

Integrating Saks (2006) and Schaufeli *et al.* (2006): towards a conceptual framework and typology of sustainable employee engagement

International
Journal of
Organizational
Analysis

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Received 7 June 2025
Revised 13 September 2025
29 November 2025
Accepted 30 November 2025

Abstract

Purpose – This study integrates two foundational perspectives on employee engagement: job demands–resources (JD-R) and social exchange theory (SET), through the lens of psychological capital (PsyCap: hope, efficacy, resilience, optimism). Additionally, it incorporates conservation of resources (COR) theory to reinforce the resource gain/loss logic underpinning sustainable engagement. The purpose of this study is to develop a conceptual framework and typology of sustainable employee engagement (SEE) that positions well-being and sustainability as central outcomes, directly aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Design/methodology/approach – Using an integrative literature review, the paper consolidates structural, relational and psychological resource perspectives. JD-R highlights the balance between demands and resources, SET emphasises reciprocity and perceived support, while PsyCap offers the psychological resources required to sustain engagement. COR theory further frames engagement as the process of protecting and accumulating valued resources. These dimensions are synthesised into a multidimensional SEE framework and typology.

Findings – Enduring engagement requires more than favourable job design or supportive exchanges. PsyCap functions as a pivotal mechanism that transforms organisational resources and social reciprocity into long-term, resilient engagement. Moderators such as psychological detachment and goal clarity act as boundary conditions to prevent over-engagement and burnout. The typology identifies unfocused, sustainable, stuck and over-engagement states.

Research limitations/implications – This conceptual model requires empirical testing across diverse organisational contexts.

Social implications – The framework supports workplaces that foster employee well-being and contribute to SDG 3 and SDG 8.

Originality/value – By uniting JD-R, SET, COR theory and PsyCap, this study advances engagement theory into a sustainability-oriented paradigm. It provides actionable strategies for building resilient, high-performing employees.

Keywords Social exchange theory, Psychological capital, Sustainable Development Goals, Job demands-resources model, Conservation of resource theory, Integrative, Sustainable employee engagement

Paper type Conceptual paper



International Journal of
Organizational Analysis
© Emerald Publishing Limited
1934-8835
DOI 10.1108/UOA-06-2025-5602

Funding: Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan. 0002305/TRP/D/ASN-2023.

Introduction

Employee engagement has long been positioned as a critical driver of organisational success, linked to improved performance, innovation and financial outcomes (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Harter *et al.*, 2002; Richman, 2006). Yet, despite its prominence, global surveys reveal a persistent “engagement gap”. According to Gallup (2024), only about 21% of employees were engaged in their work, down from 23% the previous year. Gallup estimates that low engagement costs the global economy approximately US \$8.9tn, about 9% of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This paradox raises a fundamental question: why does engagement remain elusive despite two decades of scholarly and practitioner attention?

One reason lies in the fragmented theoretical foundations of engagement research. Much of the literature has relied on two seminal perspectives: the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006), which emphasises structural job resources, and Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Saks, 2006), which highlights relational reciprocity. While each has provided valuable insight, both remain incomplete. JD–R explains how resources buffer demands but underplays the role of social exchanges, whereas SET captures relational dynamics but overlooks structural strain. Moreover, both models treat employee engagement as a static and traditional construct, no longer adequate to capture the evolving nature of engagement in an era of disruption and rapid technological advancement. This limitation helps to explain the persistence of the engagement gap, which, if unaddressed, may yield adverse consequences for both individuals and organisations.

Several studies argue that engagement alone is insufficient to sustain performance over time. Robertson and Cooper (2010) and Lewis *et al.* (2012) emphasise that focusing exclusively on engagement risks neglecting psychological and health-related dimensions necessary for employees to thrive (Robertson and Cooper, 2010; Lewis *et al.*, 2012). This concern is echoed in the AIHR HR Trends Report (2025), which calls for a redefinition of engagement beyond superficial perks or recognition, advocating instead for meaningful, sustainable practices rooted in employee well-being. According to the report, unless engagement is reframed accordingly, levels will likely stagnate, preventing organisations from realising its full potential as a long-term performance driver.

These perspectives converge with the global sustainability agenda, especially the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goals such as SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) emphasise that productive work must go hand in hand with employee health, resilience and dignity. Together, the evidence suggests that organisations cannot rely on traditional, narrow conceptualisations of engagement that treat it as a static construct. Rather, there is an urgent need for a framework of Sustainable Employee Engagement (SEE), one that explicitly integrates well-being, psychological resources, adaptability and thriving as core mechanisms for sustaining engagement in contemporary workplaces. By embedding these dimensions, SEE provides a pathway not only towards enhanced organisational outcomes but also towards sustainable human flourishing aligned with global development priorities.

In this study, the SEE framework addresses these concerns by advancing a theoretical integration of the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model and Social Exchange Theory (SET) through the lens of Psychological Capital (PsyCap: hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism). PsyCap represents the personal psychological resources that enable employees to sustain engagement under non-linear and dynamic conditions, including hybrid work structures, rapid digital transformation and cultural diversity. To reflect the dynamic nature of resource acquisition and depletion, the framework also draws upon Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. COR conceptualises engagement as a process of protecting, investing and gaining valued resources over time. By synthesising structural (JD–R),

relational (SET), psychological (PsyCap) and resource-based (COR) perspectives, this paper develops a novel conceptual framework and typology of Sustainable Employee Engagement (SEE). The proposed framework not only addresses limitations of prior models but also offers a pathway for aligning engagement with both organisational performance and broader societal sustainability goals.

The research gap emerges on two critical fronts. At the theoretical level, there remains no comprehensive framework that captures how job resources, social reciprocity and personal psychological resources interact to sustain engagement across organisational contexts, especially in a way that reflects the dynamic process of resource accumulation and loss over time. This lack of integration has left engagement research fragmented, and limited in its ability to explain mechanisms that render engagement enduring rather than short-lived. At the contextual level, foundational models were developed before the rise of hybrid work, rapid digital transformation and increasing cultural diversity. Consequently, existing theories often struggle to account for the realities of contemporary workplaces, where engagement must be sustained under more complex, dynamic and non-linear conditions.

This study makes several contributions to address these gaps. First, it advances a novel theoretical integration by combining the structural insights of the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, the relational dynamics of Social Exchange Theory (SET) and the personal resource perspective of Psychological Capital (PsyCap). Moreover, by drawing upon Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, it conceptualises engagement as a process of continuous resource investment, preservation and gain, thus reinforcing mechanisms that sustain engagement over time. This synthesis moves engagement theory beyond fragmented explanations towards a holistic understanding of sustainable engagement. Second, it introduces the concept of Sustainable Employee Engagement (SEE) and develops both a conceptual framework and typology to explain engagement as a dynamic, non-linear and well-being-oriented construct. Third, it explicitly links SEE to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), extending engagement research into the domain of global sustainability. Finally, it offers practical implications by highlighting PsyCap as a mediator that transforms structural and relational resources into sustainable outcomes, while COR theory elucidates how these resources must be preserved and deployed strategically to prevent loss and foster long-term resilience. Together, these insights equip organisations with strategies to cultivate not only engaged and high-performing employees but also resilient, adaptable and healthy workforces.

Accordingly, this study is guided by three central research questions: RQ1: How can JD-R model and SET be integrated with COR Theory and Psychological Capital to explain Sustainable Employee Engagement (SEE)? RQ2: What conceptual framework and typology can capture engagement as a non-linear, long-term and well-being-oriented construct? RQ3: How does SEE align with and contribute to the achievement of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)? In summary, this paper seeks to reposition engagement research within a broader sustainability paradigm. By integrating JD-R, SET, COR Theory and PsyCap into the SEE framework, it contributes to both theory and practice, offering a comprehensive and future-oriented model of engagement. This integrative approach sets the foundation for the following sections, where the methodological choices and conceptual development of the framework are elaborated in greater depth.

Methodology

This research article adopts the Integrative Literature Review (ILR) methodology, a distinctive form of conceptual analysis that critically evaluates and synthesises existing studies to produce new theoretical insights (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). The ILR approach

is particularly valuable for consolidating fragmented knowledge across disciplines and for examining mature or emerging topics through comparative critique (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005).

To strengthen the methodological foundation, the ILR process in this study follows a four-phase model:

- (1) problem identification, where the research gap in the conceptualisation and measurement of employee engagement is clarified;
- (2) literature search and selection, ensuring that only peer-reviewed, foundational and theory-rich articles are included;
- (3) data evaluation, which involves assessing methodological rigor and theoretical relevance of the selected papers; and
- (4) analysis and synthesis, where contrasting perspectives are critically compared to derive integrative insights (Russell, 2015; Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005).

This study comparatively reviews two articles: Saks (2006) and Schaufeli *et al.* (2006). The selection is based on four main reasons. First, both are seminal contributions foundational to employee engagement theory. Schaufeli *et al.* (2006) introduced the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), framing engagement as a positive, work-related psychological state characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption. Saks (2006), on the other hand, conceptualised engagement through Social Exchange Theory (SET), distinguishing between job and organisational engagement. Second, these papers provide complementary theoretical anchors: JD-R emphasises structural work resources, while SET underscores relational reciprocity. This dual lens reflects the multifaceted determinants of sustainable employee engagement. Third, they are highly cited and have been widely applied across sectors and cultures, making them suitable for a critical cross-contextual comparison. Fourth, while enduring in impact, both papers have been critiqued for lacking integration and modern contextualisation an ideal gap addressed through the ILR (Bakker and Albrecht, 2018; Saks and Gruman, 2014).

To minimise bias, the ILR approach ensures transparency in study selection and critical objectivity in analysis. This includes triangulating theoretical frameworks, contextualising empirical findings and acknowledging researcher subjectivity (Whittemore and Knafl, 2005). By embracing multiple paradigms and avoiding a single-theory dominance, the review achieves methodological pluralism and theoretical inclusiveness.

Table 1 summarises the ILR methodology used in this study, detailing the search parameters, inclusion and exclusion criteria, review phases and key theoretical anchors. The initial ILR was grounded in two seminal works: Saks (2006) and Schaufeli *et al.* (2006) which serve as foundational anchors for employee engagement theory, emphasising relational (SET) and structural (JD-R) dimensions, respectively.

To construct a more contemporary and robust conceptualisation of Sustainable Employee Engagement (SEE), the review was extended through systematic searches in Scopus and Google Scholar, targeting peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2005 and 2025 within the fields of business and sociology. As the specific term Sustainable Employee Engagement remains underrepresented in indexed databases, the search strategy also included Full Engagement, a term used synonymously by Robertson and Cooper (2010) and Lewis *et al.* (2012). This dual-keyword approach ensured the inclusion of relevant studies that align with evolving conceptualisations of engagement, capturing both theoretical depth and contemporary contextual relevance. The full ILR parameters and process are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the integrative literature review (ILR) methodology

ILR component	Description
Databases searched	Scopus and google scholar
Search string	Full engagement and sustainable employee engagement
Search filter	Document type : journal articles, publication stage: final, subject area: business and sociology, language : English
Inclusion criteria	Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2005–2025; studies with clear conceptual or theoretical contributions; works citing or building upon Saks (2006) and/or Schaufeli et al. (2006) .
Exclusion criteria	Conference papers, non-peer-reviewed sources, articles lacking theoretical rigour, grey literature and publications not available in full text.
Key Achor papers	Saks (2006) , Schaufeli et al. (2006)
Source(s): Authors' work, 2025	

Ultimately, this ILR aims not just to compare the two foundational works, but to propose an integrative conceptual framework for sustainable employee engagement, addressing the limitations of past models and bridging the structural and relational dimensions needed in contemporary workplaces.

Discussion

This integrative literature review synthesises insights from the seminal works of [Schaufeli et al. \(2006\)](#) and [Saks \(2006\)](#) to advance a unified perspective on employee engagement. By combining the structural foundations of the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, the relational dynamics of Social Exchange Theory (SET), the psychological resource perspective of Psychological Capital (PsyCap) and the resource-based logic of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, this study develops a comprehensive framework and typology of Sustainable Employee Engagement (SEE). The following discussion addresses the research questions posed in this study:

Addressing *RQ1*. How can JD-R and SET be integrated with COR Theory and Psychological Capital to explain Sustainable Employee Engagement (SEE)?

In this study, the researcher develops a comprehensive concept of Sustainable Employee Engagement (SEE) by integrating the two theories used in the seminal works of [Schaufeli et al. \(2006\)](#) and [Saks \(2006\)](#). Each of these theories offers distinct strengths, complementing one another in advancing a more holistic understanding of engagement.

In [Saks's \(2006\)](#) study, employee engagement was grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET), originally proposed by [Blau \(1964\)](#). SET is based on the principle of reciprocal relationships, wherein exchanges between individuals and organisations are viewed as mutually beneficial. In organisational contexts, when employees receive positive treatment such as emotional support, recognition, fairness and trust, they are psychologically motivated to reciprocate with greater commitment, loyalty and engagement. Engagement, conceptualised by [Schaufeli et al. \(2002\)](#) as vigour, dedication and absorption, can thus be interpreted as a reciprocal response to organisational support. For example, when organisations demonstrate trust and grant autonomy, employees feel valued and are encouraged to contribute more both

Table 2. Summary of definitions, antecedents, moderators and outcomes underpinning sustainable employee engagement (SEE)

Element	Key themes	Representative references
Definitions	Sustainable employee engagement (SEE) is defined as a multidimensional construct involving simultaneous affective, behavioural and cognitive engagement. It is characterised by authenticity, inclusion, psychological well-being, value alignment and long-term organisational contribution. SEE reflects dynamic and regenerative participation enabled through personal, relational and structural resources	Beymer <i>et al.</i> (2024); Robertson and Cooper (2010); Ogueyungbo <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Lewis <i>et al.</i> (2012); Chaudhary <i>et al.</i> (2025); Thiratisakun (2020); Adeniji <i>et al.</i> (2024)
Antecedents	Structural resources: job design, learning infrastructure, enabling systems, digital tools, policy alignment Relational resources: leadership support, inclusion, team collaboration, mentoring, psychological safety Psychological resources: psychological capital (hope, efficacy, resilience, optimism), identity safety, value alignment	Structural Resources : Barrick <i>et al.</i> (2015); Shoufan (2020); Adeniji <i>et al.</i> (2024); Ford (2006) Relational Resources: Ogueyungbo <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Collins and Rocco (2018); Harris <i>et al.</i> (2015); Haughey <i>et al.</i> (2024) Psychological Resources: Robertson and Cooper (2010); Conner and Pope (2013); Thiratisakun (2020)
Moderators	Organisational culture, digital access, leadership style, contextual affordances, institutional structures, diversity and inclusion practices	Chaudhary <i>et al.</i> (2025); Turner <i>et al.</i> (2024); Maphosa (2024); Haughey <i>et al.</i> (2024); Collins and Rocco (2018); Beymer <i>et al.</i> (2024); Ogueyungbo <i>et al.</i> (2022); Harris <i>et al.</i> (2015)
Outcomes	Employee-Level outcomes: Enhanced well-being, resilience, performance, reduced burnout, increased learning agility Organisational Outcomes : lower turnover intention, innovation and adaptability, contribution to SDGs goals	Robertson and Cooper (2010); Chaudhary <i>et al.</i> (2025); Adeniji <i>et al.</i> (2024); Lewis <i>et al.</i> (2012)
Source(s): Authors' work, 2025		

emotionally and cognitively. [Saks \(2006\)](#) further demonstrated that perceptions of organisational support and justice significantly enhance engagement through such exchange mechanisms.

However, a key limitation of SET lies in its narrow focus on relational aspects, often underemphasising the structural and environmental conditions of work. Even when social reciprocity is strong, high job demands, such as workload, time pressure and role conflict can exhaust employees' psychological energy, potentially leading to disengagement despite supportive relationships. Recent studies affirm this limitation: [Lusiana *et al.* \(2025\)](#) found that intensified demands diminish the efficacy of relational reciprocity, as employees may still experience emotional exhaustion. Likewise, [Aldabbas and Blaique \(2025\)](#) noted that while caring HRM practices foster engagement through SET mechanisms, their effectiveness is constrained in organisations that fail to address excessive workload or resource asymmetries. Extending this critique, [Chen and Chen \(2025\)](#) observed that in gig economy contexts, where job insecurity and volatility prevail, SET-based explanations provide only a partial account of engagement, underscoring the need for models that integrate structural and psychological factors.

In contrast, [Schaufeli *et al.* \(2006\)](#) drew implicitly on the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model to conceptualise engagement. The JD-R model posits that engagement results from the dynamic interplay between job demands and job resources ([Demerouti *et al.*, 2001](#); [Bakker and Demerouti, 2007](#)). Job demands refer to elements such as workload, stress and role conflict that require sustained effort and may deplete energy, whereas job resources, such as autonomy, feedback, supervisor support and opportunities for development—not only buffer against these demands but also foster intrinsic motivation. Unlike SET, which emphasises relational exchange, the JD-R model foregrounds the structural and psychological dimensions of the work environment.

A growing body of empirical evidence supports the explanatory power of the JD-R model. For instance, [Semelius Granevald *et al.* \(2025\)](#) reported that job resources such as social support, growth opportunities and manageability are mutually reinforcing and instrumental in preserving employee well-being under pressure. Similarly, [Kızrak \(2025\)](#) found that supervisor support and person–job fit significantly enhance engagement and career satisfaction, particularly in high-demand industries. These findings reinforce the relevance of the JD-R model in modern work contexts characterised by volatility and complexity, offering insights not only into disengagement under strain but also into the drivers of sustainable high engagement.

Although both the Social Exchange Theory (SET) and the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model provide valuable insights, they remain insufficient to fully capture and explain employee engagement in the context of technological transformation and the disruptive era. Therefore, this study introduces an integrative approach that brings together these theoretical perspectives to develop a more comprehensive understanding of Sustainable Employee Engagement (SEE).

To reinforce the resource-based logic behind this integration, this paper adopts the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory ([Hobfoll, 1989, 2001, 2011](#)). COR theory posits that individuals are motivated to acquire, retain and protect valued resources, and that the impact of resource loss is psychologically more potent than that of resource gain. In organisational contexts, sustained engagement is not solely dependent on the presence of job resources or positive social exchanges; it also hinges on employees' ability to manage and replenish their internal resource reservoirs over time. When exposed to prolonged demands such as excessive workload, role ambiguity or digital overload without sufficient resources, individuals may enter a downward loss spiral, where engagement is gradually eroded.

Conversely, resource gain can trigger an upward spiral, enhancing motivation, adaptability and well-being.

Recent empirical research continues to affirm the explanatory power of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory in sustaining engagement through dynamic resource accumulation and renewal. For example, [Uslukaya and Zincirli \(2025\)](#) demonstrated reciprocal relationships between job resources and work engagement in a longitudinal study of teachers, finding that each predicts the other over time reinforcing COR's core tenet of resource cycles and mutual reinforcement. In a related study, the 2022 research on training transfer revealed that job resources and engagement can initiate a positive gain spiral, whereby heightened engagement enhances employees' opportunity and motivation to apply new skills, further generating valuable personal and professional resources ([Salamon et al. 2022](#)). Most notably, a 2025 study on social resources and engagement confirmed that social support, trust and team cohesion not only contribute to work engagement but also co-develop with it over time, creating resource spirals that evolve collectively rather than in isolation ([Murray et al., 2025](#)).

These findings highlight the critical role of resource stability in enabling sustainable employee engagement, supporting the idea that engagement must be protected and regenerated over time, not merely activated in response to temporary incentives or isolated support systems.

Together, these findings support the proposition that work engagement functions both as a beneficiary of existing resources and a driver of future ones. This underscores the importance of designing systems that enable resource stability, regeneration and integration particularly in high-demand, fluctuating environments. Such an approach is foundational to Sustainable Employee Engagement (SEE), where engagement is maintained not through short-term interventions but through reinforcing cycles of structural, social and psychological support.

This study also introduces Psychological Capital (PsyCap) as a core personal resource that can function as a "resource caravan", a concept in COR theory referring to clusters of resources that travel together and reinforce each other over time ([Hobfoll et al., 2011](#)). PsyCap is defined as a positive psychological state characterised by hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism ([Luthans et al., 2007](#)), and serves as a mechanism that enables employees to convert structural and relational support into sustainable engagement.

Each component of PsyCap contributes distinctively to sustaining engagement. Hope enhances employees' ability to set and navigate alternative pathways to reach goals, particularly under uncertainty or when obstacles arise. Efficacy strengthens belief in one's capabilities to mobilise motivation and resources to execute tasks successfully. Resilience enables employees to recover from setbacks and persist during adversity. Optimism sustains positive expectations and confidence in future success, which is essential when facing disruptive changes.

Recent empirical evidence reinforces this integrative perspective. For instance, [Mualimin et al. \(2025\)](#) found that PsyCap significantly moderates the relationship between engagement and performance among health-care professionals, ensuring sustainable outcomes even in high-pressure environments. Similarly, [Shahbaz and Shahid \(2025\)](#) argue that workplace mindfulness can be conceptualised as an extension of PsyCap, broadening its role as a foundation for long-term engagement and employee well-being. In crisis contexts, [Öksüz et al. \(2025\)](#) demonstrate that PsyCap, together with self-efficacy, predicts preparedness and adaptability among nurses, underscoring its value as a resilience mechanism in uncertain work settings.

Taken together, these insights demonstrate that the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and Psychological Capital (PsyCap) jointly fill the missing psychological dimension

in engagement theory. While the JD-R model explains the motivational role of job and personal resources, and Social Exchange Theory (SET) clarifies the importance of reciprocity and relational support, COR theory provides the overarching logic of resource preservation and loss aversion, and PsyCap ensures that employees possess the internal capacity to sustain engagement over time. Integrating COR, PsyCap, JD-R and SET thus produces a holistic theoretical foundation for Sustainable Employee Engagement (SEE), where structural, relational and psychological dimensions interact dynamically to generate engagement that is not only activated but also maintained across diverse organisational contexts. This integrative model captures the complex, non-linear and adaptive nature of engagement required in the digital and disruptive era.

RQ2. What conceptual framework and typology can capture engagement as a non-linear, long-term and well-being-oriented construct?

To address the second research question: what conceptual framework and typology can capture engagement as a non-linear, long-term and well-being-oriented construct?, this study integrates insights from the seminal works of [Schaufeli et al. \(2006\)](#) and [Saks \(2006\)](#) to advance a renewed theoretical contribution. While both studies laid essential foundations for understanding employee engagement, they predominantly conceptualised it in traditional terms, with benefits largely accruing to the organisation and limited attention to employee well-being or adaptability in the face of contemporary changes. Moreover, these earlier models do not fully capture the accelerated transformation of workplace dynamics shaped by digitalisation, technological disruption and hybrid work structures.

Building on these contributions, this study proposes the concept of Sustainable Employee Engagement (SEE) as an evolved form of engagement that responds to the complexity and volatility of the modern work environment. SEE is characterised by the integration of affective, behavioural and cognitive engagement ([Schaufeli et al., 2002](#); [Beymer et al., 2024](#)) with sustained employee well-being, resilience and value-alignment, supported through authentic inclusion, supportive leadership and adaptive organisational systems ([Robertson and Cooper, 2010](#); [Ogueyungbo et al., 2022](#); [Thiratsakun, 2020](#)). Rather than viewing engagement as a static psychological state, SEE is understood as a dynamic, durable and regenerative process, one that is maintained through the interaction of structural, relational and psychological resources over time.

This conceptualisation is informed by a synthesis of empirical literature across diverse sectors and settings. Based on a systematic screening of literature from 2005 to 2025, [Table 2](#) below summarises the definitional themes, antecedents, moderators and outcomes that underpin SEE. The table demonstrates how engagement can be sustainably cultivated through mechanisms such as psychological capital, inclusive organisational cultures, consistent managerial behaviours and supportive systems that align employee needs with organisational goals. These insights not only expand the theoretical scope of engagement but also provide a robust foundation for the proposed framework presented in [Figure 1](#).

By integrating the structural balance of the JD-R model, the relational dynamics of Social Exchange Theory (SET), the resource-based logic of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and the psychological strengths of Psychological Capital (PsyCap), this study proposes a comprehensive framework and typology that reconceptualise engagement as a dynamic and regenerative process, one capable of sustaining performance while simultaneously safeguarding employee well-being over time. The proposed conceptualisation is illustrated in [Figure 1](#), which presents the Sustainable Employee Engagement (SEE) framework.

As previously outlined, the SEE framework is informed by three theoretical foundations: Social Exchange Theory (SET), Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, Conservation of

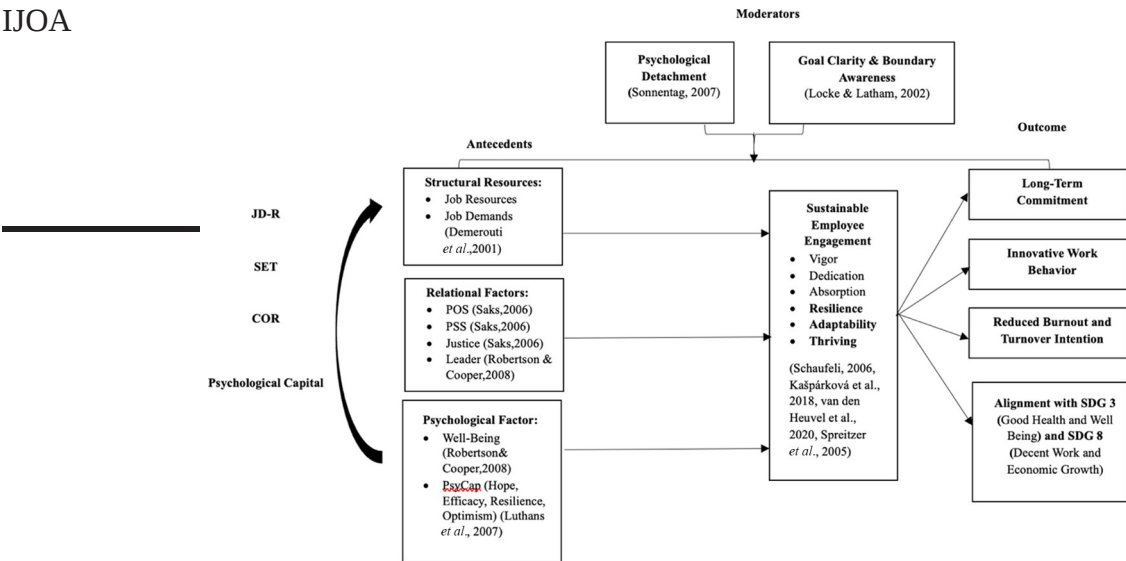


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of sustainable employee engagement (SEE)
Source(s): Authors' own work

Resources (COR) theory and Psychological Capital integrated to capture and explain the evolving nature of employee engagement in the face of ongoing change. By drawing on these theories in combination, SEE redefines engagement as a dynamic construct, sustained by structural, relational and psychological antecedents, safeguarded by moderators and directed towards outcomes that benefit both employees and organisations while aligning with global sustainability goals.

The first set of antecedents derives from the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, which emphasises the importance of balancing job demands with adequate resources (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Within this framework, job resources, such as autonomy, constructive feedback and developmental opportunities serve as powerful motivators that stimulate vigour and dedication. By contrast, excessive job demands, including workload, time pressure and role conflict, deplete employees' physical and psychological energy, potentially leading to disengagement. Importantly, JD-R theory argues that resources not only buffer the negative impact of demands but also activate motivational processes, thereby fostering both performance and well-being over time. Recent studies reaffirm that in complex and digitally disrupted environments, strategically provided resources remain indispensable for sustaining engagement (Jonge and Peeters, 2025; Volderauer *et al.*, 2025).

The second set of antecedents is grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET), which frames engagement as a response to reciprocal exchanges between employees and their organisations (Blau, 1964; Saks, 2006). According to this perspective, when employees perceive fairness, recognition and organisational support, they feel valued and are motivated to reciprocate through deeper emotional, cognitive and behavioural investment in their work. Constructs such as Perceived Organisational Support (POS), Perceived Supervisor Support (PSS) and organisational

justice establish a relational climate that sustains engagement. Leadership plays a central role in reinforcing this process: leaders who demonstrate trust, fairness, inclusion and empowerment strengthen the exchange relationship, thereby enhancing employees' sense of obligation, loyalty and motivation. Recent studies underscore the critical role of inclusive and transformational leadership in fostering employee engagement through psychological empowerment and shared moral norms (Alwali, 2024; Alwali, and Alwali, 2025; Alwali, 2025), reinforcing the relational pathways that sustain engagement in diverse organisational settings.

The third category of antecedents reflects psychological factors, particularly Psychological Capital (PsyCap). PsyCap defined as a positive psychological state comprising hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism, provides employees with the internal strengths needed to navigate uncertainty and volatility (Luthans *et al.*, 2007). Hope and efficacy sustain goal-directed behaviour under pressure, while resilience and optimism enable recovery from setbacks and maintain motivation in uncertain environments. Within the SEE framework, resilience is understood at two levels: first, as a psychological antecedent that equips employees to withstand challenges; and second, as a manifestation of SEE itself, visible in the sustained engagement of employees under disruptive conditions (Mualimin *et al.*, 2025). Complementing PsyCap, well-being is positioned as a foundational psychological state that preserves energy, cognitive clarity and emotional stability, thereby reducing the risk of exhaustion and ensuring that engagement is sustainable rather than fleeting (Chomać-Pierzecka *et al.*, 2024; Jose and Padmaavathy, 2024).

The next component of the Sustainable Employee Engagement (SEE) conceptual framework is the role of moderators, conceptualised as boundary conditions that protect against the depletion of resources and ensure that engagement remains sustainable over time. While antecedents including structural, relational and psychological resources serve to initiate engagement, moderators regulate its trajectory, intensity and durability. From the perspective of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), these moderators function as resource-preserving mechanisms that buffer against loss spirals and reinforce gain spirals. In high-demand environments, the absence of such boundaries may accelerate resource depletion, turning engagement into strain or burnout.

For instance, psychological detachment (Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007) allows employees to disengage mentally from work demands, preserving energy and psychological resources for future effort. Similarly, goal clarity and boundary awareness (Locke and Latham, 2002) enhance employees' sense of control and direction, increasing the likelihood of resource accumulation and preventing role ambiguity, a known stressor that contributes to loss cycles. These moderators act as critical thresholds that help determine whether engagement evolves into a regenerative or a draining process.

The culmination of structural, relational and psychological antecedents, safeguarded by moderators, produces Sustainable Employee Engagement (SEE). Unlike traditional models that define engagement primarily through vigour, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006), SEE expands the construct by incorporating resilience, adaptability and thriving (Kašpárková *et al.*, 2018; van den Heuvel *et al.*, 2020, Spreitzer *et al.*, 2005). These additional dimensions ensure that engagement is not a static state but a regenerative and enduring process capable of responding to dynamic organisational and societal challenges.

The conceptual framework further identifies the outcomes of SEE, which manifest across four strategic domains. The first outcome is long-term commitment, which emerges from the reciprocal exchange processes emphasised in Social Exchange Theory (SET). When employees perceive that their organisation provides fair treatment, adequate support and recognition, they reciprocate with stronger affective and normative commitment. This relational reciprocity is reinforced by structural job resources identified in the JD-R model, such as autonomy and developmental opportunities, which foster motivation and loyalty. Psychological Capital

(PsyCap), particularly optimism and resilience, further sustains commitment by enabling employees to remain engaged even under high demands. Together, these mechanisms significantly reduce turnover risks and stabilise workforce retention, embedding loyalty within the employment relationship (Meyer and Allen, 1997; Setyawan *et al.*, 2024).

The second outcome concerns innovative work behaviour, which is consistently fuelled by sustainable engagement. The JD-R model explains how resources stimulate intrinsic motivation, providing employees with the energy and confidence to generate new ideas. SET adds the relational dimension by showing how fairness, trust and supportive leadership create a climate of psychological safety in which employees feel free to experiment. PsyCap strengthens this process through hope, efficacy and resilience, which collectively encourage risk-taking, persistence in the face of setbacks and sustained creativity. This integrative dynamic allows innovation to become an enduring behavioural outcome rather than a sporadic activity (Janssen, 2000; Elamin *et al.*, 2024).

A third outcome is the reduction of burnout and turnover intention. Traditional engagement theories have long acknowledged the risk that high vigour and dedication may lead to exhaustion when not properly managed. JD-R highlights this risk when job demands exceed available resources, but SEE addresses it directly by integrating moderators such as psychological detachment and boundary awareness. These mechanisms allow employees to recover, replenish resources and avoid over-engagement. Relational trust, emphasised by SET, also prevents disengagement by reinforcing employees' sense of being valued, while PsyCap provides resilience and optimism to reframe challenges as manageable. Together, these mechanisms ensure that sustainable engagement remains energising without tipping into exhaustion, thereby lowering burnout and reducing employees' intention to leave (Rai and Yadav, 2022; Dhaneesh *et al.*, 2025).

Finally, the most distinctive outcome of SEE is its alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 3 and 8. JD-R ensures that job design promotes not only productivity but also employee health by balancing demands and resources, thereby supporting SDG 3 (*Good Health and Well-being*). SET emphasises that organisational reciprocity must be grounded in fairness, dignity and supportive climates, directly contributing to SDG 8 (*Decent Work and Economic Growth*). PsyCap complements both perspectives by equipping employees with the psychological resources necessary to thrive, ensuring that engagement aligns with both organisational prosperity and broader societal well-being. Through this alignment, SEE transcends organisational outcomes, positioning engagement as a strategic driver of sustainable development.

Thus, the SEE framework not only integrates three major theoretical paradigms into a cohesive model but also establishes a clear pathway from antecedents, through the mechanisms that sustain engagement, to strategic outcomes highly relevant to the challenges of contemporary organisations. In doing so, it represents a logical evolution from the classical models of Saks (2006) and Schaufeli *et al.* (2006), advancing towards a multidimensional, adaptive, resilient and context-sensitive approach. Beyond proposing a conceptual framework, this study also clarifies the positioning and conditions of SEE by introducing a typological matrix. Figure 2 illustrates this typology, which builds on the moderators identified within the conceptual framework and demonstrates how different configurations of resources and safeguards shape distinct forms of engagement.

This typology maps four distinct engagement conditions based on the interaction between engagement levels (low–high) and the strength of moderators (low–high), specifically psychological detachment and goal clarity as boundary condition. These moderators act as safety mechanisms that ensure work energy is effectively channelled, while also preventing exhaustion or resource depletion. By framing engagement through this dual axis, the typology demonstrates

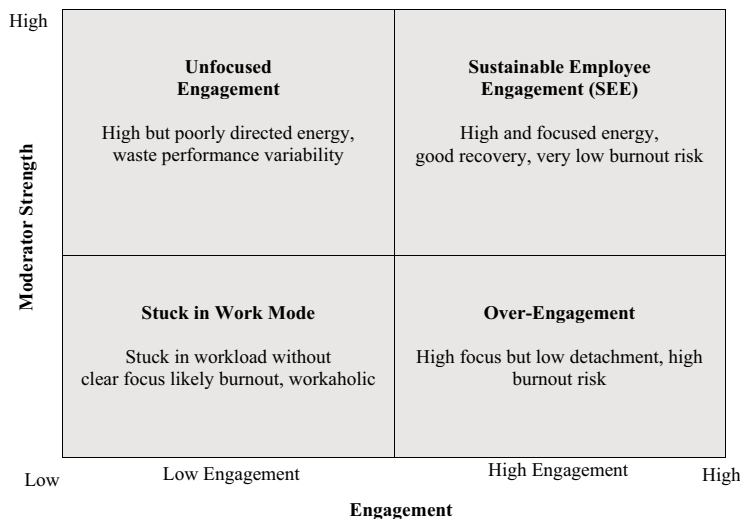


Figure 2. Typology matrix of sustainable employee engagement
Source(s): Authors' own work

how different constellations of antecedents and safeguards lead to qualitatively distinct engagement outcomes.

The first condition reflects what can be described as unfocused engagement, in which employees benefit from strong moderators such as clear goal orientation and the ability to maintain healthy work-life boundaries, yet their levels of engagement remain relatively low. From the perspective of the JD-R model, recovery and clarity are present, but the absence of sufficient job resources prevents the activation of motivational processes. SET similarly indicates weak reciprocity, where employees may not feel a strong obligation to reciprocate organisational support. PsyCap highlights that inadequate hope or efficacy further limits the conversion of available energy into meaningful engagement. As a result, energy is preserved but not directed, leading to wasted potential and fluctuating performance (Knight *et al.*, 2023).

By contrast, the most desirable state is sustainable employee engagement (SEE), where high engagement coexists with strong moderators. In this condition, employees exhibit vigour, dedication and healthy absorption while balancing energy through recovery and maintaining focus through goal clarity. JD-R explains how job resources serve as drivers of intrinsic motivation, with moderators buffering against excessive demands. SET adds that fairness, recognition and support foster reciprocal exchanges that stabilise long-term commitment. PsyCap reinforces this cycle by strengthening hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism, which allow employees to adapt and thrive even in uncertain contexts. Together, these mechanisms create a regenerative cycle of engagement that is both productive and sustainable, minimising the risk of burnout.

A less favourable condition arises when both moderators and engagement are weak, often described as being stuck in work mode. Employees in this state demonstrate minimal vigour or dedication, while weak moderators prevent them from psychologically detaching from work. JD-R suggests that demands consistently outweigh resources, resulting in strain rather than motivation. From a SET perspective, insufficient support or fairness undermines trust

and erodes reciprocity. PsyCap highlights that depleted resilience and optimism leave employees unable to positively reframe adversity, trapping them in cycles of fatigue, stagnation and ultimately disengagement. If left unaddressed, this condition can escalate into chronic burnout (Sonnentag, 2018).

Finally, over-engagement captures the paradox of employees who demonstrate high levels of vigour, dedication and absorption but lack adequate moderating mechanisms. Without sufficient recovery or boundaries, their energy becomes unsustainably intense. JD-R interprets this as a resource imbalance: motivation is temporarily fuelled, but unchecked demands accumulate, leading to exhaustion. SET warns that even strong reciprocal ties may become maladaptive if employees feel pressured to over-invest without corresponding organisational safeguards. PsyCap explains that while persistence is initially supported, the absence of recovery cycles eventually erodes resilience and optimism, leaving employees vulnerable to burnout. Although performance may appear strong in the short term, this condition is unsustainable over time (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006).

Taken together, this typology underscores that engagement must be evaluated not only by its intensity but also by its quality and sustainability. Strong moderators distinguish adaptive and regenerative engagement from forms that are risky or misdirected, while weak moderators exacerbate disengagement or lead to destructive over-engagement. By embedding this typology within the integrative perspectives of JD-R, SET and PsyCap, the SEE framework highlights that sustainable engagement emerges not from energy alone, but from the balance of resources, reciprocal exchanges and psychological strengths, safeguarded by recovery and boundary-setting mechanisms.

RQ3. How does SEE align with and contribute to the achievement of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)?

The Sustainable Employee Engagement (SEE) framework not only advances organisational performance but also aligns directly with global sustainability priorities, particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). By integrating insights from the JD-R model, Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Psychological Capital (PsyCap), SEE demonstrates how employee engagement can evolve from an organisational construct into a broader societal mechanism for sustainable development.

From the perspective of the JD-R model, SEE contributes to SDG 3 by emphasising the balance between job demands and resources. When organisations design work environments that provide autonomy, constructive feedback and developmental opportunities, they not only stimulate motivation but also protect employees' mental and physical health. By buffering excessive demands through strong resources and moderators such as psychological detachment, SEE prevents exhaustion and burnout, thereby enhancing long-term well-being. This aligns directly with SDG 3's call to "promote mental health and well-being," showing that sustainable engagement is not achieved through relentless effort but through a careful alignment of work design with employee health. At the same time, JD-R's focus on resources as motivators ensures that engagement drives consistent productivity, contributing to the "productive employment" dimension of SDG 8.

Social Exchange Theory (SET) reinforces this alignment by embedding engagement in reciprocal relationships of trust, fairness and organisational support. When employees perceive organisational justice and supportive leadership, they reciprocate with higher levels of commitment, innovation and discretionary effort. This reciprocity sustains engagement in ways that respect employees' dignity and foster decent work conditions, fulfilling the essence of SDG 8. Moreover, fair and supportive exchange relationships reduce stress and foster psychological safety, which directly enhances employee well-being in line with SDG 3. In this sense, SET

underscores that decent work cannot be achieved without fairness and reciprocity, core conditions for sustainable engagement.

The integration of Psychological Capital (PsyCap) further extends SEE's relevance to both SDGs by embedding hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism into the engagement process. PsyCap enhances employees' capacity to thrive in uncertain and disruptive contexts, ensuring adaptability while preserving mental health. For SDG 3, resilience and optimism function as protective factors that safeguard well-being and reduce the risk of psychological strain. For SDG 8, hope and efficacy support goal-directed innovation and persistence, enabling employees to contribute to sustained economic growth. By emphasising psychological resources as both antecedents and outcomes, SEE highlights that healthy, resilient employees are the foundation of long-term organisational and societal prosperity.

Taken together, these perspectives illustrate that SEE is uniquely positioned to advance both health-related (SDG 3) and economic (SDG 8) sustainability agendas. JD-R ensures that job design promotes both productivity and health, SET guarantees fairness and reciprocity in work relationships and PsyCap equips employees with the psychological strengths to thrive under disruption. This integration transforms engagement from a narrow organisational metric into a lever for societal impact. By aligning organisational practices with global sustainability goals, SEE not only addresses the persistent engagement gap but also establishes a pathway through which human resource practices can directly contribute to healthier employees, more resilient organisations and sustainable economic growth.

Implications for theory and practice

This study makes a dual contribution to theory and practice by advancing the concept of Sustainable Employee Engagement (SEE) through the integration of the JD-R model, Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Psychological Capital (PsyCap). Theoretically, SEE reconceptualises engagement as a dynamic and multidimensional construct that goes beyond vigour, dedication and absorption to incorporate resilience, adaptability and thriving, while clarifying the recursive role of resilience and well-being as both antecedents and outcomes. By embedding moderators such as psychological detachment and goal clarity, the framework explains how engagement can be sustained without tipping into over-investment, and by explicitly linking engagement to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), it situates engagement within both organisational and societal sustainability agendas. Practically, SEE provides organisations with a blueprint for cultivating enduring engagement by balancing demands and resources, fostering fairness and support to strengthen reciprocity, developing employees' PsyCap to build hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism and embedding recovery-supportive practices such as boundary management and flexible scheduling. Together, these strategies equip organisations to prevent burnout, avoid the risks of over-engagement and build work systems where employees remain energised, innovative and healthy, delivering sustainable value to organisations while contributing to broader global development priorities.

Limitations and future studies

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, as a conceptual and integrative framework, the SEE model requires further empirical validation across different industries, cultural contexts and organisational structures. While JD-R, SET, COR Theory and PsyCap provide robust theoretical underpinnings, their integration within SEE has yet to be tested systematically using longitudinal or cross-cultural designs that can capture the dynamic and evolving nature of engagement. Second, the inclusion of moderators such as psychological detachment and goal clarity, while theoretically grounded, demands further empirical scrutiny to

establish their role as protective mechanisms in diverse work environments, particularly in hybrid and digital contexts. Third, although this study explicitly aligns engagement with SDG 3 and SDG 8, future research could broaden this linkage to other sustainability goals, such as SDG 5 (*Gender Equality*) and SDG 12 (*Responsible Consumption and Production*), thereby embedding engagement more fully into the global sustainability discourse.

Building on these limitations, future research should pursue three directions. First, empirical studies using multi-level and longitudinal designs are needed to test the recursive relationships proposed in the SEE framework, particularly the dual roles of resilience and well-being as antecedents and outcomes. Second, future work should explore sector-specific and cross-cultural adaptations of SEE, examining whether its mechanisms hold equally across industries such as health care, education or technology and within both Western and non-Western organisational contexts. Third, researchers should investigate how emerging organisational practices including artificial intelligence in HRM, digital monitoring and sustainability-driven leadership interact with SEE to shape engagement outcomes. Addressing these questions would not only validate the framework but also extend its applicability, ensuring that SEE evolves in tandem with the realities of the modern workplace and contributes meaningfully to both organisational success and sustainable societal development.

Conclusion

This study develops the Sustainable Employee Engagement (SEE) framework as an integrative and future-oriented model that addresses long-standing conceptual and practical limitations in engagement research. By synthesising the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, Social Exchange Theory (SET), Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory and Psychological Capital (PsyCap), the framework reconceptualises engagement as a dynamic, multidimensional and regenerative construct. It moves beyond the traditional focus on vigour, dedication and absorption to incorporate resilience, adaptability and thriving, while clarifying the dual roles of resilience and well-being as both antecedents and outcomes. Moderators such as psychological detachment and goal clarity further enrich the framework by demonstrating how engagement can be sustained without leading to overextension or burnout.

The SEE framework makes a dual contribution. Theoretically, it provides a more coherent and comprehensive explanation of engagement that bridges structural, relational and psychological dimensions while explicitly linking engagement to the global sustainability agenda, particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Practically, it equips organisations with actionable strategies to balance job demands and resources, foster reciprocal and fair relationships, preserve and regenerate key resources and develop psychological strengths that protect employee well-being and sustain performance. In doing so, SEE advances engagement research from a fragmented and short-term construct towards a holistic, adaptive and sustainable model. It provides both scholars and practitioners with a robust foundation for understanding and shaping engagement in ways that support not only organisational success but also societal progress in an era defined by disruption and complexity.

Acknowledgments

The authors sincerely thank Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan (LPDP), Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Indonesia, for their generous support in funding this study.

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