



# An analysis of hot topics in employee engagement research in China

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**Abstract.** Under the background of economic globalization, enterprises are facing unprecedented competitive pressure, and talents play a vital role in enhancing the competitiveness of enterprises. However, some companies often have problems such as lack of motivation for young and highly educated employees. This study takes CNKI as the source, uses CiteSpace software, and uses keywords as node types to carry out visual analysis of employee engagement. The results show that the domestic research on engagement started late. The academic community has been discussing how to improve the motivation of employees at work and make them actively increase their work engagement. Engagement is affected by multiple factors at multiple levels such as individuals, leaders and organizations, but previous studies are limited to a single perspective and ignore the interaction of multiple perspectives. In the future, we should further expand the research perspective and increase the breadth and depth of the research on engagement.

**Keywords:** Employee engagement; Organizational performance; Work enthusiasm

## 1 Research background and purpose

The most valuable resource in the enterprise is talent, is dedicated talent. To achieve long-term development, the core strategy of enterprises is to retain talents and improve employee engagement, so as to maximize the potential of employees. Dedicated employees have high work enthusiasm, positive work spirit and confidence to face various tasks at work. Therefore, ensuring the high engagement of enterprise talents is an important way for enterprises to improve efficiency and sustainable development.

According to Gallup, the global engagement rate is now 13 percent. However, the proportion of engagement in China is only 6%. Now, the new generation of knowledge workers has become the backbone of the development of various industries. Most of them are grass-roots and front-line employees, facing the status quo of boring work content, low innovation and high work intensity. This is in contrast to the character characteristics of the new generation of employees who pursue independence and freedom and advocate self-worth. Based on this perspective, in order to accurately grasp the research hotspot and evolution trend of Chinese scholars on engagement, this paper uses CiteSpace to visually analyze the literature on employee engagement, and reveals

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the influential factors affecting the work engagement of the new generation of knowledge employees, so as to truly realize the sustainable development of employees and enterprises along the effective path of work engagement.

## 2 Related concepts of employee engagement

The concept of engagement was first proposed by American scholar Kahn(1990), who defined engagement as: engaged employees will actively devote themselves to their work, and fully devote themselves in the work process from physiological, cognitive and emotional aspects, so as to bring benefits to the organization and realize their own value <sup>[1]</sup>. Maslach (1999) believes that employee engagement is characterized by high energy at work, ability to get along well with others and focus on work, so as to efficiently complete work tasks. Subsequently, it is proposed that employee engagement consists of three aspects: energy, involvement and efficacy <sup>[2]</sup>. May et al. (2004) believe that employee engagement includes three aspects: employees' own cognition of work, emotions and psychological activities <sup>[3]</sup>. Saks (2006) defined the concept of engagement as consisting of knowledge, emotion and behavior <sup>[4]</sup>. Soane et al. (2012) developed a model of employee engagement, which proposed three requirements including role focus, activation and positive emotion <sup>[5]</sup>. From the perspective of the company to study employee engagement, there are Gallup (Gallup), Hewitt (Harter) and other consulting companies conducted long-term research, and achieved remarkable results. Hewitt Company (1994) defines employee engagement as the degree of intellectual and emotional investment and commitment that employees are willing to make for the organization. Gallup (2001) defines employee engagement as: the organization creates a good working environment for employees, and the employees' psychological identification with the organization and behavioral willingness to work hard for the organization <sup>[6]</sup>. Zeng Hui (2005) believes that employee engagement is a positive attitude towards work of employees who are willing to pay extra energy and time for the development of the enterprise, and believes that engaged employees can withstand greater work pressure <sup>[7]</sup>. Feng Jie (2017) defined employee engagement as an employee who loves his/her job, is able to realize his/her ambition and value in the organization, and is willing to contribute to the development of the organization <sup>[8]</sup>.

## 3 Analysis of hot topics in employee engagement

### 3.1 Engagement keyword contribution analysis

Using CiteSpace software and using keywords as node types, the three groups of c, cc and cv were set to 1,2,20, and the time slice was set to 1 year. The clustering effect of 213 nodes, 308 connections and 0.0136 density was obtained. The co-occurrence map of keywords in engagement research is shown in Figure 1. As can be seen from keyword clustering map, knowledge employees, job performance, job engagement, intrinsic motivation, and influencing factors appear more frequently, indicating that these topics have attracted the focus of scholars. Through the review of the existing literature, it can

be found that Chinese scholars' research on engagement mainly has the following characteristics: first, in terms of research objects, "young employees" and "knowledge employees" are the main; Second, in terms of research content, the influential factors of engagement are relatively hot, such as employees' psychological capital, work pressure, intrinsic motivation and work engagement, etc. At the same time, it also involves the research on organizations, such as leadership style and organizational atmosphere. Third, the selection of outcome variables mainly focuses on innovation performance.

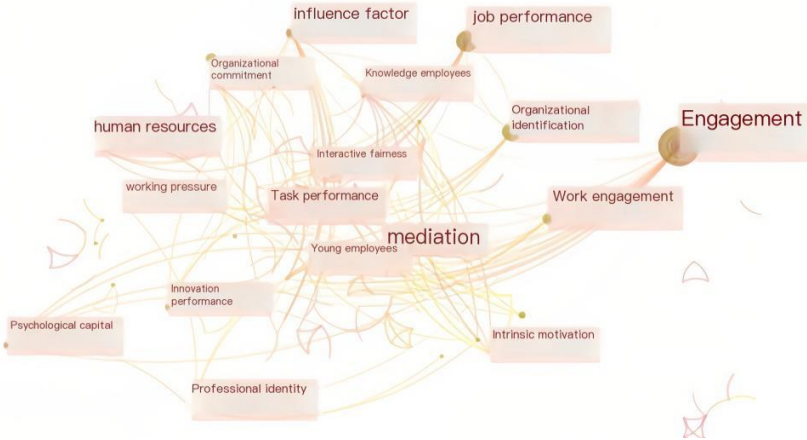


Fig. 1. The keyword co-occurrence map of China's engagement from 2002 to 2023

### 3.2 Keyword cluster analysis of engagement

In the keyword clustering map in Figure 2., nine major keywords are closely related to each other, which is suitable for cluster analysis. It can be seen from the clustering results that  $ModularityQ=0.7879>0.3$ , indicating that the clustering structure of this network is significant.  $MeanSihouette=0.9788>0.7$ , indicating that the literature in the cluster is very homogenous and the reliability of the clustering results is very high. In the clustering graph, different clusters such as engagement, psychological contract, psychological capital, intrinsic motivation, job performance, influencing factors, and human resources are displayed, and hot issues concerned by scholars are found, and it can be seen that there are overlapping keywords contained in each cluster.

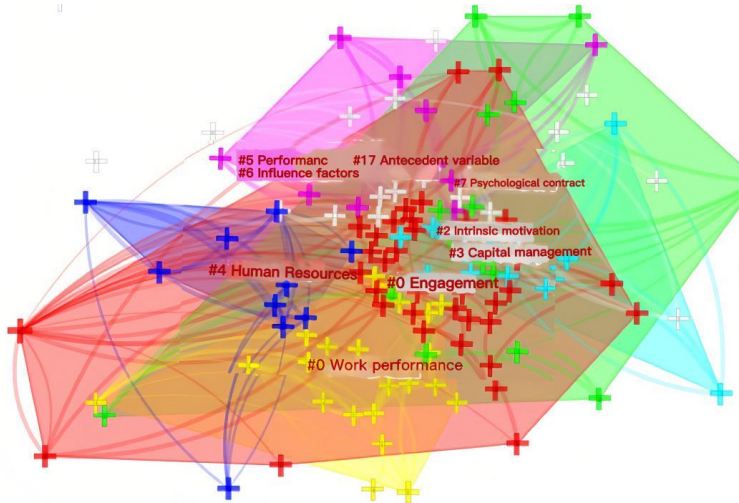


Fig. 2. Keyword clustering map of engagement from 2002 to 2023

### 3.3 Influencing factors of employee engagement

The improvement of employees' job engagement can promote them to keep working hard for a long time and reduce the trend of job-hopping after their personal performance is improved. Therefore, the academic community has been discussing and studying how to improve the enthusiasm of employees at work and make them actively increase their engagement to work. Through the cluster analysis of engagement keywords, from the perspective of research content, the core of the research is mainly focused on how to improve engagement. In recent years, through theoretical exploration and empirical testing, many scholars at home and abroad have dug out the factors that have different degrees of influence on employees' work engagement at different levels, and constantly supplemented and enriched the theoretical model of the occurrence of work engagement. Based on the literature review of employee engagement, this paper summarizes and collates the researches on the influencing factors of job engagement at home and abroad, and further supplements and summarizes the representative ante-dependent variables related to job engagement in a tabular form. Due to the limited space, part of the collating contents are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Influencing factors of employee engagement

Influencing factor	Measurement method	Type of study/sample
Pay gap	Gallup's employee engagement scale	260 organizational employees
Organizational values	Gallup's employee engagement scale	276 employees from five companies were studied
Job autonomy	scale compiled of by Kirmeyer, Shirom	795 employees of the company were studied

At the leadership level, through empirical research, Zhou Yu and Fang Zhicheng (2018) found that inclusive leadership style can influence employee engagement by shaping employees' psychological capital. Job embeddedness moderates the influence of psychological capital on employee engagement<sup>[9]</sup>. Based on social cognitive theory and social comparison theory, Wang Dongdong and Qian Zhichao (2017) show that leader member exchange has a significant positive impact on employee engagement, in which employee self-efficacy plays an intermediary role<sup>[10]</sup>. At the organizational level, based on incentive theory and social exchange theory, Qiu Min and Hu Bei (2015) took 421 organizational employees as research objects and concluded that both intrinsic and extrinsic incentives have significant positive impacts on employee engagement<sup>[11]</sup>. Zhang Peifeng (2007) took 276 employees from five companies as research objects and found that organizational value is related to employee total engagement through empirical research<sup>[12]</sup>. Tao Jianhong and Liu Yaya (2021), through a questionnaire survey of employees, find that horizontal pay gap is significantly negatively correlated with employee engagement, while vertical pay gap is significantly positively correlated with employee engagement, in which sense of organizational support plays a moderating role<sup>[13]</sup>. At the individual level of employees, Liu Xin and Yang Dongtao (2017) concluded through empirical analysis that employees' perceived job autonomy positively affects their engagement, and selfmonitoring and distribution equity play a moderating role<sup>[14]</sup>. To sum up, the factors that affect engagement can be divided into personal factors (such as employee initiative, psychological capital, etc.), leadership factors (leadership style), and organizational factors (such as organizational values, working environment, organizational support, internal/external incentives, etc.). Engagement is affected by multiple factors at multiple levels, but previous studies are limited to a single perspective and ignore the interaction of multiple perspectives<sup>[15]</sup>.

## 4 Conclusion and prospect

### 4.1 Research conclusion

Using CiteSpace software, this paper makes a visual analysis of the literature, keywords and research trends on employee engagement in CNKI from 2002 to 2023, and finds that: First, the number of published articles on employee engagement is small, and the research content of scholars is relatively simple. And compared with foreign research on engagement started relatively late. Second, the research content of Chinese scholars on engagement mainly focuses on the unified symmetry assumption of causal effect in linear regression, without considering the causal asymmetry of the triggering mechanism of job engagement, so that the path that triggers employee job engagement and the path that triggers non-job engagement are not simply opposite. In other words, the reasons for non-job engagement cannot be directly deduced from the reasons for job engagement. Third, scholars have found that the influencing factors of job engagement in existing studies can be roughly divided into three levels: organizational level, leadership level and individual level.

## 4.2 Research prospect

At present, domestic and foreign studies on the anthems of employee work engagement mainly focus on the relationship between a single variable and employee work engagement. However, it is impossible for a single factor to play a role in employee work engagement. Future studies can be conducted from multiple perspectives, considering the causal asymmetry of the triggering mechanism of work engagement. In addition, cross-disciplinary research and cooperation need to be strengthened. Through visual analysis of employee engagement, it is found that there is less cooperation between authors in previous studies. Engagement problems not only appear in traditional enterprises, but also exist in government agencies and other social organizations. In the future, in the study of engagement, we should study how to improve employee engagement from multiple perspectives.

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