

*“Work Engagement: An exploration into the barriers and facilitators that affect Clerical Officers abilities to engage in the Irish Civil Service”.*

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## **Abstract**

This study seeks to address the barriers and facilitators that affect employee's abilities to engage at work by proposing '*Work Engagement: An exploration into the barriers and facilitators that affect Clerical Officers abilities to engage in the Irish Civil Service.*' The aim of this study is to identify the barriers and the facilitators in order to increase work engagement among Clerical Officers. To date the majority of studies on engagement have been focused on human services occupations. This present study intends to add to the occupational groups outside the human services industries by examining administrative personnel within a bureaucratic setting.

The study will make two significant contributions. Firstly, it will add to the international literature in an Irish context and secondly it will be one of the first studies to examine work engagement within a bureaucratic, hierarchical structure such as the Irish Civil Service. The findings will provide insight and information for organisations both in the civil service and the public sector. In the context of increased demand, diminished resources, increased media and political criticism it is time to review the basis on which public sector are motivated to meet the challenges ahead.

The research strategy adopted was a quantitative, deductive approach using an in-depth survey. The survey consisted of five sections examining demographics, working life, management and communication, attitudes to work and engagement levels. Multiple statistical analyses such as descriptive and inferential statistics were used in conjunction with the SPSS statistical program. The findings illustrate that overall engagement levels are currently high among the responding Clerical Officers, showing 65% cognitively, 74% emotionally and 65% physically engaged with 51% displaying advocacy. However, respondents reported lower levels of engagement since 2008.

The research findings support the key themes identified within the literature. They support the prediction that perceived organisational support, job content and attitudes to work have a substantial influence on work engagement. The findings also offer insight into the perceived impact the Haddington Road Agreement will have on work engagement.

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## **1. Introduction**

“If there is one quality that executives seek for themselves and their employees, it is sustained high performance; the source of which is as elusive as the fountain of youth” (Loehr & Schwartz, 2001, p120). Building and increasing engagement levels among employees can enable organisations to deal with the challenges of the recession by unlocking the knowledge and commitment of individual employees. Paul Drechsler, CEO of Wates Group, argues that “a leader’s focus on engagement is even more important during difficult times to motivate, engage and ultimately retain your people” (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009, p25).

This study seeks to address the barriers and facilitators that affect employee’s abilities to engage and perform at work by proposing ‘*Work Engagement: An exploration into the barriers and facilitators that affect Clerical Officers abilities to engage in the Irish Civil Service.*’ The aim of this study is to identify the barriers and the facilitators in order to increase work engagement among Clerical Officers.

Barriers to engagement can be damaging to not only employees but to stakeholders and ultimately the customers. To better address these barriers it is essential to determine what is and is not working. By measuring engagement levels management will inevitably identify what gaps exist, how to address issues and source facilitators to bring about change. It has been agreed that engagement needs to become more than a strategic driver in business; it must be “owned by management and form an integral part of how managers act, ensuring that engagement is a lived experience in the daily interactions between managers and employees” (IBEC, 2011).

This thesis argues that work engagement, in particular sustainable work engagement has an important role to play in Ireland’s recovery. Research has shown that engaging

employees is and will be a key driver and enabler on the road to recovery and therefore creating an understanding of the main barriers and facilitators that employees experience to work engagement on a daily basis is vital to this discussion.

## **1.1 Background**

Up until recently, it had been widely accepted that employee satisfaction was the main focus of labour management practices within organisations mainly due to its relationship and influences on job performance. However, Freeney and Tiernan (2006, p130) maintain that “satisfied employees do not necessarily perform to the best of their abilities” and researchers now affirm that engagement may add but cannot be an indicator of performance levels across organisations.

The concept of engagement itself is relatively new and numerous studies conducted have yet to reach a consensus on its definition. The literature available associates it as the antithesis to burnout and it has been widely seen in the literature that highly engaged employees make fundamental contributions to their organisations, whereas disengaged employees may prove a liability. Although there have been numerous studies conducted to determine the levels of engagement, the majority have revealed that those who are actively engaged at work still remains relatively low.

To date no single study has proved beyond doubt that engagement leads to higher performance, previous research and company studies together provide a compelling case (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009, p13).

A global study for instance carried out by Towers Perrin-ISR compared the financial performance of organisations with a more engaged workforce to their peers with a less engaged workforce over a period of 12 months. Engagement for the purposes of this study was measured using business performance measures such as operating

income, net income and earnings per share in a cross organisational study comprising of over 50 companies.

The results found that companies with a highly engaged workforce improved operating income by 19.2% over a 12 month period, and demonstrated a 13.7% improvement in net income growth; whilst those with a low engagement score from the outset saw operating income decline by 32.7% in the same period and net income growth decline by 3.8% (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009, p36)

In a study carried out by Salanova, Agut and Peiro (2005) among personnel working in Spanish restaurants and hotels, it was found that engagement had a positive effect on performance levels and that “employee’s levels of engagement had a positive impact on the service climate of hotels and restaurants, with an increase in extra role behaviour and an improvement in customer satisfaction” (Freney and Tiernan, 2006, p136).

The most compelling research evidence to date about the importance of engagement and its impact on performance was conducted by Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti and Schaufeli (2007), who expanded on previous research conducted by Salanova *et al.* (2005).

Xanthopoulou *et al.* (2007) built on this theory , that the more engaged employees are the more value they add to the organisation by focusing was on the “predictive value of work engagement for performance, on a daily basis” using a diary study among employees. Their findings showed that the higher employee levels of daily engagement were attributed to an increase in job resources such as supervisor coaching and personal resources such as self-efficacy and esteem (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008, p215).

It is not only employers who gain from increased engagement but employees also. Research has provided evidence that high levels of engagement are inversely related to burnout and directly associated with wellbeing (Bakker *et al.*, 2008). CIPD data confirms this further by showing that engaged employees enjoy work activities, cope with work related problems and feel workload is manageable (CIPD, 2010, p49).

Despite its potential gains literature tell us that “less than one in every five workers is actively engaged in their work and this low rate of engagement has continued to be found in many other surveys conducted in the past 10 years” (Attridge, 2009, p384).

Although improved performance and productivity is at the heart of engagement, it cannot be achieved by a programmed approach which tries to extract discretionary effort by manipulating employees’ commitment and emotions. By contrast, “engaged employees freely and willingly give discretionary effort as an integral part of their daily activity at work” (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009, p9). In particular engagement is a two way process, organisations must work to engage the employee, who in turn has a choice about the level of engagement to offer the employer.

The literature tells us that empirical research supports the link between work engagement and performance levels, inferring that engagement has both a positive impact for employees and employer but imperative to that justification is the development of an understanding of how engagement may lead to negative consequences (Halbesleben, 2011, p68).

It is the purpose of this research to test these claims and to establish what can impede (barriers) or enable (facilitators) employee’s levels of work engagement. If engagement can deliver so many benefits, what is stopping management capturing this value?

## **1.2 The Context of the Research**

The context for this research is set in the public sector, more specifically the Irish Civil Service. Within the context of the national labour market, the civil service is an important employer, not just in terms of volume (staffing numbers) but also geographically. The civil service is typically a very hierarchical and bureaucratic structure, with a number of grade categories of which Clerical Officers make up the highest numbers in service today. The role of the Clerical Officer is fundamentally customer focused, providing a supporting role to management and are a central component of each civil service department. An examination of the civil service since the unprecedented challenges of the economic recession will provide insight into how Clerical Officers have dealt with the outcomes. Employers recognise the role employees play in rebuilding the economy however according to IBEC (2011), engaging their employee's is a much lower priority at the moment. In a business survey conducted by IBEC (2011) CEO's identified cost cutting, improving productivity/performance levels, accessing new markets and leadership as key priorities for the months ahead. Areas such as teamwork and employee empowerment were considered a lower priority.

By identifying the barriers and facilitators to work engagement among staff this will enhance the process of becoming more effective with fewer resources. This will play a momentous role on the path to economic recovery.

### **1.2.1 The Economic Crisis**

The economic challenges Ireland has faced since 2008 have brought about unprecedented events and challenges to public sector employees. The effects of the

recession can be seen to have resulted in a subsidence of confidence, trust and subsequently a withdrawal of engagement.

In line with this, government proposals continue to seek cost saving strategies across staffing levels and departments. Both the Croke Park and the Haddington Road agreement emphasised the need to achieving more with less on the impending agenda. The availability of facilitators such as job resources is imperative for work engagement as employees' battle against increased workloads, knowledge gaps due to a high volume of voluntary retirements in line with a loss of tacit knowledge, shrinking training budgets and the stark reality that development opportunities are few and far between.

Clerical Officers now face incremental freezes on top of previous pay cuts, increased hours and increased job demands in the face of lower job resources. All in all these new terms limit any incentives for staff to engage with their work.

The stark reality is the public sector will continue to shrink over the course of the next few years and the ability of the public sector to now maintain and provide better services with less and less will push resources to the limit. In that context the need for a productive public sector with engaged employees is greater than ever (Boyle & MacCarthaigh, 2011, p16).

### **1.3 Rationale for the Research**

It has been argued and agreed by several contributors (Bakker, Albrecht and Leiter (2011b), Halbesleben (2011) that future research should look for and examine moderators in work engagement. It is for that reason I propose the following research

question to ‘*Work Engagement: An exploration into the barriers and facilitators that affect Clerical Officers abilities to engage in the Irish Civil Service.*’

Empirical studies are limited in terms of identification of the barriers and facilitators to work engagement on performance levels. Koyuncu, Burke and Fiksenbaum (2006) embarked on research to examine the potential antecedents and consequences of work engagement in a sample of women managers and professionals employed by a Turkish bank; with Freney and Tiernan (2009) embarking on a similar study of the main barriers and facilitators to engagement within Nurses, this research was conducted in an Irish context.

The present study extends the predictions of the job demands resources model in line with Salanova *et al.* (2009) exploration of the mediating role of student’s wellbeing in the relationship between perceived obstacles and facilitators and their future academic performance. The model assumes two processes in which engagement plays a key role, an effort driven process that starts with demands (barriers) leading to negative outcomes of poor performance and secondly a motivational process (facilitators) driven by the availability of resources leading to positive outcomes of higher performance through engagement. Previous studies have confirmed this mediating role of engagement between job demands and resources (Salanova, Schaufeli, Martineza & Bresó, 2010, p55). This study further extends research on engagement by seeking to explore the barriers and facilitators that impede Clerical Officers abilities to engage with their work and ultimately perform their roles in a hierarchical bureaucratic environment. Obstacles and facilitators are specific to each organisation.

Barriers to engagement can be defined as those negative “tangible organisational characteristics that may potentially restrict” and hinder work engagement and thus

performance; whilst facilitators play the role of enablers. They can “promote performance or one’s ability to optimally perform one’s job” (Salanova et.al. 2010, p55).

#### **1.4 Significance of Research**

To date the majority of studies on engagement have been focused on human services occupations such as teachers, nurses and medical practitioners. It has only been in recent years that this area of research has been extended to include occupational groups outside of the human services industries and as of yet there exists little research in this area. This present study intends to add to the occupations groups outside the human services industries by examining administrative personnel within a bureaucratic setting. The study will make two significant contributions. Firstly, it will add to the international literature on engagement in an Irish context as to date there is relatively little research conducted in Ireland; secondly it will be one of the first studies to examine work engagement within a bureaucratic, hierarchical structure such as the Irish Civil Service.

Within the current economic climate and turbulent times of recent years this research would prove invaluable for management when dealing with limited resources and budgets, in a time of huge reform within the civil service. A comprehensive study exploring the barriers and facilitators to work engagement specifically within the Irish Civil Service has not been undertaken in Ireland to date and little is known of the barriers and facilitators that can impact work engagement. It is my objective to identify and explore these barriers and facilitators in the grade of Clerical officer in line with looking at work life variables, perceived organisational support and the impact and influence of job demands and resources. Research in Canada suggests that the link between engagement and profitability in the private sector could translate to

the public sector with trust and public confidence at the end of the chain rather than profit (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009, p13).

The results and findings of this study will provide insight and information for organisations both in the civil service and the public sector alike that will benefit from an understanding of the main barriers and facilitators that affect work engagement levels. In the context of increased demand, diminished resources, increased media and political criticism it is time to review the basis on which public sector are motivated to meet the challenges ahead.

### **1.5 Research Objectives**

*‘Work Engagement: An exploration into the barriers and facilitators that affect Clerical Officers abilities to engage in the Irish Civil Service.’*

In order to determine the overall objective, five sub-objectives have been identified:

- i. To determine the levels of work engagement among Clerical Officers in the Irish Civil Service.
- ii. To explore the barriers & facilitators that impact on the work engagement levels of Clerical Officers.
- iii. To investigate whether the employee’s age, gender or years of service make a difference to their levels of engagement or their willingness to engage?
- iv. To ascertain whether shared perceptions on how employees perceive organisational support impacts engagement levels.
- v. To investigate the extent to which engagement levels may have changed since the economic recession in Ireland.

## **1.6 Overall Structure**

This study is presented in eight sections. Section 2 outlines a review of the literature on the work engagement. The literature review will examine and discuss the main academic literature available to date that has contributed to the topic of work engagement. It will seek to identify the development of the engagement construct, its relationship with other constructs and the main drivers that affect levels of work engagement.

Section 3 will give a brief outline of the main research aims and objectives.

Section 4 seeks to discuss the methodology used in identify the population, the specific sample and overall design of the research while outlining and verifying the various methods of measurement and data analysis that will be undertaken in this research.

Section 5 highlights the main findings from the research with a discussion of those findings in section 6 followed by section 7 which concludes by outlining recommendations and avenues for future research.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this literature review is to evaluate and critique the body of literature available to date on the area of Work Engagement. This section will seek to conceptualise the term work engagement, discuss and evaluate empirical studies, understand the main drivers and consequences and examine the dark side of work engagement that exists in both the academic and practitioner literature. While work engagement is the subject area of research, the scope of this literature review is expanded to include the employment relationship and the indeterminate nature of the labour contract. An appreciation of how the employment relationship operates is essential if one is to develop an understanding of the work environment and subsequently its role in creating and sustaining an engaged workforce.

### **2.2 Employment Relationship**

Before one can create an understanding of how work engagement is conceptualised, a knowledge and understanding of the employment relationship is essential to the discussion and evaluation of work engagement. The employment relationship influences not just the economic outcomes of an organisation but also the behavioural characteristics of its employees.

The nature of work carried out by individuals and how they feel about their work is governed by the employment relationship and the psychological contract (Armstrong, 2009, p252). In recent times employees in Ireland have experienced a fundamental shift in this relationship. The changing nature of the employment relationship can be attributed to many aspects such as the external environment, globalisation, role of the

state, population shifts and various social influences. All of which are influential in shaping the employment relationship over time. Both the state and the trade unions play an active role in this relationship. The state in particular is seen as an employer, regulator and a legislator.

The “frame of reference adopted by managers according to Henderson (2011, pp8-9), will influence how they expect people to behave, how they think they ought to behave, and how they react to the behaviour of others”. This in turn “shapes the methods management chooses when it wishes to change the behaviour of people at work” (Wallace, Gunnigle & McMahon, 2004, p447).

The psychological states of employees are therefore key factors in determining employee behavioural responses at work. It is at least in part through the management of these psychological states that organisational effectiveness can be achieved (Aggarwal, Datta & Bhargava, 2007, p314).

### **2.2.1 Psychological Contract**

The psychological contract is in effect a set of “unwritten expectations/beliefs that exist between individual employees and their employers which encompasses the actions employees believe are expected of them and what response they expect in return, reciprocally, the actions employers believe are expected of them and what response they expect in return from employees” (Armstrong, 2009, p277).

In many cases key values such as mutual trust and the psychological contract have been severely damaged, impacting on the ability to build and rebuild engagement levels among employees. The psychological contract in particular will play a key role in rebuilding this relationship. Research undertaken by Beech & Akerson (2008) and

Blessing White (2008) share this consensus that a lack of trust can be a precursor to disengagement, particularly a lack of trust in senior management.

A positive psychological contract typically supports a high level of employee engagement. “Violations of same signal that parties no longer share a common set of values” (Armstrong, 2009, p280), leading to a negative impact on job satisfaction, commitment of the employee and most importantly on engagement. Once the psychological contract is in effect broken, this can lead to obstacles being placed in the way of work engagement. Typically communication and managerial relations becomes an obstacle.

### **2.2.2 Employment Relationship**

The employment relationship itself is in essence the outcome of both the market relations and the managerial relations. The market relations in effect determine the wages or the price of labour, whilst managerial relations endeavour to establish how much work is to be undertaken and when/where it takes place. This also enables sanctions for non-compliance to be implemented i.e. the policies and procedures that govern work practices.

This relationship is ultimately the relationship that exists between the employer and the employee. For that reason, the foundation of this relationship is characterised by the employers’ power and obligation to pay salary, provide a safe workplace, act in good faith towards employees and not act in such a way as to undermine the trust and confidence of the relationship. The employee in return has a corresponding obligation to display obedience, competence, honesty and engagement (Armstrong, 2009, p262).

Central to this discussion is the notion of the labour contract, contract for service and contract of service. It captures the reciprocity evident in the agreement by an employer to provide workers with wages in exchange for their capacity of labour. By accepting an offer of employment workers ultimately come under the authority of an employer and therefore occupy a much weaker position than their prospective employer who controls the labour power. “Labour differs from other commodities in that it is enjoyed in use and embodied in people” (Edwards 1995, p8). Employers do not buy employees; rather they secure capacity of employees to engage in productive work, their potential labour power. The employer must then convert labour power into productive effort, through systems of control that retain, engage and fundamentally lead to a profit.

The pluralist perspective (Ireland) acknowledges that society is comprised of a range of individuals, interests and social groups, each in pursuit of their own objectives” (Wallace *et al.*, 2004, pp24-25). It also “recognises the existence of a basic antagonism in the employment relationship and the inevitable potential for conflict” (Williams and Adam-Smith, 2010, p13). In this perspective both the employer and employee have two separate priorities.

The labour contract is fundamentally employer driven by a principle to produce at minimum cost, seeks greater effort from employees whose main aim is maximum return for their labour. The power differential is ultimately in favour of the employer, with their ability to shift the term wage-work bargain to suit their interests. Although cooperation is an important characteristic of the employment relationship there remains a basic antagonism between employer and employee that generates an inherent potential for conflict. The employee however wants the maximum value for their labour and to ‘squeeze’ from the employers more benefits for what they are

doing. Therefore conflict is inevitable when both employer and employee goals are not aligned. Employee's in return react by organising themselves collectively in trade unions to combat this imbalance of power, which is slightly more evident in public sector organisations rather than private.

### **2.2.3 Summary**

Hence, the entire context is essentially managerialist aiming to shift the wage-effort bargain in favour of the employer. They essentially seek to get the most out of the employee and in order to achieve this work engagement is and will be a vital component of sustained engagement. By identifying the obstacles to work engagement that employees experience, organisations can successfully put in place facilitators (change agents) to capture engagement once again.

### **2.3 Conceptualisation of Work Engagement**

The majority of literature available on work engagement is heavily embedded in the psychology school of thought, with only recently a shift towards more of a practitioner focus developing. Over the last number of years, there has been a vast increase in the amount of work engagement literature, in particular the accumulation of various definitions evident in both the academic and practitioner literature.

The concept itself is elusive and hard to quantify. Practitioner literature view engagement as an actual outcome. They believe that “engaged employees show commitment and are enthusiastic advocates of their organisation its goals and the values it holds. Whilst in contrast the academic definitions tend to focus more on the outcomes from engagement, such as the psychological states and the role the employment relationship plays” (Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2009, p5). They

encapsulate it in terms of an elevation in one's energy and identification, "characterised by a high level of energy and strong identification with ones work (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter & Taris, 2008, p189).

Current thinking by Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzales-Roma & Bakker (2002, p74) define the work engagement concept further as "*a positive, fulfilling, work related state of mind that is characterised by vigor, dedication and absorption*". "That is, in engagement, fulfilment exists in contrast to the voids of life that leave people feeling empty such as 'burnout'. The vigor dimension is characterised by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in ones work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties. Whilst the dedication dimension refers to a sense of becoming involved in one's work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge. And finally absorption is characterised by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work" (Bakker *et al.*, 2008, p188).

They further state that engagement is not just a momentary and specific state, but rather, it is "a more persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behaviour". Engaged employees are therefore generally associated with high levels of energy and positivism, thus enabling them to handle situations where job demands are considered high.

The literature further infers that engagement is not just about driving employees to work harder; instead it is concerned with providing the conditions under which they will work more effectively, i.e. "releasing employees' discretionary behaviour at

work” (CIPD (c), 2012). Although engagement is expressed by individual workers this is often a reflection of their work environment and the employment relationship that exists in the organisation. By identifying what obstacles in the work environment are impeding engagement management can seek to implement change through facilitators. An acknowledgement of which will prove invaluable.

To date there is a general consensus among academics and practitioners that engaged employees tend to feel a sense of attachment towards their organisation investing not only in the role itself but the organisation as a whole (Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2009, p5).

Nonetheless, the “broad exploration of the term work engagement over the past decade has ceased to produce a consensus about its meaning or a universal definition” (Bakker *et al.*, 2008, p189).

It is from a review of the literature which shows that by its nature, work engagement essentially encapsulates high energy and identification with ones work and the most and widely accepted definition is that of Schaufeli *et al.* (2002). As Freaney and Tiernan (2006, p133), maintain “it is the best available as it taps into the nature of the state of engagement by considering cognitive and affective components, allowing for a more specific identification of where strengths and weaknesses lie in terms of engagement”.

## **2.4 Empirical Studies**

Empirical studies on work engagement are limited to a few theorists. Much of the academic research to date on work engagement has been inspired by Kahn (1990), who is central to any discussion on work engagement. Conceptually, Kahn began with

the work of Goffman (1961) who proposed that, people's attachment and detachment to their role varies. Kahn argued that Goffman's work focused on "fleeting face-to-face encounters", while a different concept was needed to fit organisational life (Kahn, 1990, p694).

By examining several disciplines Kahn realised that psychologists (Freud 1922), sociologists (Goffman 1961, Merton 1957) and group theorists (Slater 1966, Smith and Berg 1987) all recognised the idea that "individuals were naturally hesitant about being members of on-going groups and systems". As a result individuals "seek to protect themselves from both isolation and engulfment by alternately pulling away from and moving towards their memberships enabling them to cope with internal ambivalence and external conditions" (Kahn 1990, p694).

The terms Kahn uses to describe these calibrations were 'personal engagement' and 'personal disengagement', which refer to the "behaviours by which people bring in or leave out their personal selves during work role performances" (Kahn 1990, p694).

These terms that Kahn developed linked in with research from the motivation theories (Alderfer 1972, Maslow 1954) that "people need self-expression and self-employment in their work lives as a matter of course" (Kumar & Swetha, 2011 p235).

Building on his research, Kahn proceeded to conduct extensive investigations into the states of being engaged or disengaged at work. He used two different environments, a summer camp and an architectural firm. From this research Kahn was able to conceptualise work engagement as "the harnessing of organisational members selves to their work roles" (Kahn, 1990, p694). He argued that "engaged individuals express and fully involve their sense of self in their role with no sacrifice of one for the other. Kahn proposed that engaged individuals are prepared to invest significant personal

resources, time and effort to the successful completion of their task and that engagement is at its greatest when an individual is driving” (Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2009, p10). He identified that employees choose when and what task they decide to become fully engaged or not engaged in. Kahn, based on his findings determined that three psychological conditions tend to generate an influence on the state of personal engagement:

- 1) Meaningfulness which “refers to a sense of return on investments such as feeling valued by the employer, a job that provides challenges including variety and good interpersonal relationships with colleagues both on a professional and personal basis” (Freeneay & Tiernan, 2006, pp131-132). Characteristics of the employee’s job can also play an influential part in creating meaningfulness at work.
- 2) Safety which “refers to an employee’s sense of safety to show their self without the risk of a negative impact on self-image, status or career. This will depend on the trust and support available to employees at a managerial and organisational level” (Freeneay & Tiernan, 2006, pp131-132).
- 3) Availability is “feeling capable, physically, emotionally and psychologically to invest in one’s role performances. This concept of availability is similar to the idea put forward by Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner et al (2001) that resources are necessary to deal with demands at work so that employees can become engaged” (Freeneay & Tiernan, 2006, pp131-132).

By building on the work of Kahn (1990), current research has proposed different conceptualisations of the term engagement (Sonnentag, 2011, p31). Rothbard (2001) for example, inspired by Kahn (1990) also saw engagement as a psychological presence but took a slightly different perspective and defined engagement as “having a two dimensional motivational construct of attention and absorption” (Bakker *et al.*,

2008, p189) regarding those two dimensions as vital aspects of engagement. Attention refers to “cognitive availability and the amount of time one spends thinking about a role while absorption means being engrossed in a role and refers to the intensity of one’s focus on a role” (Saks, 2006, p601). This is consistent with Schaufeli *et al.* (2002), definition which sees vigour, dedication and absorption as being the core dimensions of engagement (Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2009, p10).

Meaningfulness, safety, and availability are said to be significantly related to engagement. In the only study to empirically test Kahn’s model, May *et al.* (2004) found that “job enrichment and role fit were also positive predictors of meaningfulness; rewarding co-worker and supportive supervisor relations were positive predictors of safety while adherence to co-worker norms and self-consciousness were negative predictors; and resources available was a positive predictor of psychological availability while participation in outside activities was a negative predictor” (Saks, 2006, p603). Overall, meaningfulness was found to have the strongest relationship to different employee outcomes in terms of engagement (Kumar & Swetha, 2011 p235), consequently concurring with Kahn’s previous research.

The ‘burnout’ literature provides an alternative model which must be considered when discussing work engagement. It argues that job engagement is the positive antithesis of burnout i.e. the erosion of engagement with one’s job (Maslach *et al.*, 2001, p45). Maslach *et al.* (2001) identified six areas of work-life that lead to burnout and engagement by arguing that engagement is associated with a sustainable workload, feelings of choice and control, appropriate recognition and reward, a supportive work community, fairness and justice, and meaningful and valued work.

These findings were supported by May *et al.*, (2004) in particular the notion of meaningful and valued work being primarily associated with engagement.

Similar to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, the physiological and safety needs of an individual must be met as a base requirement for meaningful work to take place.

Employees want to feel worthwhile and valuable to ultimately make a difference.

Hackman and Oldham (1980) also reiterate this primary motive of seeking meaning in ones work. They conceive that a lack of 'meaning' has the potential to lead to alienation i.e. disengagement at work. Employees want to work in organisations where they can find meaning. Taking this one step further May *et al.* (2004) sought to consider the concept of 'meaning' itself (Kumar & Swetha, 2011 p236).

Theorists Holbeche and Springett (2003) linked levels of engagement and, ultimately, performance with the concept of meaning. They believed that employees actively seek meaning through their work and research findings support this statement by showing people experience a greater search for meaning in the workplace (70 per cent) than in life in general. There are numerous possible reasons for this most notably that people generally spend longer time at work than on other parts of their lives. It can be argued therefore that "high levels of engagement can only be achieved in workplaces where there is a shared sense of destiny and purpose that connects people at an emotional level and raises their personal aspirations" (Kumar & Swetha, 2011 p236).

Management play a key role in shaping workplace environments so as meaningful work can take place; by enabling meaningful work, managers are in effect increasing work engagement.

Current theorist Saks (2006) does not discount Kahn's (1990) and Maslach *et al.* (2001) models but implies that they do not fully explain why individuals will respond to these psychological conditions with varying degrees of engagement (Saks, 2006, p603). It can be argued that a one size fits all approach is unrealistic and each organisation will have diverse job resources and job demands that will influence employee's potential to engage at certain times over others.

Concerned by this Saks (2006) proposed a stronger theoretical rationale for explaining employee engagement, the Social Exchange Theory (SET). SET basic principle is that "relationships evolve over time into trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments as long as the parties abide by certain 'rules' of exchange" (Kumar & Swetha, 2011, p236). Consistent with Robinson *et al.* (2004) description of engagement as a two-way relationship between the employer and employee, Saks (2006) argues that one way for individuals to repay their organisation is through engagement. In other words, employees will choose to engage themselves to varying degrees which is comparable with Kahn's findings, and in response to the resources they receive from their organisation. Thus, employees are more likely to exchange their engagement for resources and benefits provided by their organisation. When the organisation fails to provide these resources, individuals are more likely to withdraw and disengage themselves from their roles. Thus, "the amount of cognitive, emotional, and physical resources that an individual is prepared to devote in the performance of their work role may be contingent on the economic and socio-emotional resources received from the organisation" (Kumar & Swetha, 2011 p236).

The Organisational Support Theory encapsulates this conception of organisational resources and their availability to staff. These perceptions can greatly impact on the employee's ability to engage with their work and it can be said holds similar characteristics to Kahn's (1990) three psychological conditions, in particular meaningfulness. Levinson (1965) noted that "employees tend to view actions by other employees as actions of the organisation itself, personification of the organisation" (Eisenberger & Huntington, 1986, p500). Studies have found (Buchanan, 1974 & Steers, 1977) that those organisations who fulfil promises with high levels of recognition inherent in their working days, increased levels of organisational attachment and identity with work among their employees.

#### **2.4.1 Summary**

From a review of empirical research it is evident that meaningfulness is the key to engaging employees and that management play a vital role enabling meaning to occur at work. The Social Exchange Theory and the Organisational Support Theory encapsulate its importance. However, Pati and Kumar (2010) highlight, that a lack of consensus in the above theories regarding the factor or factors that drive employees of the same organisations to either burnout or engage needs considerably more research. It is for that reason an exploration of the barriers and facilitators among workers will be a vital addition to research and in particular add to the literature on work engagement in an Irish context.

#### **2.5 Drivers of Work Engagement**

Many researchers have tried to identify the factors that ultimately lead to work engagement. A consensus among researchers is that the 'one size fits all' approach to

enabling engagement is futile as levels of engagement and its drivers vary according to the organisation, employee group, individual and the job itself (Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2009, p40).

Biographical details such as personal characteristics prove this theory that levels of engagement vary according to the individual. Robinson *et al.* (2007) revealed in their findings that differences could be found in gender, age, ethnicity and those who had caring responsibilities versus those who did not. Balain and Sparrow (2009) reiterated these findings and further included work related factors such as working hours; pay and ones position in the organisation when trying to decipher what employees were likely to engage more than others. In addition current research by CIPD (2006) on employee attitudes and engagement also concluded biographical difference such that women were in fact more engaged than men and older employees tend to be more engaged than their younger counterparts.

There is limited academic research on the drivers of work engagement to date. Practitioner literature illustrates that culture, management styles, availability of development opportunities, pay and working hours are all consistent drivers of engagement over time. In a national survey on Working Life (2006), CIPD also identified drivers of engagement that consistently showed up in their findings. They noted that employees favoured the opportunity to give ones opinion upwards (employee voice), being kept informed about events in the organisation and the knowledge that managers were committed to the organisation.

The academic literature much of which stems from Kahn's (1990) research highlights again the importance of meaningful work, management capabilities and their role in creating an engaged work force. Coinciding with this work life balance is seen as a

necessary driver as it has the ability to offer a recovery period in leisure time, hence supporting ones psychological well-being, equipping employees with the resources to engage at work.

Subsequent research has increased our knowledge about what engagement is and the conditions under which it develops, with studies consistently showing that both job resources and personal resources are important predictors for shaping perceptions on work engagement.

### **2.5.1 Job Resources & Job Demands**

Bakker and Demerouti (2007) equate job resources to “those physical, social or organisational aspects of the job that may reduce job demands, be functional in achieving work goals or stimulate personal growth i.e. autonomy, social support from colleagues and skill variety” (Bakker *et al.*, 2011a, p6). Whereas, job demands are associated with the “physical, social or organisational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs” (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001, p501).

The influential nature of job resources on future work engagement was recognised by Hackanen, Schaufeli and Ahola (2008) in their research of managers and executives in a Dutch telecom company. Similar to Saks (2006) and Robinson *et al.* (2004), they observed that “work environments that were rich in resources fostered work engagement when job demands were high and personal resources like self-esteem, optimism and self-efficacy enabled employees to cope with their daily demands” (Bakker *et al.*, 2011a, p8).

Additionally, Koyuncu, Burke and Fiksenbaum (2006) examined the potential antecedents and consequences of work engagement in a sample of women managers and professionals employed by large a Turkish bank. The results highlighted “that of the six areas of work life (Maslach & Leiter, 1997) job control, rewards and recognition and value fit were significant predictors of all three engagement measures” (Bakker *et al.*, 2008, p191). Furthermore, the results showed that levels of control, reward and recognition were significant in influencing engagement levels.

To test this hypothesis further Hackanen, Bakker and Demerouti (2005) conducted a study on Finnish dentists. It was found “that job resources were more beneficial in maintaining work engagement under conditions of high job demands” (Bakker *et al.*, 2008, p192). Bakker, Hackanen, Demerouti and Xanthopoulou (2007) reported similar findings to Hackanen *et al.* (2005) in their study of Finnish teachers. They discovered that job resources act as buffers and diminish the negative relationship between pupil misbehaviour and work engagement. In addition the study revealed that “job resources particularly influenced work engagement when teachers were confronted with high levels of pupil misconduct” (Bakker *et al.*, 2008, p192). Accordingly, it can be said that job resources diminish the impact of job demands on employees.

### **2.5.2 Summary**

In summary the literature available on the drivers of work engagement is limited and there is a general consensus among the academics and practitioners that the ‘one size fits all’ model is unfeasible. The literature tells us that both job resources and personal resources are important predictors for enabling work engagement. With the availability of these resources employees can sustain engagement even when job demands are high.

## 2.6 Performance Link

Another key relationship linked with engagement and perhaps most notably for organisations is performance. This relationship has become synonymous with the term work engagement in recent years. There has been limited research in the area examining this relationship to date however the research that has been conducted affords a promising future. Bakker, Demerouti and Verbeke's (2004) research on this relationship revealed that engaged employees tend to receive higher ratings from their colleagues on "in role and extra role performance, indicating that engaged employees perform well and are willing to go the extra mile" (Bakker *et al.*, 2008, p194).

In an examination of the relationship between perceived performance obstacles and facilitators on the future performance of students, Salanova *et al.* (2009) determined that engagement mediated the impact of performance obstacles and facilitators on future performance. Subsequently, in their study among Dutch employees Schaufeli, Taris and Bakker (2006) found that "work engagement was positively related to in role performance, whereas workaholism was not" (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008, p214). "These findings were further expanded in another study among secretaries by Gierveld and Bakker (2005) showing that engaged secretaries had more influence on daily business compared to the non-engaged employees and were often asked to carry out additional tasks" (Bakker *et al.*, 2008, p194).

Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti and Schaufeli (2007), expanded on the research conducted by Salanova, Agut and Peiro (2005) about personnel employed in restaurants and hotels by focusing in on the "predictive value of work engagement for performance, on a daily basis". The findings showed that "higher employee levels of

daily engagement, the higher their objective financial returns” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008, p215).

In essence performance is inextricably linked with many organisational policies such as recruitment & selection, retention and performance management. This in turn minimises costs, retains key talent and minimises loss of tacit knowledge. By engaging employees through performance management employees receive corrective coaching and constructive feedback. Performance management is the vital policy for organisations wanting to create engagement. Having to do more with fewer resources and having engaged people is crucial to their success. Human resources practices such as recruitment, training and performance management provide levers for enhancing performance.

The literature provides some evidence of a direct link between engagement and performance, however this is still an under-researched area of study and further longitudinal research is necessary to provide tangible evidence of the relationship.

## **2.7 Consequences of Work Engagement**

It is generally agreed that the results of engagement are both positive for the employee e.g. quality of people’s work and their own experiences of doing that work, as well as the organisation e.g. the growth and productivity of organisations (Kumar & Swetha, 2011).

As work engagement has become increasingly topical in recent times employers are now becoming more acutely aware of the benefits an engaged work force can afford them.

Harter *et al.* (2002) reiterates this new found awareness by concluding that, “employee satisfaction and engagement are related to meaningful business outcomes at a magnitude that is important to many organisations”. However, as engagement begins at an individual level it must first create an impact at this level first before its benefits are felt by the organisation.

Consistent with these findings current research by the Gallup Organisation (2004) has found critical links between employee engagement, customer loyalty, business growth and profitability. They set out to compare the scores of these variables among a sample of stores scoring in the top 25 per cent on employee engagement and customer loyalty with those in the bottom 25 per cent. Stores in the bottom 25 per cent significantly under-performed across three productivity measures: sales, customer complaints and turnover. Gallup cites numerous similar examples, which offer proof of the significant contribution engagement has in organisations.

In an extension of the Gallup findings, Ott (2007) found that higher workplace engagement predicted higher earnings among publicly-traded businesses. When compared with industry competitors at a company level, organisations showed that for every four engaged employees one was actively disengaged and experienced 2.6 times more growth than other companies with a ratio of one engaged employee for every one actively disengaged employee (Kumar & Swetha, 2011). Hence, this highlights the effects between an organisation with engaged and disengaged employees. Work engagement has a correlation effect with business outcomes.

## **2.8 Dark Side of Engagement**

That being said, emerging literature is also revealing a darker side to work engagement. While most of the literature agrees that work engagement affords benefits to both the employer and employee, a small area of research is now considering that engagement may even have a dark side.

Bakker *et al.* (2011b) believe that engagement should be a win-win situation for the employer and employee, however both Halbesleben (2011) and George (2011) suggest Bakker *et al.* (2011b) have “adopted an overly romanticised notion of engagement which is skewed more toward a managerial focus than an employee wellbeing focus” (Bakker, Albrecht and Leiter, 2011b, p80-81).

It is becoming increasingly more important for organisations to identify and explore this negative (dark) side to work engagement, and Sonnentag (2011) acknowledges that unless one can understand the negatives involved, one will never really build a beneficial strategy to engage employees sustainably over time. Schwarz and Clore (1983) agree “that negative effect is known to be highly important for specific kinds of information processing and may even foster creativity under certain conditions” (Sonnentag, 2011, p33). Generally the negative effects associated with engagement are interference with one’s family life, employee stress levels when job demands are high, diminished time and energy available for pursuits outside of work and ultimately making sacrifices in one’s personal life to maintain engagement over time.

Research by Towers Watson have revealed that employee wellbeing and performance support, which tend to decrease during economically challenging times, can negatively impact sustainable engagement over time.

In a survey conducted in Ireland, it was found that a significant proportion of employees, while demonstrating high engagement also experienced low wellbeing, suggesting as IBEC (2011) called it ‘forced engagement’. Forced engagement is an inherent characteristic of the economic crisis, driven by concerns of redundancies and financial security. This type of engagement is not sustainable over time and could eventually lead to burnout.

Similar to wellbeing, Kahn (1990) in his research also noted that work life balance (availability) was crucial to employees engaging at work. He stated that “issues in people’s lives outside of work “leave them more or less available for investments of self during role performances” (Kahn, 1990, p705).

In Halbesleben’s (2001) research concerning the consequences of engagement, he found the “conservation of resources (COR) theory useful as it concentrates on resources i.e. states, objects and characteristics that one values” (Halbesleben, 2011, p69). The COR theory advocates the more resources one has, the better position they are in to invest, therefore suggesting that “engaged employees are in a better position to invest their resources in a manner that leads to positive outcomes” (Halbesleben, 2011, p68).

Managers have a critical role to play in this process by removing the barriers that are impeding employees to engage at work. Even in “challenging, recessionary conditions, the powerful combination of engagement, wellbeing and performance support can ensure that engagement is sustained over time” (IBEC, 2011).

Since research on work engagement has just started and is continually growing as a subject area, there are many questions that still need to be answered. Bakker, Albrecht and Leiter (2011b), agree with several contributors that future research on

engagement should look for moderators, i.e. what are the facilitators and obstacles, under which conditions does work engagement result in positive or negative work outcomes (Sonnentag, 2011) and in what environment, predictable or uncertain.

Halbesleben (2011) also reemphasises the need for more work on moderators to the engagement-performance relationship to “better understand the strategies employees take when investing their resources” (p69).

Unless organisations are able to ensure the wellbeing of their employee’s, sustainable engagement and performance levels will be unfeasible to uphold.

## **2.9 Summary**

In summary, this literature review provided an in-depth review of the main terms associated with work engagement. By highlighting the role of the employment relationship, it developed an understanding of the work environment and subsequently its role in creating sustained levels of work engagement. It sought to conceptualise the construct of work engagement, distinguish it from similar concepts, examine the relationship with burnout, job demands, job resources, performance and briefly delved into the dark side of engagement.

Throughout the literature it has been clearly identified from “previous studies that job resources such as social support from colleagues and supervisors, performance feedback, skill variety, autonomy and learning opportunities are positively associated with work engagement” (Bakker &Demerouti, 2008). Work environments that are “rich in job resources foster work engagement when job demands are high and personal resources like self-esteem, optimism and self-efficacy help employees to cope with daily demands in organisational life” (Bakker, Albrecht and Leiter, 2011a, p8). It has also examined the suggested link that work engagement is positively

related to performance, that engagement may have a dark side and the potential consequences for both the employer and employee.

Furthermore, the literature has identified that future research should seek to examine moderator's and to look more specifically for the obstacles and barriers that exists, impeding employees from engaging with their work.

### **3. Research Objectives**

Many contributors to work engagement have identified that future research should look for moderators (Bakker, Albrecht and Leiter, 2011). Key questions and areas for future research have also been identified such as the identification of both the “facilitators and obstacles of the impact of work engagement on performance” (Bakker *et al.*, 2011, p83). Thus, from this identification of future research the following research question is proposed:

*‘Work Engagement: An exploration into the barriers and facilitators that affect Clerical Officers abilities to engage in the Irish Civil Service.’*

#### **Objective 1**

*To determine the levels of work engagement among Clerical Officers in the Irish Civil Service. Quantitatively measure levels of work engagement that currently exists among Clerical Officers in the Irish Civil Service.*

#### **Objective 2**

*To explore the barriers and facilitators that impact on the work engagement levels of Clerical Officers. Empirical studies are limited in terms of identification of the barriers and facilitators that impact work engagement, in particular in a bureaucratic organisation such as the Irish Civil Service. An examination of both will seek to add to existing literature and to work engagement in an Irish context.*

#### **Objective 3**

*To investigate whether the employee’s age, gender or years of service make a difference to their levels of engagement or their willingness to engage? Robinson, Hooker & Hayday (2007) in a survey of eight organisations found that differences in*

the levels of engagement were attributed in some part to the gender, age and ethnicity of the employees. Balain & Sparrow (2009) concurred with Robinson *et al.* (2007) survey agreeing that the engagement levels “co-vary with biographical factors” (Robinson *et al.*, 2007, p24). In line with these studies analysis of the work life variables and their impact on Clerical Officer engagement levels is essential to this research.

#### **Objective 4**

*To ascertain whether shared perceptions on how employees perceive organisational support impacts engagement levels.* Kahn (1990) found that “supportive and trusting interpersonal relationships as well as supportive management promoted psychological safety. In their empirical test of Kahn’s model, May *et al.* (2004) also found that supportive supervisor relations was positively related to psychological safety” (Saks, 2006, p605). Accordingly, Eisenberger *et al.* (1986) supports this statement that “perceived organisational support strengthens employee’s effort in the organisation, resulting in greater efforts to fulfil the organisations goals” (Colakoglu, Culha & Atay, 2010, p128). Therefore, by identifying whether employees shared perceptions on organisational support are acting as either a barrier or facilitator, one should be able to interpret its impact on engagement levels.

#### **Objective 5**

*To investigate the extent to which engagement levels may have changed since the economic recession in Ireland.* Did the current economic climate cause any significant impact on Clerical Officers abilities to engage at work and if so how.

## **4. Research Methodology**

### **4.1 Introduction**

To accurately understand the phenomenon of Work Engagement among employees it is necessary to measure it, most commonly through the use of a quantitative research strategy. Each and every organisation is characterised by its own unique dynamics and by choosing a survey method it enables tailored specifications to organisational needs.

This section provides an overview of the research approach, design and the methods that will be adopted in addressing the barriers and facilitators that affect employee's abilities to engage and perform at work by proposing '*Work Engagement: An exploration into the barriers and facilitators that affect Clerical Officers abilities to engage in the Irish Civil Service.*'

The dependent variable for the purposes of this study will be Work Engagement. The primary information related to population, sample and instruments is also detailed extensively within this section.

### **4.2 Research Philosophy**

A positivistic perspective (paradigm) and a philosophical framework were adopted to understand the phenomenon under investigation, together with quantitative methods of measurement to explore and identify the barriers and facilitators that affect Clerical Officers abilities to engage and perform to their optimum levels at work.

The positivistic perspective is grounded in the belief that there is only "one objective reality; reality is singular and separate from consciousness" (Quinlan, 2011, p99). In

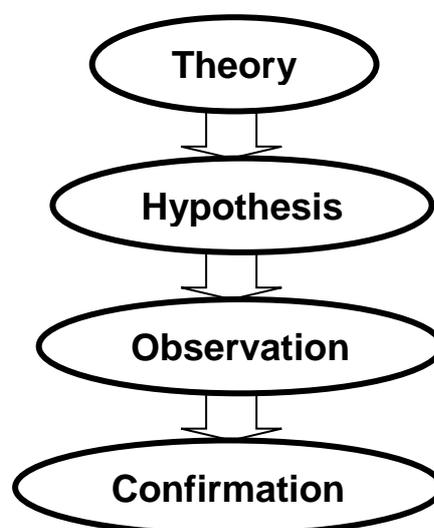
essence the knowledge gained from previous studies allows one to use existing theory to develop a new hypothesis or expand existing research.

The positivist position is evaluated using three fundamental principles:

1. The validity of the measurement must supply accurate information to the researcher to allow evaluation of the objective reality.
2. The measurement format must give a standardised, consistent answer whenever the research is carried out to ensure reliability.
3. The extent to which the findings of the study can be applied broadly outside the context of the study, allowing generalisability.

Linked to the positivism paradigm is the use of a deductive research approach. Figure 1 illustrates. This approach quantifies reasoning going from more general to specific by allowing for large collections of quantitative data to be taken from a population. As a result data can be standardised to allow comparisons and examinations of and between relationships.

**Figure1      Deductive Research Approach**



### 4.3 Research Strategy

The research strategy adopted was a quantitative, deductive approach using an in-depth survey among Clerical Officers in the Irish Civil Service. Early stages began with a review of both the academic and practitioner literature (secondary data) from a variety of sources such as research evidence, journals, books using textual analysis and documentary analysis. These secondary sources of information provided a foundational overview of the subject matter, allowing development of a gap within the literature to be established. This inevitably led to the development of a research question which accredited authors also cited and sought as important for any further research within the area of work engagement.

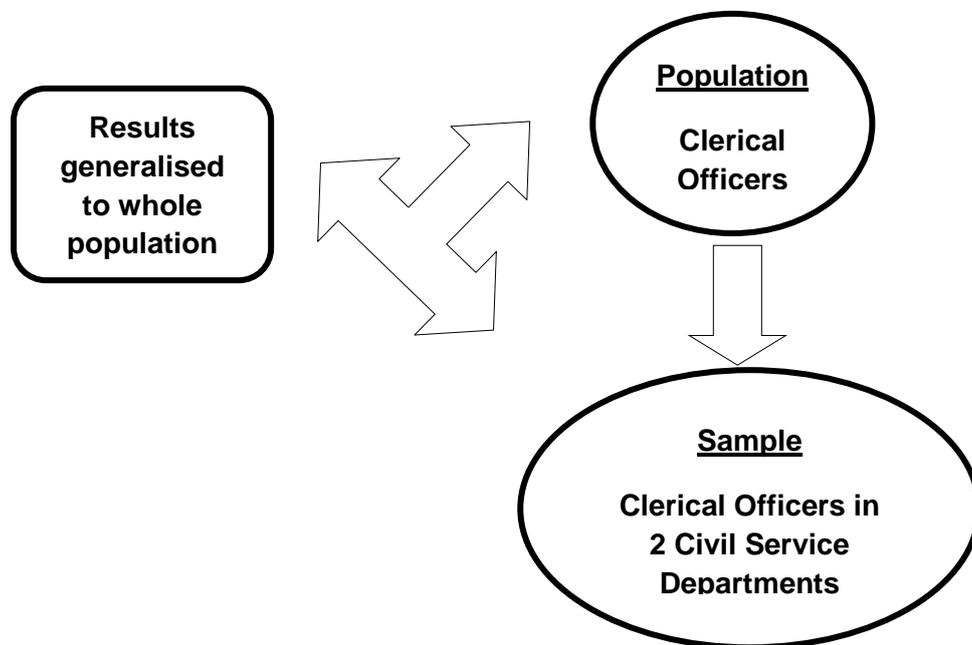
To date the academic literature available on the construct of work engagement is firmly grounded in the psychology school of thought and by proposing my research question it was a chance to expand the knowledge within a business and ultimately an Irish context.

More specifically this strategy employed a sample survey adopting an online survey format which can be seen in the majority of previous research using descriptive and inferential statistics, analysis of which afforded reasons for particular relationships between the dependant variable and the independent variables. In setting out this research strategy the following crucial elements were taken into account.

1. Content validity – the measure adopted provided adequate data in order to answer the proposed research questions.
2. Predictive validity – the measure had the ability to make accurate predictions.
3. Construct validity – extent to which the measure actually measured the presence of the constructs that it was intending to measure (Saunders *et al.*, 2009, p367).

This strategy was chosen due to the nature of the research question as it would have been impossible to engage every Clerical Officer within the whole Civil Service. By conducting a survey I was able to ensure to a degree high response rates, offering anonymity to the participants, limiting opportunity for bias to occur and hence allowing for a greater degree of generalisability of the findings beyond the context of the study.

#### 4.4 Population and Sample



The population for the purposes of this research was Clerical Officers within the Irish Civil Service. The Irish Civil Service is comprised of a total of sixteen departments spread geographically throughout the country employing a range of individuals from administrative positions to specialists' posts. Its function is primarily advising on Governmental policy, to preparing new draft legislation. Each department essentially plays a role in aiding the functioning of the state.

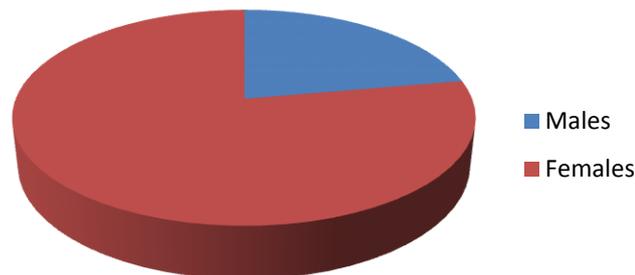
This group of employees were chosen for the study due to their prominence as the largest grade in terms of population within the Civil Service, their ability to impact on the future of the organisation and their potential to become both junior and senior management figures in the future. Their role interacts across all grades and most importantly with the public. With so much emphasis on the 'public purse' and where money can be saved, the Irish Civil Service has become a focal point for many since the recession and due to its bureaucratic, hierarchical structure the organisation itself provides for an interesting research arena. In light of the mass exodus (retirements) of 2012 and current embargos on recruitment, the engagement levels of civil servants will prove significant in the overall scheme of sustaining services in a time of cost saving measures.

However, one can sometimes forget that the individuals that work within these government departments are also hit by the unforeseen external environment. I choose to examine how if any the recession impacted on them and what if any barriers were effecting their engagement levels at work. The work setting was chosen due to its prominence and relevance in the current economic climate. It is a work setting that is affected by both the internal and external environment.

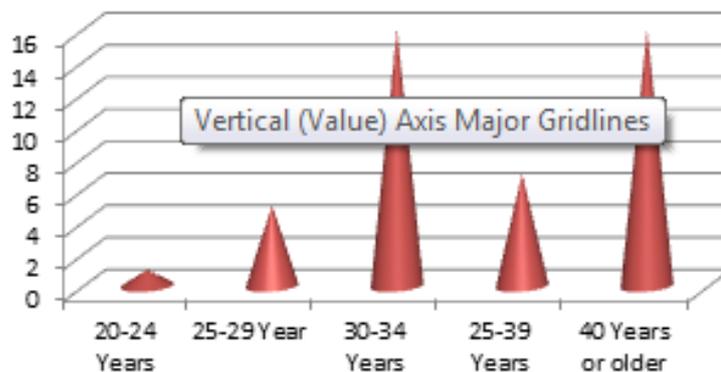
Due to the extensive size of the Civil Service it was not possible to get a consensus sample or engage every member of the population an in-depth research; therefore a sample population was used. Clerical Officers within two Government Departments of the Irish Civil Service, the Department of Jobs, Enterprise & Innovation and the Department of Transport, Tourism & Sport engaged in this research. The results sought to generate findings that were representative of the whole population using

probability sampling. When a sample is not representative of the population, this can lead to sampling bias. The more representative the sample is of the population, generalisations and statistical inferences from the sample to the population can be made. Overall the survey was distributed to a combined total 240 Clerical Officers (sample size). Due to the nature of the sample size the chances of error or bias were limited. However response rates were low and a total of 45 responses were received. Unfortunately this is not a statistically representative sample. Therefore, the findings only represent the opinions expressed by the respondents in this survey and one cannot presume that the opinions of the sample represent the overall population. The sample collected consisted of 10 males (23%) and 35 females (77%).

**Figure 2 Male Vs Female Response Rates**



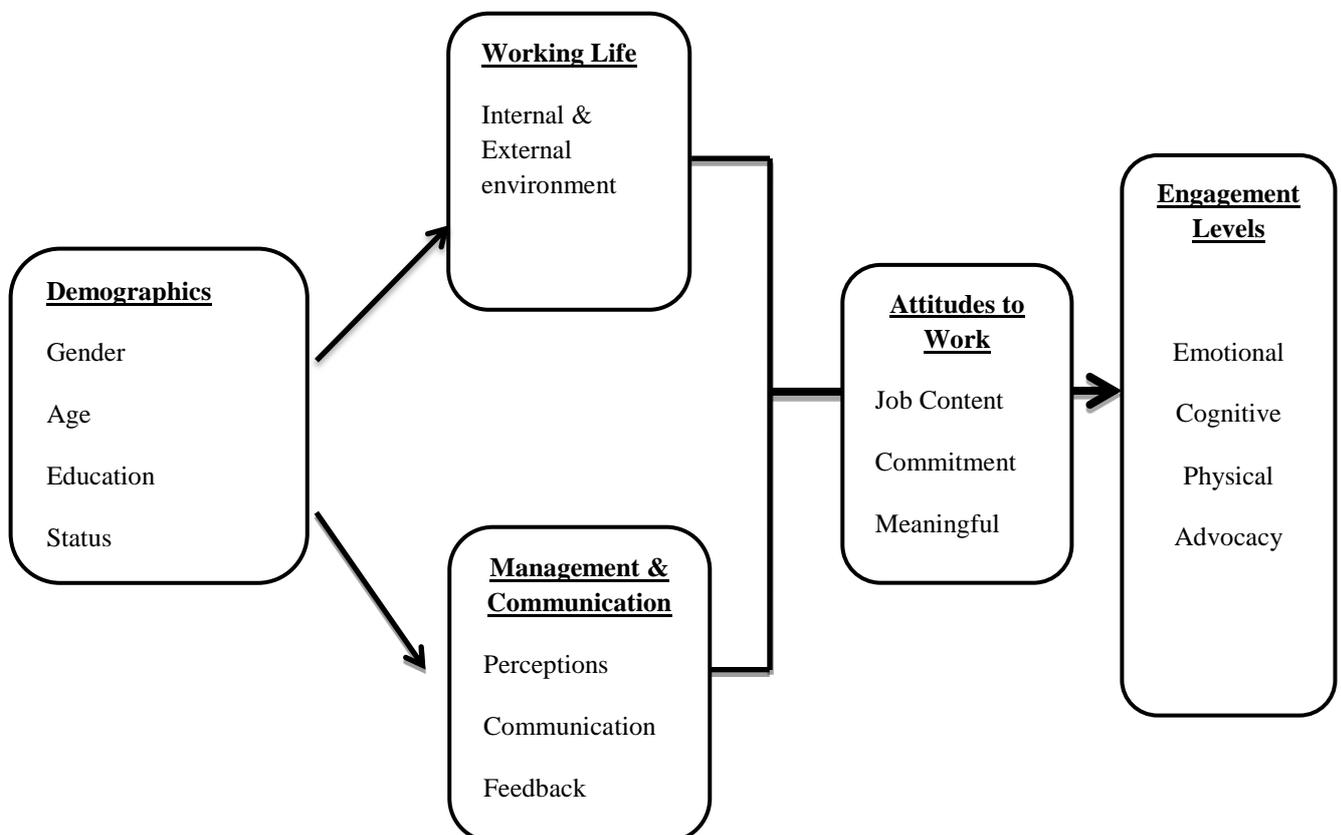
**Figure 3 Age Brackets**



#### 4.5 Survey Design

The survey sought to identify the barriers and facilitators that impede Clerical Officers abilities to engage at work. A measure of work engagement with one scale was simply not sufficient to answer the research question comprehensively; other work practices/elements needed to be considered in order to obtain a broader more cohesive depiction. On initial examination of work engagement as a construct and the secondary research it was determined that many validated surveys were already in existence. By examining each in line with the research aims I was able to adopt elements into the survey along with tailored specific questions I established myself. Similar to studies carried out by CIPD (2006) Working Life: Employee Attitudes and Engagement and also Koyuncu *et al.* (2006), I constructed a survey containing a total of five sections. Figure 4 illustrates

**Figure 4** **Survey Design**



Each section was dedicated to the different areas of work life aided by previously validated scales (Appendix 1). The survey was structured as follows:

- 1) Demographic Characteristics such as age, gender, length of tenure and hours of work were used to establish the sample demographics.
- 2) Work Engagement measuring cognitive, emotional, physical and advocacy levels.
- 3) Management and Communication to determine perceptions of management and work practices in the organisation.
- 4) Attitudes to Work and role within the organisation.
- 5) Work Life Issues examined the impact of the external environment.

The survey consisted of various questions ranging from closed questions using points along a scale, independent alternatives such as categorical i.e. male or female and open ended questions which allowed elaboration on certain questions. Each of the sections used a Likert rating scale except the final section Work Life. The Likert scale was composed of both positive and negative enabling the measurement of attitudes, direction and force. For the purposes of this research a four item Likert scale was used. All negatively phrased statements within the survey were reverse coded in SPSS prior to analysis.

It was important when constructing the survey to be aware of acquiescence, extremity and social desirability bias. Any type of bias may have caused distortions in the results and ultimately unrepresentative data for the population.

#### **4.6 Data Collection Methods**

I evaluated all possible data collection methods, however due to limited access to my sample (Clerical Officers) I felt the most appropriate method was to administer the survey electronically, availing of an online website Survey Monkey. This enabled quick and easy design with a link being forwarded onto the Human Resources Units of each department. Each department were given a two week time line for completion. All responses were consequently received electronically through the use of Survey Monkey.

#### **4.7 Pilot Study**

The pilot study was conducted using an online survey format called Survey Monkey. This tool was accessible and easy to use for participants. For the purposes of the pilot study a convenience sample was availed of consisting of both work colleagues and family. It sought to identify ambiguous questions in addition to their face validity, construct validity, content validity, and the likely reliability of data, clarity of instructions, and most importantly the layout.

Reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach's Alpha during this phase. Internal reliability was sought through the use of SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to determine the consistency in the responses received. The results of the reliability concurred with previous studies.

**Table 1 Case Processing Summary/ Reliability Statistics**

		N	%
Cases	Valid	18	40.0
	Excluded <sup>a</sup>	27	60.0
	Total	45	100.0

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.782	77

The results of the pilot study proved successful, highlighting simple errors of question repetition, suggested rephrasing of certain questions in addition to small grammar and spelling mistakes being exposed.

#### **4.8 Measurements (Scales & Instruments)**

There are many instruments that can be used to gauge work engagement, but for the purposes of this research instruments that had been validated more extensively in previous research were used (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter and Taris, 2008, p189).

##### **4.8.1 Demographics**

The first section of the survey gathered a range of demographic variables such as gender, age and levels of education. These individual factors provided information about feeling towards work thus allowing comparisons in the analysis stages to be conducted.

### **4.8.2 Working Life**

This section sought to identify more specifically what barriers or facilitators existed. It examined their perceptions of their work life balance, the impact of the external environment in addition to their terms and their conditions of work. All these factors have a considerable impact on how individuals feel at work. This section was divided in two; one with a range of statements about work life specifically focused on the impact of the recession on their engagement levels and the second section consisted of a range of statements concerning the external environment i.e. Haddington Road Agreement.

### **4.8.3 Management and Communication**

Management and communication was concerned with employee perceptions about management as well as their views on communication within their organisation, opportunities to participate in organisational decision making and determining the levels of trust. One of the most critical factors that influence both how people feel about their work is managerial relations. Supervisors and line managers have the power to make or break levels of work engagement and the measurement of same is vital when examining work engagement levels among employees.

To examine perceived organisational support again a validated measure from previous research was used, the Survey of Perceived Organisational Support (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986, 1990). Rhodes, Eisenberger and Armeli (2001) used a shorter version, eight items of the original thirty six item scale and went on to state that “prior studies surveying many occupations and organisations provided evidence for high internal reliability” (Rhodes *et al.*, 2001, p827). Pati and Kumar (2010) also used the shorter version to establish on a five point Likert scale levels of perceived organisational

support and went on to state that future research in a more bureaucratic structure with its top down chain of command fixed would prove worthy. Six out of the eight questions used were relevant and could add value to this research. Cronbach's Alpha was .782. In addition, seven questions from the Gallup Work Place Audit survey (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002, p269) with Cronbach's Alpha of .874. A further three questions from CIPD's (2006) research report on Working Life: Employee Attitudes and Engagement were incorporated.

#### **4.8.4 Attitudes to work**

This section was devised to determine the critical aspects of how individuals feel about their work and their perceptions about their jobs. Sixteen items from the Karasek (1985) Job Content Questionnaire were integrated. Cronbach's Alpha was .907. The Job Content Questionnaire focused on the psychological and social structure of the work situation by examining job demands, workload and decision making opportunities. In addition five items from CIPD's (2006) research report were implemented into the survey.

#### **4.8.5 Engagement**

How engaged are employees is the question every employer wants to know. Previous research has consistently shown that engagement is a combination of Vigor, dedication and absorption or as Kahn (1990) stated meaningfulness, safety and availability.

The most common measurement of engagement is the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) which incorporates three subscales, vigor, dedication, absorption which has been validated in several studies worldwide. However, on examination of the scale the questions did not fit with this research. Instead a work engagement scale

from a survey conducted by CIPD (2006) research report Working Life: Employee Attitudes and Engagement was adopted. This scale consists of cognitive, emotional and physical engagement. Sixteen items from this scale, cognitive engagement 4 questions, emotional engagement 4 questions, physical engagement 5 and advocacy 3 questions were incorporated. Cronbach's Alpha was .713.

#### **4.9 Data Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted in conjunction with the SPSS statistical program. The first step was to summarise the raw data using descriptive statistics in summary calculations. The mean allowed aggregated comparisons of a dataset so that differences between subgroups could be examined.

In order to test the research question inferential statistics were integrated into the analysis. By using inferential statistics it enabled inferences about the population based on the sample to be made between groups and ultimately correlations between variables. Correlation analysis examined the strength of the relationship that existed between two variables i.e. age and engagement. The  $r$  value represents strength of the relationship whilst the  $p$  value explains the significant of the correlation.

Linked to these inferences, parametric tests such as Independent t-test and a one way ANOVA were used to determine if males versus females were statistically different and to determine any cause and effect between two sets of variables – predictor (input) or dependent (output). “A significant relationship is one that is highly unlikely to have occurred by chance and therefore important” (CIPD (b), 2010, p61). Alpha level 0.05 was adopted for statistical analysis.

#### **4.10 Ethical considerations**

Ethics can be defined as the “moral principles governing the conduct of an individual, group or organisation” (Quinlan, 2011, p70). In undertaking any research one must always be aware of the ethical considerations involved in the research and be governed by the fundamental principles of showing respect for the participants, beneficence (to do good), non-maleficence (no harm), avoid deceptive practices and justice.

There is an onus on the researcher to formulate and clarify the research topic, design and gain access by obtaining permission, collect data accurately and respectfully, process and store sensitive data so as to ensure anonymity and confidentiality; analyse and write up the findings in a moral and responsible way that is a clear reflection of the data obtained.

By observing these principles the researcher has the ability to maintain objectivity and ultimately avoid a bias verdict and misrepresentation of data on analysis. It is imperative for the researcher to show integrity and strive for consistency within the research from start to finish. Any presentation of other researcher’s works as one’s own, threatens to undermine the integrity of the entire research project.

Throughout this research process, I was be governed by the National College of Ireland Code of Ethics. From the outset, in order to establish credibility while trying to gain access a formal introductory email was sent to the Human Resources Departments within various Civil Service Offices outlining my topic of study, the purpose of the study, and any specific requirements involved when conducting the research (Appendix 2). To encourage participation, a copy of the thesis findings was offered to both the participating departments. I sought permission to circulate the link

and consent that the participants could complete it on their work desktop. My initial timeframe for completion of the survey was two weeks, after which I reviewed my responses and made a decision to analyse or extend the timeline.

I had to overcome one main barrier, the organisational concerns about staff access. The Departments had to engage in consultation with the Union's in order to get prior approval. Once privileged access was approved by the Union's I was allowed access to the staff members via the Human Resources Department.

I highlighted from the outset to the organisation the research objectives, its voluntary nature of participation and confirmation of anonymity at all times of the process. I felt it was important for the population sample to know that confidentiality would be upheld at all times and that all data collected will be trusted to the researcher only, used for the specific purposes of the study, kept securely to ensure data protection of sensitive information and would not be made visible to their employer until such a time as the research was complete and at which stage no identification of an individual would be possible. This is in line with EU Directive 95/46/EC that all personal data should be processed fairly and lawfully, obtained for explicitly and lawful purposes only and kept securely.

#### **4.11 Limitations**

The main limitation to this research strategy was the limited access to the population and ultimately the sample. This in turn posed a delay on information being received due to a high dependence on the Human Resources Departments to grant access and subsequently circulate the survey link. I had no contact with the sample. As a result participant response rates were lower than I had initially hoped for. This in turn

limited the quality of data analysis for demographics as there was an unbalance between males and female response rates.

Again the research itself was very much dependant on others to provide information therefore delaying progress. I had to be mindful to limit the number and type of questions the survey could contain to guarantee responses. Due to the nature of surveys they are designed for elicit responses therefore hindering elaboration on certain questions and disabling further probing in certain questions.

#### **4.12 Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the main research methods employed to undertake the research. It identified the population, the specific sample, the key instruments and scales necessary to gather the data and the various methods of analysis. It also identified the main limitations experiences while carrying out this research strategy.

The preliminary findings are detailed in the section 5 followed by an extensive discussion which will be detailed in section 6.

## **5. Research Findings**

This section presents the findings of the study in terms of the quantitative data that was collected. The results are illustrated through the use of descriptive and inferential statistics where the prevalence of work engagement statements and their contents are analysed, as well the barriers and facilitators that impact Clerical Officers abilities to engage at work. All the findings are central to the objectives identified prior to undertaking this research.

The survey data will be presented under the following headings as per the survey design:

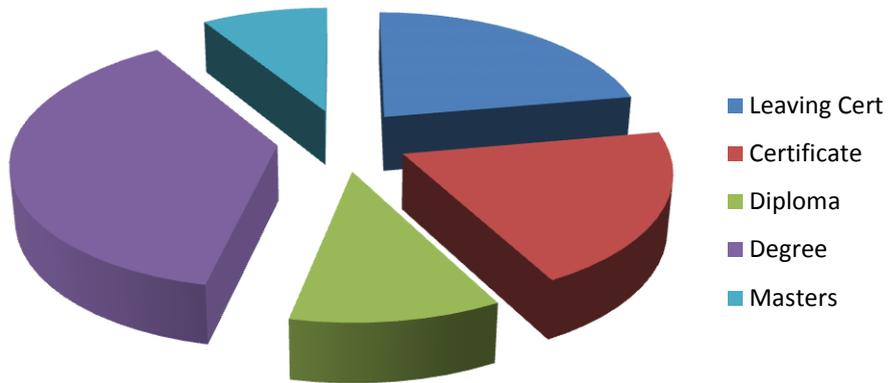
- Profile of Participants
- Engagement Data
- Management & Communication
- Attitudes to Work
- Work Life

### **5.1 Profile of Respondents**

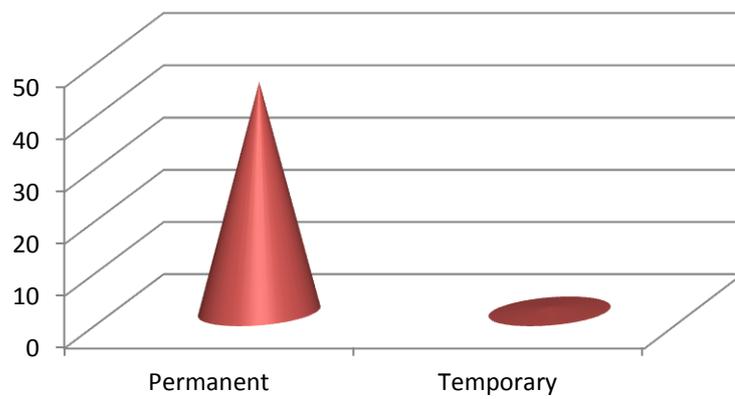
Overall responses accounted for N= 45. Male employees accounted for a total of 23% with females representing 77% of the overall respondents. The majority of the respondents were in their late thirties with 35% being forty years or older. All respondents had a form of education, with 38% having attained a degree and a further 9% possessing a masters' level of education. Out of the current sample 98% hold a permanent full time position with only 2% on temporary contracts. Overall it was noted that 58% of respondents were with the organisation for 10 years or more with

only 13% with less than 12 months up to 2 years. These findings are illustrated graphically below.

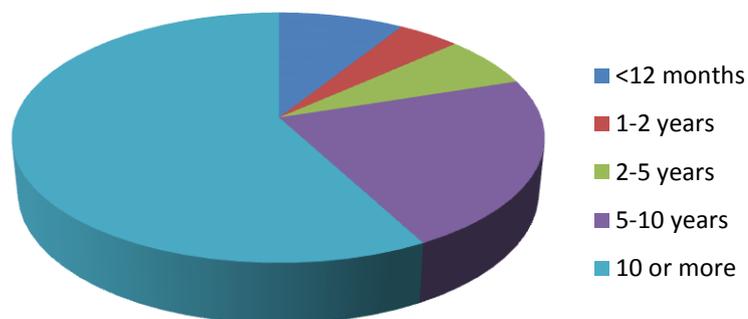
**Figure 5 Levels of Education**



**Figure 6 Status of Contract**



**Figure 7 Length of Service**



## 5.2 Engagement Data

Overall work engagement levels among Clerical Officers were examined under:

1. Cognitive (focusing on ones work);
2. Emotional (emotionally involved with work);
3. Physical (ones willingness to go the extra mile) and
4. Advocacy (degree to which one would recommend their organisation).

Overall engagement levels among Clerical Officers were found to be high, with 65% cognitively engaged, 74% emotionally engaged, 65% physically engaged and 51% signifying advocacy. Table 2 illustrates.

**Table 2 Average Work Engagement Levels of Respondents**

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
CogEng	45	6	16	10.40	1.993
EmoEng	44	5.00	16.00	11.8864	2.05976
PhyEng	40	10.00	16.00	13.4250	1.21713
AdEng	44	3.00	12.00	8.2727	1.66166
Valid N (listwise)	39				

A Pearson's correlation was used to determine if relationships existed between the four levels of engagement. It found a moderately significant positive relationship between emotional and physical work engagement,  $r = 0.439$ ,  $p = 0.005$  and similarly with emotional engagement and advocacy,  $r = 0.437$ ,  $p = 0.003$ . No other relationships were founded. The results show that those employees who are emotionally engaged will endeavour to go the extra mile and become proud advocates for their organisation.

**Table 3 Work Engagement Correlation Analysis**

		CogEng	EmoEng	PhyEng	AdEng
CogEng	Pearson Correlation	1	.364*	.199	.135
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.015	.219	.384
	N	45	44	40	44
EmoEng	Pearson Correlation	.364*	1	.439**	.437**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.015		.005	.003
	N	44	44	39	44
PhyEng	Pearson Correlation	.199	.439**	1	.250
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.219	.005		.125
	N	40	39	40	39
AdEng	Pearson Correlation	.135	.437**	.250	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.384	.003	.125	
	N	44	44	39	44

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A one-way ANOVA sought to determine whether engagement levels differed across respondent's age categories. This did not yield significant differences between the categories,  $F(4, 34) = .586$ ;  $p = .675$  and an independent t-test found that engagement levels did not differ significantly between males and female clerical officers,  $t(37) = -0.308$ ;  $p = .076$ , males ( $M = 43.5000$ ;  $SD = 4.994$ ) females ( $M = 44.0690$ ;  $SD = 5.056$ ). In the same way length of service failed to show any impact on engagement levels  $t(22) = .048$ ;  $p = .962$ . These findings were central to research objective three.

### 5.2.1 Cognitive

	Agree	Disagree
Time passes quickly when I perform my job	40%	9%
I often think about other things when performing my job	60%	33%
I am rarely distracted when performing my job	44%	40%
Performing my job is so absorbing that I forget about everything else	33%	49%

Clerical Officers were asked four questions to evaluate their levels of cognitive engagement. An independent t-test found that cognitive engagement levels did not differ significantly between males and female clerical officers,  $t(43) = -0.178$ ;  $p = .866$ . A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether cognitive engagement scores differed across participants based on their years of service and age category. Both tests failed to show positive associations with cognitive engagement,  $F(4, 40) = .926$ ;  $p = .458$ .

A Pearson's correlation however, found a moderately significant relationship between cognitive engagement and meaningful work,  $r = .441$ ;  $p = .003$ . Table 4 illustrates. Equally a relationship was found with job content,  $r = .425$ ;  $p = .008$  and with management & communication,  $r = .757$ ;  $p = .000$ . The results signify that those Clerical Officers who found their work more meaningful and enjoyed their jobs were more inclined to be cognitively engaged compared to their counterparts. Similarly if the employment relationship was good then cognitive engagement will endeavour to take place. This level of engagement relies heavily on the nature of work itself.

**Table 4**

		Mefw	CogEng
Mefw	Pearson Correlation	1	.441**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.003
	N	44	44
CogEng	Pearson Correlation	.441**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	
	N	44	45

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

### 5.2.2 Emotional

	Agree	Disagree
My own feelings are affected by how well I perform my job	51%	24%
I really put my heart into my job	62%	2%
I get excited when I perform well in my job	76%	13%
I often feel emotionally detached from my job	28%	58%

Emotional engagement was evaluated using four questions. An independent t-test found that emotional engagement levels did not differ significantly between genders,  $t(42) = -0.670$ ;  $p = .506$ .

Similarly, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether emotional engagement scores differed across participants based on their years of service. This did not yield differences between the groups,  $F(2, 41) = .772$ ;  $p = .469$

However, a Pearson's correlation found a moderately significant relationship between emotional engagement and meaningful work,  $r = .415$ ;  $p = .006$  signifying meaningful

work as a facilitator to the work engagement levels of Clerical Officers. Table 5 illustrates.

**Table 5**

		EmoEng	Mefw
EmoEng	Pearson Correlation	1	.415**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.006
	N	44	43
Mefw	Pearson Correlation	.415**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	
	N	43	44

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A Pearson’s correlation found no relationship between emotional engagement and perceived organisational support,  $r = .238$ ;  $p = .135$ . Similarly no relationship between emotional engagement and attitudes to work was founded,  $r = .352$ ;  $p = .035$ .

### 5.2.3 Physical

Five questions were asked of respondents to evaluate levels of physical engagement.

Analysis of such yielded the following.

	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
I stay until the job is done	71%	2%
I exert a lot of energy performing my job	60%	27%
I take work home to do	4%	60%
I avoid working overtime whenever possible	24%	56%
I avoid working too hard	11%	56%

In general engaged employees will want to succeed and go the extra mile in their job.

A one-way ANOVA sought to determine whether physical engagement levels differed

across respondent's age categories and length of service. This did not yield significant differences between age,  $F(4, 35) = .535; p = .711$  or length of service  $F(4, 35) = .307; p = .872$ .

It is clear from the findings that 71% stay until the job is done with only 11% avoiding working too hard. These findings suggest that physical engagement has an important role to play in the productivity of a person at work.

#### **5.2.4 Advocacy**

Clerical Officers were asked if they would recommend their organisation in various questions of advocacy. When questioned if they would recommend their organisation to family and friends 58% agreed with 27% saying they would not, with 42% of the respondents being proud to tell people where they work and 31% disagreeing. An overwhelming majority of 78% said they would in fact continue their career with the organisation.

On analysis a Pearson's correlation found a significant positive relationship between organisational advocacy and overall work engagement levels,  $r = .655; p = .000$ , hence one can infer that employees who are more engaged will in fact become positive advocates for their organisation. Table 6 illustrates.

**Table 6**

		AdEng	OAE
AdEng	Pearson Correlation	1	.655**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	44	39
OAE	Pearson Correlation	.655**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	39	39

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

### 5.2.5 Barriers to Work Engagement

**Figure 8**



From an initial examination of the findings it was apparent that a lack of appreciation was one of the key barriers affecting Clerical Officers abilities to engage at work.

When asked “*What issues do Clerical Officers face that act as barriers to work engagement*”, respondents offered mixed replies. The chart above illustrates the most

commonly reported barriers. One respondent stated that there were feelings of “*being ignored and treated as if your input is not valued because you are merely a Clerical Officer*”. This issue of appreciation among respondents developed as a consistent pattern throughout the survey.

Mostly employees are motivated and driven to succeed with the notion that work will be rewarded. A key trend that emerged was the severe lack of promotional opportunities in line with a shrinking salary which did not in any case add to engagement levels.

Feedback is increasingly seen as a key line manager role in order to sustain engagement at work. However this survey consistently found a lack of feedback and encouragement were impeding engagement. This coincided with a lack of communication and feelings of being aggrieved by management, in particular a lack of a support system.

Interestingly a lack of respect from higher grades was perceived among Clerical Officer’s. This issue was cited in numerous responses throughout the survey with one employee phrasing it as “*grade snobbery*”. Respondents voiced feelings of a lack of trust by management to allow or delegate more demanding, challenging tasks. This point was reiterated again in another answer stating that Clerical Officers are “*treated in a manner as if they do not matter*”.

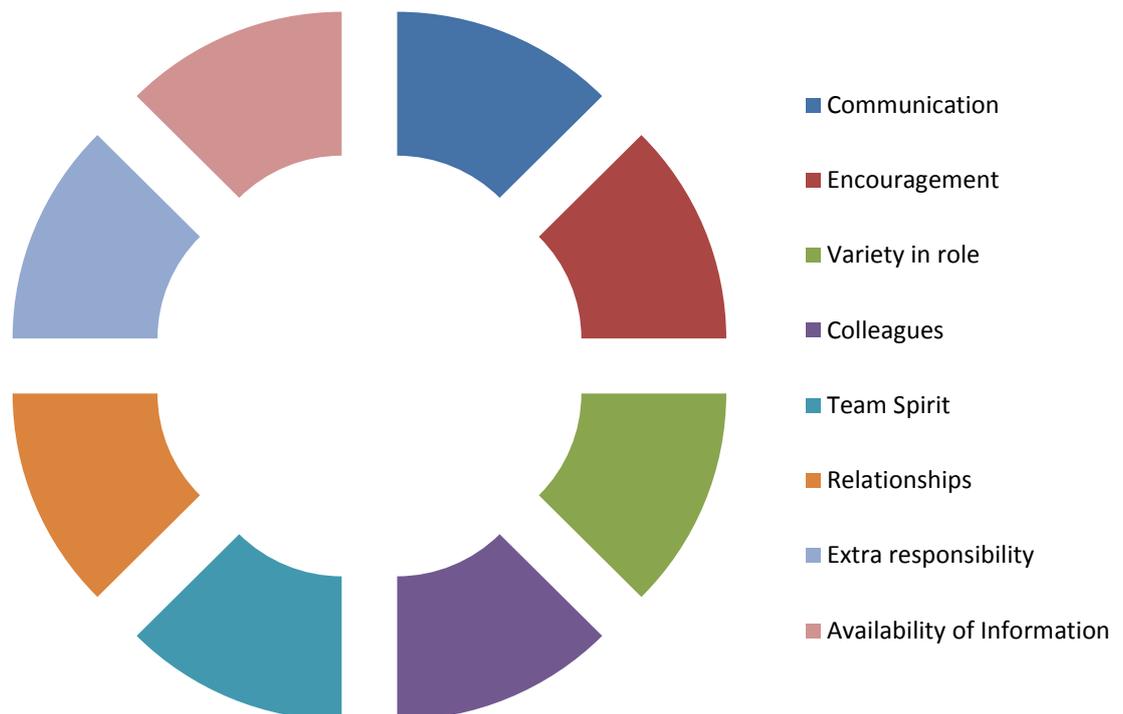
The menial repetitive nature of work was also seen as a barrier to engagement.

*“Sometimes the repetitive nature of the role can be frustrating. The clerical staff have taken on a lot of extra work within the organisation within the last 2 years and I feel that this has not been acknowledged by senior management as much as it should be. Also the fact that we're working with decreasing staff numbers only adds to the*

*pressure*". Furthermore "*underperforming colleagues' not dealt with, unfair delegation of work*" and perceived non recognition from managers were also identified as barriers. All of these findings were central to research objective two.

### 5.2.6 Facilitators to Work Engagement

**Figure 9**



The foremost facilitators influencing respondents work engagement levels were effective communication in terms of information and feedback between management and employees.

Good management practices and a good team spirit also sought to create an environment for better work engagement to exist. Work variety was high on the list of priorities ensuring tasks did not become mundane and uninteresting; intertwined with better encouragement to put one's own initiative into the job with possibilities of extra responsibility.

Work colleagues were also seen as facilitators. One individual cited that *“the people I work with and my immediate manager, otherwise I would have left long ago”*. This again was reiterated by another employee *“a good relationship with colleagues and management, and interesting fulfilling work”*.

Knowledge is power and respondents recognised this as a key facilitator in work engagement. By sharing information, Clerical Officers were confident in performing their role *“fact that we know the correct legislation familiar with processing on this type of system so not being totally stressed day in day out and can work more quickly as confident I won’t make any mistakes”*. These findings were again fundamental to research objective two.

### **5.3 Management & Communication**

One of the most critical factors that influence how people feel about their work is their perception of management and their treatment by same. Clerical Officers believe it is management’s role to promote a positive working environment.

#### **5.3.1 Perceived Organisational Support**

Perceived organisational support was examined using a Pearson’s correlation analysis to determine if a relationship existed with work engagement. Analysis found a moderately significant positive relationship between both variables  $r = .477, p = .004$ . This finding was crucial to research objective four. One can infer from these findings that Clerical Officers who perceive their organisation/management as supportive are prone to higher levels of engagement.

**Table 7 Perceived Organisational Support V's Work Engagement Correlation**

		Correlations	
		OverallEng	Perorg
OverallEng	Pearson Correlation	1	.477**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.004
	N	39	35
Perorg	Pearson Correlation	.477**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	
	N	35	40

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

However, Pearson's correlation found no relationship between perceived organisational support and gender  $r = .059, p = .717$ , or age of respondents  $r = .344, p = .030$ .

**Table 8 Perceived Organisational Support Vs Gender of Respondent**

		Correlations	
		Perorg	Gender of Respondent
Perorg	Pearson Correlation	1	-.059
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.717
	N	40	40
Gender of Respondent	Pearson Correlation	-.059	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.717	
	N	40	45

**Table 9 Perceived Organisational Support Vs Age of Respondents**

Correlations			
		Perorg	Age of Respondent
Perorg	Pearson Correlation	1	-.344*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.030
	N	40	40
Age of Respondent	Pearson Correlation	-.344*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.030	
	N	40	45

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Subsequently, perceived organisational support was examined using correlation analysis to determine if a relationship existed with attitudes to work. Analysis found a moderately significant positive relationship between both variables  $r = .544, p = .001$ . Thus, effective management of the employment relationship impacts considerably on how Clerical Officers choose to engage at work.

**Table 10**

Correlations			
		POS	workatt
POS	Pearson Correlation	1	.544**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	42	35
workatt	Pearson Correlation	.544**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	35	37

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

### 5.3.2 Perceptions of Management

When Clerical Officers were posed with the question, “*What single change would most improve your perceptions of management and the organisation?*” it was clear

there were a number of issues with management, in particular line managers. Feelings that management do not care about the staff were prominent in responses to the long questions.

In order to improve their perceptions of management, respondents sought the elimination of the grade structure so that everyone would be “*treated as individuals and equals*”. A grade structure can sometimes make people at the lowest grades almost feel inferior to seniors which can completely impair structures within departments and create divides among employees.

A lot of similar responses appeared in the results, appreciation was another important point Clerical Officers wanted to get across. The term “appreciation” was consistently mentioned throughout the findings. Staff felt that encouragement and appreciation would improve their perceptions of management. Feelings of appreciation together with a sense of belonging are vital components of work engagement.

Communication and team building would also improve perceptions. One staff member noted that “*updates on how the work we do has made an impact*”, they want to see an end result. More information sharing so that there is more inclusion, opportunities to share ideas and participation on the team would greatly improve perceptions of management.

There is a perceived lack of communication by respondents that management do not actively listen or take on board their suggestions. It was felt that management merely pay “lip service” to communication in the department.

Trust is a two way process. If management are not seen to trust employees, employees in turn will automatically shy away from management. Clerical Officers

have voiced that they would like the opportunity to take on new work and for more important challenging tasks to be trust to them. They echoed this again stating that their capabilities go beyond menial tasks and want to be entrusted with more challenging tasks. They are seeking recognition for their capabilities and skills and a chance to apply accordingly perhaps beyond the compounds of their current job description.

#### 5.4 Attitudes to work

By examining attitudes to work and the nature of work one can understand how feelings towards work impacts engagement levels, in particular their willingness to engage. Whether or not someone’s work is personally meaningful to them has a big impact on how they feel about their work overall. Not surprisingly, on examination a Pearson’s correlation found a significant positive relationship between scores on meaningful work and overall work engagement levels,  $r = .651$ ;  $p = .000$ . Table 11 illustrates.

**Table 11**

		OAE	Mefw
OAE	Pearson Correlation	1	.651**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	39	38
Mefw	Pearson Correlation	.651**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	38	44

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Further analysis using cross tabulation and a one-way ANOVA were conducted to determine whether work attitudes differed across respondent’s gender [ $F(1, 35) = 1.388$ ;  $p = .247$ ] or length of service [ $F(4, 32) = .876$ ;  $p = .489$ ]. These did not yield significant differences between the groups. A Chi square test was performed to

determine if males versus females saw their work differently i.e. meaningful and worthwhile. The test failed to indicate a significant difference. In line with this Phi & Cramer’s V test were used to measure the strength of the relationship, showing only slight to moderate strengths.

Overall 77% felt the work they do was worthwhile, 69% thought their job activities were significant and 71% agreed that their work was meaningful. We know from analysis that meaningful work and engagement are positively related and a key facilitator of work engagement levels among Clerical Officers.

Subsequently, a Pearson’s correlation found a moderately significant positive relationship between scores on job content questions and overall work engagement levels,  $r = .561$ ;  $p = .001$ . Table 12 illustrates. Emphasising again the link between meaningful work, job content and work engagement.

**Table 12**

		OAE	JOB
OAE	Pearson Correlation	1	.561**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	39	33
JOB	Pearson Correlation	.561**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	33	38

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

When questioned on ways to improve attitudes to work again feelings of being appreciated and recognition were high on the list. Clerical Officers are seeking “*meaningful reward in return for working well*”, the basis of the employment relationship between management and employees.

Interestingly some respondents mentioned “*other people’s attitudes to Clerical Officers*”. This again highlights the grade structure in place which seemingly severely undermines Clerical Officers.

The creation of opportunities to grow within the organisation, motivating factors such as promotions, variety of work so as it does not become mundane, the chance to get involved in more challenging stimulating work and to be given the opportunity to attend interesting courses other than mandatory training.

Another key trend was the issue of work colleagues not pulling their weight in times of increased workloads. This was seen as a big issue carrying other people and management not intervening to solve the situation. This is especially significant in terms of Haddington Road and its impact on work life.

## **5.5 Work Life**

Work life sought to examine experiences since the economic recession of 2008 and how if any impacted engagement levels and to understand attitudes towards work. Interestingly the majority of respondents mentioned work colleagues as one of the main incentives for going to work every day “*the work itself and atmosphere of colleagues in work*”, “*to be honest, it's the mates I have in work*”.

The work itself for some people was a motivating factor going to work every morning. The routine was seen as important for mental wellbeing, “*I feel good when I can see my daily progress*”. Respondents identified the importance of how the work made them feel “*to know that the work I do matters*”, the challenges and the results

that are seen, the responsibility for their work, with the opportunity to make a difference.

Only one individual mentioned work ethic *“I just have a good work ethic - my husband and my father had the same work ethic”*.

Basic needs such as job security and paying the bills were additional elements, *“the prospect of the pay at the end of the week”*, pertaining to work each day.

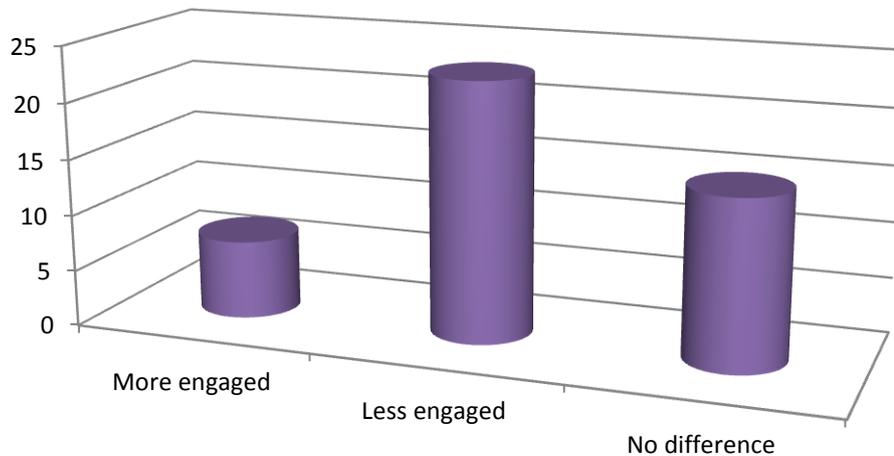
When questioned on increasing levels of work engagement among the Clerical Officers improved levels of recognition and appreciation were repeatedly observed. Better pay was also a grievance among employees *“20 years of hard work allowed for extra annual leave (2 days) and regarded as encouragement to work here. Under current pay agreement this is removed. Therefore what was point of working for 20 years and dedicating yourself to organisation?”*

In line with Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs employees need to work towards goals and seek opportunities to progress. Promotional chances were a significant component which affected engagement levels with input into decision making, trust and ownership of tasks, and variety in the role also influencing levels of engagement. Traditionally tasks at the grade of Clerical Officer were seen as mundane, repetitive sometimes almost data entry roles that offered little in the way of development.

### **5.5.1 External Environment**

Since the deterioration of the economic climate in 2008, 51% of respondents stated they were less engaged with 33% signifying no difference and 16% feeling more engaged. Figure 8 illustrates.

**Figure 10 Engagement Levels since 2008**



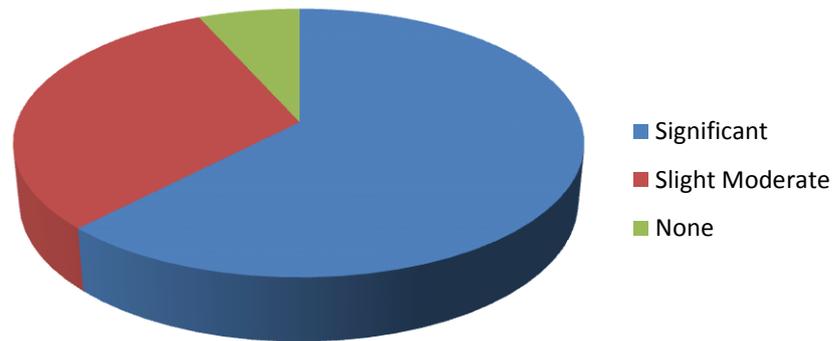
Data analysis using cross tabulation showed that females were in fact less engaged than their male counterparts since 2008. A one way ANOVA test did not yield any significant differences between males and females  $F(1, 43) = 0.163; p = 0.688$ , signifying no significant relationship between gender and engagement levels in this question, only a moderate relationship  $V = 0.202$ .

A one way ANOVA did not yield any significant differences between age groups of respondents  $F(4, 40) = 3.356; p = 0.18$ . The test did however detect that respondents aged between 40 years or older were less engaged, with their 35-39 year old counterparts showing no difference.

Further examination showed that those with 5 years' service or more were less engaged than those with less service.  $V = 0.47$  moderate effect on engagement levels however no significant relationship existed  $F(4, 40) = 2.186; p = 0.088$ .

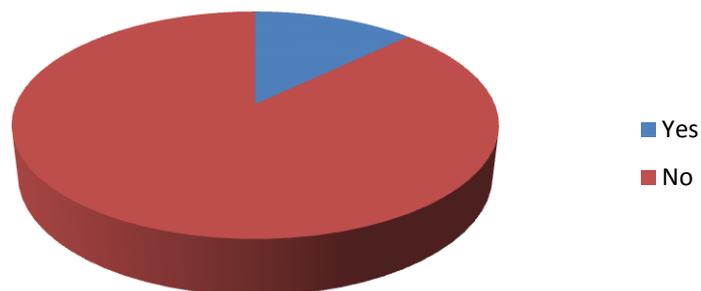
When asked what impact the implementation of the Haddington Road Agreement would have 62% reported a significant impact, 31% reporting a slight to moderate impact with only 7% reporting no impact. Figure 9 illustrates the results.

**Figure 11**



When questioned about their thoughts on the Unions, frustration was clear. One respondent held *“it's pathetic, to say the least - a total waste of money every week. Having to work extra time (with no extra pay) for me is just terrible - totally unfair - and very difficult to balance work/life (what life?) balance - with school-going children, it's ridiculous. That Minister for Public Expenditure is a real dictator”*. Only 13% were currently happy with their union's efforts and a staggering 87% were unhappy. Figure 10 illustrates.

**Figure 12**



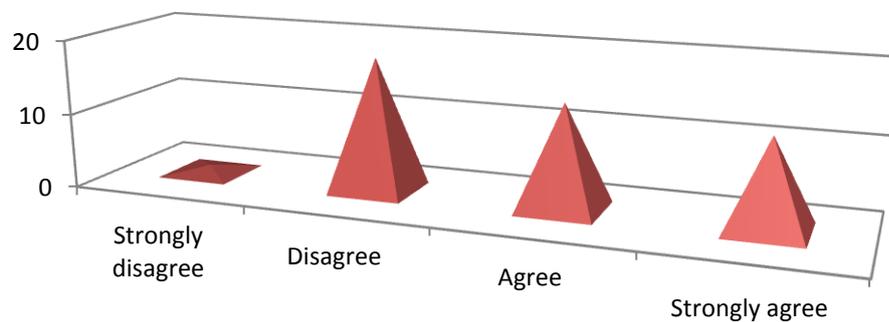
The frustration continued among respondents who felt they were targets *“CO's and government employees are easy targets when it comes to cuts especially when the Union doesn't actively fight. Financially it would be better for me to be made redundant as all the benefits I would receive and with not paying for childcare it would mean I would end up better off than working which is a v sad thing to admit is true”*.

One respondent mentioned that Clerical Officers were already an extremely unmotivated workforce mainly due to and with the increasing hours it will *“mean more disillusioned workers spending longer at their computers trying to punch in time. Also the decrease of flexi time available is going to de-motivate even further and particularly affect people like me who have young children and very often have to use annual leave or flexi leave when my child is sick. I rely heavily on flexible working arrangements to facilitate family life”*.

It seems the Haddington Road Agreement is creating more unsettled feelings and impacting on work engagement. Respondents reiterated their anger by stating *“it is unclear to me why having worked for 20 years I am to be punished for this by losing annual leave. I only earned it in the first place by working hard and loyally for the Department. Somehow this is supposed to be fair. It states more that I am not well regarded by the Department for all the years' work I have put into the job”*. These findings were central to research objective five.

Further probing established that 31% feel trapped in their job, with 27% strongly agreeing to the statement and 40% disagreeing. Figure 11 illustrates. However, 48% contemplated finding a new job with 52% willing to stay.

**Figure 13**



Following on from this 47% agreed that they were more stressed since 2008 with 73% of respondents finding it a harder place to work.

Accordingly 49% do not feel their perceptions of management have changed in light of these economic developments, with 53% stating they still would trust management.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

The main key findings central to the research objectives were as follows:

- Work Engagement levels are relatively high among the respondents
- 65% Cognitively engaged
- 74% Emotionally engaged
- 65% Physically engaged
- 51% displaying Advocacy
- Positive relationship found between emotional and physical engagement
- Positive relationship found between emotional engagement and advocacy
- Cognitive and emotional engagement have a positive relationship with meaningful work

- Overall engagement levels and advocacy have a positive relationship
- Overall engagement and perceived organisational support have a positive relationship
- Perceived organisational support has a significant positive relationship with both work engagement and work attitudes
- Meaningful work and job content impact on work engagement levels
- Since 2008 those aged forty years or older are less engaged
- Since 2008 those with 5 years plus service are less engaged compared to their counterparts with less service.
- Since 2008 51% reported lower engagement levels
- Since 2008 47% reported being more stressed
- Since 2008 73% find it a harder place to work

This section provided an overview of the main findings from the survey data. It sought to determine if any significant relationships between the variables occurred and provided imperative information pertaining to the research aims. A detailed discussion of these findings will be carried out in section 6.

## **6. Discussion**

Sustainable work engagement has a central role to play in Ireland's economic recovery and only through investigation can organisations develop an awareness of the barriers and facilitators that can influence engagement levels. The findings presented in the preceding section have shown that many of the themes that arose pertained to themes in the literature whilst affording insight into other areas. The findings will be discussed accordingly.

### **6.1 Work Engagement**

The findings from this study provide evidence that overall work engagement is relatively high among responding Clerical Officers with 65% cognitively, 74% emotionally and 65% physically engaged in their work and 51% indicating advocacy for their organisation. Kahn (1990) in his studies examined how individuals invest themselves in their work. He found that cognitive, emotional and physical aspects of themselves were brought into their work in varying degrees. Furthermore Kahn (1990) held a belief that "engaged individuals were prepared to invest significant personal resources, in the form of time and effort, to the successful completion of their task, and that engagement was at its greatest when an individual was driving personal energies into physical, cognitive and emotional labours" (Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2009, p700).

Confirming Kahn's theory, key relationships were identified between emotional and physical engagement and likewise with emotional engagement and advocacy. On analysis these positive relationships confirm that Clerical Officers who are

emotionally connected with work will be more willing to go the extra mile and become firm advocates for their organisation. These findings also resembled CIPD's (2006) survey outcomes.

A strong association was found between cognitive engagement and meaningful work. Emotional engagement among Clerical Officers also afforded a positive relationship with meaningful work. Meaningful work is continually linked to engagement in the academic literature. It is seen as being a key lever for engagement to take place and ultimately strives for more effective performance. Likewise job content including management and communication within the organisation revealed positive associations with engagement levels. The results indicated that those Clerical Officers who found their work meaningful and enjoyed their work were more inclined to be more engaged compared to their counterparts. Similarly, if the managerial relations were positive then cognitive engagement would endeavour to take place. It was found that this level of engagement relied on the nature of work itself; job content and meaningful work which were seen as important facilitators of work engagement. These positive associations concur with empirical studies that job content, management practices and meaningful work are pervasive elements for engagement to take place.

Generally, the responding Clerical Officers displayed high levels of physical engagement demonstrating high work ethic. The findings signify that respondents were willing to go the extra mile which impacts considerably on engagement levels. Studies such as CIPD (2006) found that engaged employees want to work hard and therefore intend to stay with their organisation displaying high levels of advocacy. The findings from this study concur with CIPD (2006) when it found respondents demonstrated high levels of advocacy. Overall 58% said they would recommend the

organisation and 42% being proud to tell people where they worked. Again this was found to have a positive relationship with Clerical Office engagement levels.

Research objective three sought to determine if personal demographic variables impacted on engagement levels. The findings concurred with Koyuncu *et al.* (2006) in their study of a Turkish Bank which established that the personal demographic variables of respondents were unrelated to their levels of work engagement. However, perhaps due to the small response rates and uneven distribution between the variables the findings proved inconclusive for the terms of this research.

### **6.1.1 Work Engagement Since 2008**

Employee engagement levels are deemed to be a reflection of the work environment and subsequently the employment relationship that exists within the organisation.

Therefore an examination of engagement levels since the deterioration of the economy in 2008 proved significant in terms of the population under investigation.

Overall engagement as seen previously is relatively high among respondents however respondents have reported lower levels of work engagement since 2008. A noteworthy finding was those employees forty years or older were less engaged than their counterparts and it was found that respondents with 5 years' service or more were also found to be less engaged.

Noteworthy findings revealed that 47% of respondents reported being more stressed and 73% accepted that the organisation is a harder place to work since 2008. Even though the findings suggest low morale and levels of work engagement, in general the majority of respondents still trust management. Again 49% reported that their perceptions of management had not changed since the 2008 economic crisis.

When questioned on the Haddington Road Agreement and its impact, 62% of respondents said it would have a significant impact on their work life. This is mainly due to workers spending longer at work and finding the effects of less flexibility impacting on their work life balance. The majority of respondents reported relying heavily on the flexible work arrangements to balance work and home life commitments.

The increased hours which the agreement will implement could be seen to demonstrate a link towards the dark side of the engagement literature. There is a consensus by Kahn that a work life balance (availability) is fundamental to employees engaging at work. One respondent described it as a “*loss of personal freedom*”. Individuals need rest in out of work activities in order to perform to the best of their abilities. Generally, these negative effects impact on maintaining sustainable engagement over time.

Findings also reported levels of union satisfaction were at an all-time low with feelings of being unfairly targeted by the government only adding to an already an unmotivated workforce. Even though moral seems low, 52% stated they would stay in their job whereas 48% contemplated finding a new job in the 5 years since 2008.

### **6.1.2 Increase Engagement Levels**

Increasing and sustaining engagement levels is something management need to take on board. Prevalent issues that Clerical Officers identified that would increase levels of engagement was a degree of participation in decision making, more trust by management to delegate work beyond their set tasks, ability to have ownership and variety in their tasks. Traditionally tasks at clerical officer level were seen as

mundane, repetitive and sometimes almost data entry roles that offered little in the way of development.

There was a sense from the respondents that management fail to recognise their abilities beyond their day to day tasks. As seen from the demographic information the majority of respondents hold degree and master level qualifications that could be utilised more effectively.

Maslach and Leiter (1997) recognised reward as one of the six areas of organisational life. They indicated that reward and recognition acted as facilitators of work engagement among employees. Recognition was a tenacious issue that Clerical Officers felt was lacking and this was reiterated throughout the survey. Similar to Maslow's Hierarchy of needs one will firstly satisfy their psychological needs (basic) but will then seek to gradually progress up the pyramid once this is fulfilled. Respondents repeatedly sought development opportunities in terms of career advancement and training. Development enables engagement and demonstrates a commitment by management to investing in the future of their employees.

However, in light of the current economic climate, there cannot be any guarantee of monetary or promotional reward. Perhaps training and development opportunities are a way forward for management to encourage employees and retain a positive employment relationship.

## **6.2 Barriers to Work Engagement**

Even though engagement levels are deemed relatively high among the responding Clerical Officers, numerous barriers were identified which may impinge on sustaining

these levels of work engagement. The general themes identified are summarised under three headings, illustrating corresponding similarities with previous empirical studies.

### **6.2.1 The nature of the work**

The nature of work was found to be a significant barrier. Respondents reported the menial nature of work and job content as influential barriers to work engagement.

There was a consistent feeling among respondents that their work lacked variety and challenge. Furthermore there was a general perception of unwillingness by management to delegate more meaningful work. Respondents felt their skills and capabilities went beyond their current tasks and are now seeking more responsibilities and increased ownership of work.

The literature supports the view that the nature of work is necessary to increasing and sustaining engagement levels. From the findings we note that Clerical Officers job content has an impact on their engagement. Those who were happy with their job content were understandably more engaged than those who felt the work was menial and repetitive in nature. We know from empirical research (May *et al.*, 2004), that role fit was a positive predictor of meaningfulness in one's role and this was evident in Clerical Officers also, there is a need to feel work is important. In addition Hackman and Oldham (1980) held that employees had a primary motive of seeking meaning in their work which is consistent with Maslow (1943) which states that the physiological and safety needs of an individual must be met as a base requirement in order for meaningful work to take place.

Another significant finding was the issue of underperforming work colleagues which as a result created larger workloads for others on the team. Corresponding with this was the matter of unfair delegation of work seen by some. These practices severely

impeded the respondent's choice of engaging with their work. In a study of teachers Hackman *et al.* (2005, 2007) found that job resources acted as buffers by diminishing the negative relationships in their case between pupil misbehaviour and engagement. In addition, it was believed that the job resources in particular influenced work engagement when teachers were confronted with high levels of pupil misconduct.

Analysis of the findings seems to infer that management are not utilising all the abilities or skills of their staff. This is a chance for management to review job descriptions and involve employees in more tasks. Managers are the corner stone for enabling engagement. They have a role in shaping the work environment so as meaningful work can take place. By enabling meaningful work managers are in effect increasing work engagement.

### **6.2.2 Managerial Relations**

We know from the literature that the psychological states of employees are key factors in determining employee behavioural responses at work. In part only through the management of these psychological states can organisational proficiency be achieved. Once the psychological contract is essentially broken, obstacles begin to form hampering work engagement.

An effective employment relationship between management and employees is seen as driver of engagement within organisations. It is important for organisations to remember that engagement firstly begins with the individual before it can have an impact on the organisation. However, from an examination of the barriers respondents highlighted, these seem to be reflective of management practices. Examples of which are limited feedback, communication, limited support and encouragement.

Accordingly, IBEC (2011) reported that managers are currently not meeting employee expectations in the current climate. They believe the role of line manager may need to be reconsidered in order to improve and sustain engagement and ultimately performance levels.

### **6.2.3 Reward**

A lack of appreciation and recognition were both seen as significant barriers to work engagement among Clerical Officers. Respondents reported higher levels of encouragement and appreciation would improve their perceptions of management. These feelings of appreciation and a sense of belonging link back to findings by Kahn (1990) in which he noted that meaningfulness, safety, availability were central to engaging with one's work.

According to Maslach *et al.* (1996) recognition for employees is associated with feelings of personal achievement and professional efficacy at work. Feelings of non-value that prevail enable disengagement to occur. Likewise Buchanan (1974) and Steers (1977) reiterated that organisations with high levels of recognition integrated into their working days had higher levels of engagement.

Other people's attitude towards Clerical Officers was also seen as a prevalent issue. Due to the nature of the Civil Service it is typically a hierarchical bureaucratic organisation built on a grade structure, being notorious top heavy with management roles. Respondents sought the elimination of the grade structures due to a perception that they created "grade snobbery" with Clerical Officers themselves perceived a lack of respect from higher grades.

### **6.3 Facilitators to Work Engagement**

Empirical studies have signified job resources such as “social support from colleagues and supervisors, performance feedback, skill variety, autonomy and learning opportunities as being positively associated with work engagement” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Parallel findings were found in this study which corresponded with the above.

#### **6.3.1 Management Practices**

As mentioned in the barriers to work engagement, management play a key role in both enabling and sustaining engagement levels. In order to do this the quality of the employment relationship is a vital component. Kahn (1990) initially identified that management styles impacted on employees feeling psychologically safe in their work environment. These supportive managerial relations influenced the safety terms described by Kahn as the availability of trust and support at work. Similarly the current study found that the influence of work place conditions helped in promoting engagement. There is a belief that “organisational support helps increase the three psychological conditions of meaningfulness, availability and safety necessary for initiating engagement” (Pati & Kumar, 2010, p133). The apparent absence of one of the three would lead to disengagement.

Perceived organisational support influences how employees feel about their work and ultimately their perceptions of management. Findings from the study concur with previous studies (CIPD, 2010) that perceived organisational support and attitudes to work have significant relationships with how employees engage at work. Findings suggest that those who perceived their organisation as supportive were prone to higher

levels of engagement. This denotes an increase/decrease in one of the variables significantly impacts to an increase/decrease in the second.

Respondents found that positive management relations could and in some cases did foster work engagement. Effective team work with open communication and trust was found to be a facilitator of engagement among respondents.

These findings are supported by May *et al.* (2004) who found a strong link between engagement and perceptions of supportive supervisor relations in insurance workers. Further explored by Saks (2008) who found that autonomy, supportive managers and feedback all promote engagement, whereas bad management practices can lead to disengagement.

### **6.3.2 Meaningful work**

Respondent's highlighted the importance of meaningful work as an influential facilitator on their engagement levels. Previous studies have simultaneously demonstrated this impact.

Kahn (1990) supported by Lockwood (2007), found that people were more likely to engage in situations that are high on meaningfulness. May *et al.* (2004) supported Kahn's assertion and "found that job fit and job enrichment positively predicts meaningfulness at work" (Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2009, p35). Respondent to the current study reiterated that varied challenging work would facilitate engagement with the ability to use ones initiative.

### **6.3.3 Job Resources**

The literature available on work engagement (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001; Baker *et al.*, 2011; Baker and Demerouti, 2007) has extensively echoed the significant role job

resources play regarding employees abilities to engage at work. Job resources such as autonomy, social support and skill variety are beneficial in a time of high job demands.

A notable finding in this research was that work colleague relationships acted as a facilitator to work engagement among the Clerical Officers. The findings show how the respondents valued the social side to their work. May *et al.* (2001) also found that rewarding co-worker relationships positive predictor of Kahn's (1990) safety element.

#### **6.4 Conclusion**

A pattern that emerged from this survey identifies a lack of recognition and appreciation among staff as a key barrier. There seemed to be a consensus that management failed to recognise the abilities of staff and appreciate their efforts. The main barriers were summarised under the nature of work, management and reward. The main facilitators identified were summarised under management practices, meaningful work and job resources.

The discussion of findings sought to conceptualise the research findings from section five and discuss their relevance in terms of the literature currently available on the construct of work engagement.

## **7. Conclusion**

The aim of this current study was to examine the barriers and facilitators that affect Clerical Officers abilities to engage in the Irish Civil Service. In doing so, the findings sought to contribute to the literature an understanding of the barriers and facilitators that impact on employees levels of work engagement in an Irish context. The research strategy adopted was a quantitative, deductive approach using an in-depth survey among Clerical Officers in the Irish Civil Service. The findings discussed were a representation of the data collated from the survey responses, the results of which were presented using the five themes central to the survey design.

### **7.1 Key Findings**

Key findings central to the five research objectives are detailed as follows:

- Relatively high levels of work engagement
- 65% Cognitively engaged
- 74% Emotionally engaged
- 65% Physically engaged
- 51% displaying Advocacy
- Positive relationship found between emotional and physical engagement
- Positive relationship found between emotional engagement and advocacy
- Cognitive and emotional engagement have a positive relationship with meaningful work
- Overall engagement levels and advocacy have a positive relationship
- Overall engagement and perceived organisational support have a positive relationship

- Perceived organisational support has a significant positive relationship with both work engagement and work attitudes
- Meaningful work and job content impact on work engagement levels
- Since 2008 those aged forty years or older are less engaged
- Since 2008 those with 5 years plus service are less engaged compared to their counterparts with less service.
- Since 2008 51% reported lower engagement levels
- Since 2008 47% reported being more stressed
- Since 2008 73% find it a harder place to work

The findings suggest that engagement is associated with autonomy, positive working environment, meaningful work and reward/recognition. The term engagement is encapsulated by cognitive, emotional and physical engagement. The results revealed that personal demographic variables were unrelated to the work engagement levels of Clerical Officers. The nature of work was found to be an important factor for meaningful work to take place. It was found that when work was perceived as meaningful it influenced attitudes towards work, for example 69% of Clerical Officers felt their work activities were significant and worthwhile.

Similarly, organisational support and attitudes to work were found to be strong predictors of work engagement. Key positive relationships between the survey variables such as perceived organisational support, attitudes to work and job content were all identified to have a moderately significant impact on engagement.

The main barriers Clerical Officers identified were the nature of work, managerial relations and reward. Whilst the main facilitators established were management practices, meaningful work and job resources. Respondents reported lower levels of

engagement since 2008, with 47% reporting higher stress levels and 73% acknowledging it was a harder place to work.

## **7.2 Implications and Significance of Research**

The challenge for the Irish Civil Service going forward will be doing more with fewer resources. Engagement levels proved quite high however, from the findings it can be noted that since 2008 engagement levels fell among employees. The biggest challenge will be increasing and sustaining these engagement levels in the future.

Overall this thesis has contributed to the Irish literature on work engagement, outside of human services occupations, examining a bureaucratic hierarchical organisation. It highlighted the impact of the 2008 economic crisis on workers engagement levels and offers insight into the perceived effects by Clerical Officers of Haddington Road.

## **7.3 Limitations**

The research strategy adopted an in-depth survey through the use of an online tool, Survey Monkey. This was an appropriate strategy since I had limited access to the population. Unfortunately this in itself did pose problems due to the reliance on other people to provide information and with no access to staff I could not guarantee high response rates. I was reliant of the good will of people working as Clerical Officers to take ten minutes of their time to respond to my survey. Due to the small response rate technically my sample was statistically unrepresentative therefore the findings cannot be generalised for every Clerical Officer with the Irish Civil Service, only for the actual respondents.

## **7.4 Recommendations**

Evaluating engagement cannot just be a one off event. Work engagement can change from one task to the next and from one day to the next. It fluctuates, therefore management need to create an understanding of what the barriers are and ultimately the facilitators before strategies to combat and sustain engagement can be put in place. This should be a priority on an annual basis and it will empower employees to become involved knowing that their input can create a difference to their work environment.

Secondly, this is a chance for management to examine the findings and up skill line managers enabling them to sustain employee engagement. Thirdly, departmental rotations could offer employees the opportunity to learn and foster new skills in new areas of the organisation.

And finally a skills analysis might prove a valuable exercise among the Clerical grade to identify any additional skills that may be used on project work or different areas. Promotional opportunities may not be possible at the moment but organisations are currently doing more with fewer resources, which is an ideal time to re-evaluate what resources one already has and work to the advantage of the organisation. One can see from the findings Clerical Officers want added responsibility and are willing to get involved in new tasks.

These findings and recommendations should prove useful and insightful for both senior management and line managers alike. These findings will also be applicable to public sector organisations with a similar makeup of the Civil Service.

## **7.5 Future study**

Future research into a bureaucratic organisation such as the Irish Civil Service would benefit from a bigger sample size. There is the potential to analyse more senior grades within the organisation such as the line managers and supervisor which could prove interesting if results were to be compared. Interviews together with a survey would provide more insightful findings as one could probe further.

