

Reimagining Employee Engagement in a hybrid HEI: Managing Social Isolation and Well-Being in a South African University

Rudo Marozva

North West University, South Africa

Anna-Marie Pelser

North West University, South Africa

Abstract:

In HEIs, shifting towards hybrid work models has had tremendous impacts on employee engagement, well-being as well as the social dynamics that are ordinarily prevalent in the world of work. Although hybridisation offers many opportunities inclusive of flexibility, they also introduce risks such as social isolation, disengagement, lack of employee well-being and reduced employee connectedness. This qualitative research investigates how a HEI in a hybrid work arrangement can reimagine employee engagement and manage social isolation and well-being. The paper uses the Self-Determination Theory and the Social Exchange Theory (1964). 23 lecturers at a public higher education institution in the Northwest Province of South Africa were interviewed to assess how hybrid work affects employee engagement and social well-being in a South African university, to identify the main challenges brought about by social isolation and to propose strategies for reimagining engagement and well-being practices for a hybrid HEI. Braun and Clarke's six phase Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the data. Findings highlight several ways of mitigating the negative effects of workplace social isolation and underscore the importance of the role of leadership in spearheading the transformational changes to thrive in a hybrid environment.

Keywords:

social isolation, employee engagement, hybrid work, well-being, Higher Education Institution.