinner dance, sporting events and University cultural festivals.
- Employees opinions have to be taken seriously and involvement should be a primary strategy in implementing decisions suggested by employees
- Employee involvement in reviewing departmental and organisational level performance.
- Employees need to know the general performance of the organisation and the policies decisions and strategies implemented by the organisation to improve performance.

Employee motivation and satisfaction alone does not guarantee an organisation of success, it is thus essential that employee engagement be furthered as it is a more reliable indicator of employee contribution to organisational effectiveness.

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