



EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES AND PERFORMANCE OF NUT PROCESSING COMPANIES IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Employee engagement is a pivotal element influencing organizational success, yet its specific impact within various industries remains underexplored. This study investigated the influence of employee engagement practices on the performance of nut processing companies in Kenya. With the global emphasis on enhancing employee satisfaction to improve organizational outcomes, this research focuses on key practices such as professional development, and employee wellness programs. The theories that informed this study are Human Capital Theory, and Investment Theory of Employee Motivation. The study adopted a descriptive research design, targeting management employees in 28 nut processing companies in Kenya. The target population comprised 252 individuals in top, middle, and lower management, with a sample size of 153 selected through stratified random sampling. Primary data was collected using a structured questionnaire, employing a five-point Likert scale for responses. The pilot test involved a sample of 15 respondents, which represents 10% of the total sample size. The results from the pilot test were not used in the main study, and the respondents who participate in the pilot test were excluded from the final research to avoid any potential bias. Data analysis involved both descriptive and inferential statistics, using SPSS software. The analysis included measures such as mean, standard deviation, and percentages, while inferential analysis were conducted through Pearson correlation and multiple regression to test the strength and nature of relationships between the variables. The pilot study confirmed that the research instrument is valid and reliable for assessing employee engagement practices and firm performance. A total of 140 valid responses were analyzed, yielding a response rate of 91.5%. Regression analysis revealed that professional development ($B = 0.348$), employee wellness ($B = 0.330$), had significant positive effects on firm performance. The study concludes that employee engagement practices—particularly professional development—are critical drivers of organizational success. It recommends that nut processing companies invest in targeted training programs, enhance employee wellness initiatives, to boost performance and competitiveness.

Key Words: Employee Engagement Practices, Performance of Nut Processing Companies, Professional Development, Employee Wellness Programs

Background of the Study

In people's day to day activities world over, their core ambition is to work towards a better-quality life. Quality life here is represented by various activities that lead to an individual's wellbeing. Such activities may include; physical activities, financial security, emotional stability and spiritual nourishment. Scholars opine that, human wellbeing has been an historic development and has been defined differently by various researchers and health bodies. According to Totty, (2020), wellness is the result of the accomplishment of an individual's basic needs as well as set plans, goals and life's objectives. According to World Health Organization, (2019) wellness is the state of complete physical, mental and social health as well as the absence of a disease in an individual. While the National Wellness Institute, (2019) further, defines wellness as the process of awareness and making choices towards a more successful way of life. Nonetheless further state that there has been lack of agreement with regard to the best definition of wellness.

Employee engagement refers to the level of commitment, motivation, and emotional connection that employees have toward their work, their team, and the organization as a whole (Bardoel, & De, 2019). Engaged employees are enthusiastic about their jobs, dedicated to achieving organizational goals, and are more likely to invest discretionary effort to contribute to the success of the company. Employee engagement is a critical factor in fostering a positive work environment, improving productivity, and retaining top talent (Mulei, 2020). According to Chan, (2021) organizations are increasingly adopting the wellbeing and health aspect of their employees. More specifically, International non-governmental organizations (NGOs) value their employees to a great extent. They perceive their employees as their most important resource and comprehend the need of having a positive, supportive, and strong surrounding so as to hold staff, draw out the best in every worker and keep up high resolve and efficiency. It is for this reason that most employees in the public sector fight to get a position in the non-governmental sector.

According to a recent study, 85% of corporate companies have implemented the corporate wellness programs to enhance the wellbeing of their employees. According to Foster and Miller, (2019) a wellness program is a method of advocating for best health maintenance rather than correction of unexpected sicknesses. Depending on the organizational structure and culture, these programs include; exercise programs, health history, habit surveys, nutritional and diet programs, simple biometric screenings such as basic blood tests, advanced screening for diseases such as cancer, exercise programs and training on protecting and improving health.

The idea of wellbeing of employees at work brings about various merits to associations of having a healthy workforce. Consequently, the elements of employee wellness at work is essential in the comprehension of the various spaces that influence the personal satisfaction grinding away. Research has been embraced by financial experts, sociologists and clinicians into understanding individuals' feeling of prosperity or pain. The better treatment of worker prosperity may give numerous focal points to an organization to accomplish expected execution levels. In other hand, give long term favorable position to accomplish corporate objectives

The nut processing industry plays a crucial role in the agricultural sector and the broader economy. It provides livelihoods to many small-scale farmers and contributes to export revenues. Despite its potential, the industry is hampered by various operational challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, limited access to finance, and the need for skilled labor. Improving employee engagement in this sector is seen as a strategic approach to enhancing performance, ensuring higher product quality, and maintaining competitiveness in the global market.

Statement of the Problem

The nut processing industry in Kenya has significant potential for growth, with the ability to contribute substantially to the country's economy through exports and employment creation. Despite this potential, the industry is plagued by numerous challenges that adversely affect its performance, including operational inefficiencies, low productivity, and high employee turnover (Ng'eno, 2020). A critical factor that remains inadequately addressed is the role of employee engagement in driving the performance of nut processing companies (Kazimoto, 2021). Employee engagement practices, such as training and development, recognition and rewards, effective communication, and employee participation in decision-making, have been shown to significantly improve organizational performance in various industries worldwide. For instance, globally engaged employees are 17% more productive than their disengaged counterparts, as reported by the Global Engagement Index (2023). However, within Kenya's nut processing sector, there is a significant gap in understanding how these practices influence critical organizational metrics such as employee motivation, productivity, and overall company performance (Kibe, 2019).

According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), the manufacturing sector, which includes nut processing, recorded a growth rate of only 3.2% in 2022, far below the 5.6% growth rate of the agricultural sector. This stagnation is partly attributed to human resource management challenges, particularly low employee engagement and high turnover. A 2021 survey by the Federation of Kenya Employers (FKE) found that employee turnover rates in the manufacturing sector were as high as 22%, significantly exceeding the national average of 15%. This high turnover rate is closely linked to low employee engagement and satisfaction within the sector. Additionally, the Global Engagement Index (2023) reports that only 25% of employees in Kenya's manufacturing sector, including those in the nut processing industry, are fully engaged at work, compared to the global average of 34%. This low engagement level directly correlates with reduced productivity and increased absenteeism, leading to poor overall company performance and decreased competitiveness. Research suggests that companies with high employee engagement outperform those with low engagement by 21% in profitability (Gallup, 2022).

Although various studies have examined the effects of employee engagement on organizational performance, there is a lack of research specifically addressing the Kenyan nut processing industry. For instance, Edwar et al. (2021) explored the effects of leadership, employee engagement, and job satisfaction on employee performance in Indonesia. Kazimoto (2021) investigated the relationship between employee engagement and organizational performance in retail enterprises in Uganda, while Phina, Ogechukwu, and Shallom (2021) studied organizational climate and employee engagement in commercial banks in Nigeria. Githinji and Muli (2019) conducted research on employee engagement strategies at Air Kenya Limited, examining their impact on employee performance. However, none of these studies adequately addressed the joint impact of key engagement factors such as professional development, employee wellness,. Furthermore, no studies to date have specifically focused on the performance of Kenya's nut processing companies. This study sought to fill these critical gaps by assessing the influence of employee engagement practices on the performance of nut processing companies in Kenya.

General Objective

The general objective of the study was to assess the influence of employee engagement practices on performance of nut processing companies in Kenya

Specific Objectives

The study was guided by the following specific objectives;

- i. To examine the influence of professional development on performance of nut processing companies in Kenya
- ii. To determine the influence of employee wellness programs on performance of nut processing companies in Kenya

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

Human Capital Theory

The proponent of human capital theory is Schultz (1961) but was developed extensively by Becker (1964). Schultz (1961) in an article entitled "Investment in Human Capital" introduces his theory of Human Capital. Schultz argues that both knowledge and skills are a form of capital, and that this capital is a product of deliberate enterprise growth. Therefore, an organization should invest in people through education and training (Alhamwan, & Norazuwabt, 2019). According to Schultz acquisition of knowledge and skills is compared to acquiring the means of production. The difference in earnings between people relates to the differences in access to education and health. In the theory Schultz argues that investment in education and training leads to an increase in human productivity, which in turn leads to a positive rate of return and hence of growth of organizations (Amah, & Ahiauzu, 2019).

Human Capital Theory, therefore emphasizes the importance of investing in employees' skills, knowledge, and abilities through professional development. The theory supports the idea that enhancing employees' human capital leads to increased productivity, innovation, and overall performance within an organization (Amah & Ahiauzu, 2019). In the case of nut processing companies in Kenya, the theory will guide will guide examining professional development through training and educational opportunities directly impacts employee engagement by making employees feel valued and empowered.

Investment Theory of Employee Motivation

The "Investment Theory of Employee Motivation" posits that organizations can achieve increased employee motivation, productivity, and loyalty by investing in the well-being of their workforce. Developed by Jeffrey Pfeffer and John F. Veiga (1986) this theory emphasizes the significance of organizations actively supporting and recognizing the holistic needs of their employees. Pfeffer and Veiga's work in organizational behavior and management has contributed to the understanding of the reciprocal relationship between employer investments and employee commitment (Chukwuemeka, 2020).

Employee wellness programs, as practical applications of the Investment Theory, exemplify a tangible commitment to employees' physical, mental, and emotional health. By offering resources such as gym memberships, mental health counseling, stress management workshops, and flexible work arrangements, employers convey a genuine dedication to their employees' overall well-being. This investment is perceived by employees as a form of acknowledgment and support, fostering a sense of loyalty and commitment (Ekere, & Amah, 2022).

The Investment Theory of Employee Motivation, links employee wellness programs to improved employee engagement and performance. The theory posits that organizations that invest in the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of their employees benefit from increased loyalty, motivation, and productivity (Chukwuemeka, 2020). This study will use the theory to explain wellness programs such as mental health support, stress management workshops, and physical fitness initiatives and how they demonstrate the company's commitment to employee well-being. This, in turn, fosters a sense of belonging and motivation among employees, resulting in higher engagement and better company performance.

Conceptual Framework

Orodho (2019) defines a conceptual framework as a graphical or a diagrammatical model of presentation of the relationship between variables in the study. It is a road map that the study intends to follow with the aim of looking for answers to the problems raised by the research questions.

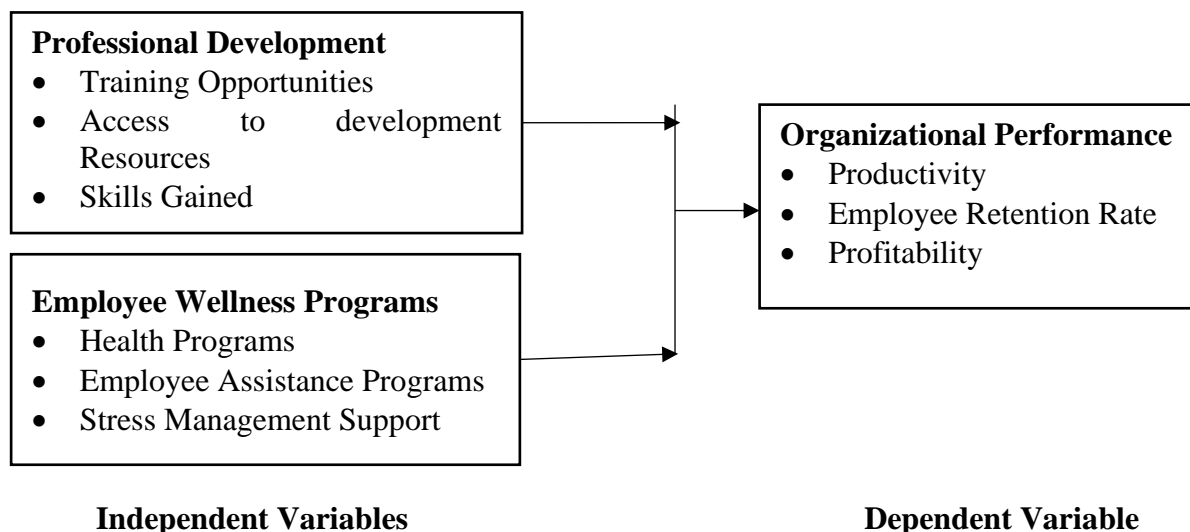


Figure 2. 1: Conceptual Framework

Professional Development

Professional development encompasses a variety of programs and opportunities aimed at enhancing the skills, knowledge, and abilities of employees. According to Watson et al. (2021), professional development is not just a benefit but a strategic investment in the workforce that ensures employees remain competent and competitive. This continuous learning fosters an environment of growth, which is critical for both employee satisfaction and the long-term success of the organization. Shaw and Chung (2019) emphasize that professional development initiatives have become increasingly important as they contribute to employee retention by providing career progression and personal growth opportunities.

Training opportunities are a significant aspect of professional development. Nelson and Decker (2020) highlight that structured training programs not only address specific skill gaps but also build employee confidence and self-efficacy. These programs can take various forms, from formal in-house training sessions to external workshops and courses. The immediate result is an increase in productivity as employees apply their newly acquired skills. Kyndt and Baert (2020) further argue that providing access to development resources, such as e-learning platforms and mentorship, contributes to a culture of continuous improvement. Employees who can readily access these resources are more likely to stay engaged and committed to their work.

The impact of professional development on organizational performance is profound. Lee and Hannum (2019) assert that skills gained from these development programs translate directly to enhanced efficiency and innovation within the workplace. Employees who perceive their organization as one that invests in their growth are more motivated, a point reiterated by Zhou and Kim (2021). This increased motivation often leads to greater work quality, reduced turnover, and stronger company loyalty. Clark et al. (2022) found that companies prioritizing professional development initiatives consistently report better operational results and an enhanced reputation, which ultimately supports sustainable growth and competitive advantage.

Employee Wellness Programs

Employee wellness programs are initiatives that organizations implement to enhance the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of their staff. These programs have become a critical part of modern HR strategies as they directly impact job satisfaction and productivity. According to Sonnentag and Fritz (2019), comprehensive wellness programs that address various aspects of health not only improve individual well-being but also create a supportive work environment. Crawford and McNair (2020) argue that such programs, which include health screenings, gym memberships, and wellness workshops, contribute significantly to employee morale and retention.

Health-focused initiatives, such as regular health check-ups and fitness memberships, are key components of wellness programs. Jones et al. (2020) found that employees who participate in health programs often show improved physical health and reduced absenteeism. This leads to increased productivity and a more positive workplace atmosphere. Furthermore, employee assistance programs (EAPs) that offer mental health support and counseling services have been shown to alleviate stress and improve job satisfaction (Chopra et al., 2021). These programs are essential, especially in high-pressure industries, as they help employees manage stress and maintain a work-life balance.

Stress management support is an integral part of employee wellness. Demerouti et al. (2020) state that organizations that teach stress reduction techniques and provide access to resources such as relaxation spaces and workshops see marked improvements in employee focus and engagement. Gordon and Rilett (2021) emphasize that such initiatives are not just beneficial for individual employees but also for the company as a whole. A workforce that feels supported and valued is less likely to experience burnout, leading to higher productivity and lower turnover rates. Chen et al. (2019) reinforce this by noting that employees who perceive their well-being as a priority tend to display greater loyalty and contribute more meaningfully to the organization.

Organizational Performance

Firm performance is commonly defined as the extent to which an organization achieves its objectives in terms of productivity, profitability, employee retention, and overall competitiveness. According to Kaplan and Norton (2020), firm performance encompasses both financial metrics such as revenue growth and return on investment, as well as non-financial metrics like customer satisfaction, innovation, and employee engagement. Firm performance is crucial for organizational sustainability as it reflects the company's ability to meet its strategic goals and adapt to changing market conditions. Tangen (2021) further emphasizes that evaluating firm performance is essential for understanding how well an organization can maintain its competitive advantage in a dynamic business environment.

Several key indicators can be used to assess firm performance, including productivity, employee retention rate, and profitability. Productivity refers to the efficiency with which an organization converts inputs into outputs. According to Chen et al. (2020), high productivity levels indicate that a company is utilizing its resources effectively to generate products or services. Profitability, on the other hand, measures the financial health of a firm, capturing its ability to generate income relative to its expenses (Delen et al., 2021). Higher profitability suggests that the company's strategies and operations are aligned effectively to maximize income.

Employee retention is another critical aspect of firm performance, as retaining skilled employees contributes to organizational stability and reduces recruitment and training costs. According to Harris and Fleming (2021), companies that have high retention rates often benefit from sustained productivity, stronger team dynamics, and improved institutional knowledge. Moreover, high employee retention is frequently linked to a positive organizational culture and

strong employee engagement, which are pivotal for long-term success. Retention not only saves costs but also boosts morale and enhances customer satisfaction through consistent service delivery.

The determinants of firm performance are multifaceted, encompassing both internal and external factors. Internal factors include strategic management practices, operational efficiency, leadership quality, and employee engagement. According to a study by Werner and Baliga (2021), firms that implement effective management practices tend to outperform their peers, as these practices create a structured and supportive environment conducive to high performance. Leadership quality, as noted by Northouse (2022), is another significant determinant that shapes organizational culture and drives strategic initiatives, influencing firm performance directly.

Employee engagement plays a crucial role in determining firm performance. Schaufeli and Bakker (2020) found that engaged employees are more productive, show higher levels of commitment, and are less likely to leave the organization. These factors contribute to overall stability and improved performance metrics. Furthermore, professional development and employee wellness programs have been shown to indirectly enhance performance by fostering a satisfied and motivated workforce (Gordon et al., 2022). When employees feel their needs are met—whether through skill enhancement, health support, or meaningful participation in decision-making—they are more likely to contribute positively to the organization's goals.

Measuring firm performance is not without its challenges. According to Johnson and Scholes (2020), many organizations rely on financial metrics alone, which do not capture the full picture of performance. Non-financial metrics, such as employee engagement and customer satisfaction, are equally important but can be harder to quantify. Delen et al. (2021) suggest that adopting a balanced scorecard approach, which considers multiple performance indicators, can provide a more comprehensive assessment of a firm's success. Moreover, in the context of the nut processing industry in Kenya, external factors such as economic conditions, regulatory policies, and market trends can also impact performance, making it essential for companies to adopt adaptive strategies.

Empirical Review

Professional Development and Firm Performance

Watson et al. (2021) conducted a study to examine how such programs influence productivity. Rooted in Human Capital Theory, which views professional development as an investment in employees' skills, the study used a quasi-experimental design. It targeted 300 employees in the finance sector, with stratified random sampling ensuring comprehensive representation. Data collection was through pre- and post-training surveys, analyzed using paired t-tests. The results showed a 20% increase in productivity after training interventions. The authors concluded that professional development has a significant positive effect on productivity and recommended regular training programs.

Shaw and Chung (2019) explored 'The Role of Professional Development in Employee Retention in the Manufacturing Industry', basing their work on the Motivation-Hygiene Theory, which posits that opportunities for growth motivate employees. Using a mixed-methods approach, they targeted 500 employees, employing cluster sampling. Data collection involved focus groups and surveys analyzed with regression analysis and qualitative tools like NVivo. Findings showed a 15% decrease in turnover rates among employees who received professional development opportunities. The study concluded that targeted skill development helps retain employees and suggested incorporating these initiatives into HR policies.

Nelson and Decker (2020) investigated 'Training Programs and Their Impact on Employee Job Satisfaction' using Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which highlights the importance of

professional development in fulfilling employees' psychological needs. The cross-sectional study included 400 employees across various sectors selected through simple random sampling. Structured questionnaires were used for data collection, and results were analyzed with descriptive and inferential statistics. Job satisfaction was found to be 30% higher among participants of training programs. The study concluded that training enhances job satisfaction and recommended its integration into regular HR practices.

Kyndt and Baert (2020) studied 'Access to Development Resources and Employee Engagement' and based their work on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, emphasizing how development resources impact engagement. A correlational research design was used, with a sample of 250 SME employees chosen through convenience sampling. Surveys were used for data collection and analyzed with multiple regression. The study found a moderate positive correlation ($r=0.55$) between access to development resources and engagement. The study concluded that access to these resources bolsters engagement and recommended better resource allocation for development programs.

Lee and Hannum (2019) conducted a study titled 'Professional Development and Innovation in Tech Companies', rooted in the Innovation Diffusion Theory, to explore how skill development impacts innovative capabilities. An exploratory case study design was applied, involving 150 employees from tech firms chosen through purposeful sampling. In-depth interviews were conducted, and thematic analysis was used for data interpretation. Findings indicated a 25% increase in innovative solutions attributed to professional development efforts. The study concluded that continuous upskilling fosters innovation and recommended periodic professional development workshops.

Employee Wellness Programs and Firm Performance

Sonnentag and Fritz (2019) examined 'The Influence of Wellness Programs on Job Performance' using the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, which suggests that wellness programs help conserve employees' energy for job tasks. The longitudinal study included 300 corporate employees selected through stratified sampling. Data were collected via surveys and performance reviews, analyzed with repeated-measures ANOVA. The study showed a 15% increase in job performance after wellness programs were implemented. The researchers concluded that wellness initiatives improve job performance and recommended that organizations implement comprehensive wellness strategies.

Crawford and McNair (2020) explored 'Employee Wellness Programs and Absenteeism' using the Social Support Theory, which focuses on workplace support's role in employee well-being. This case study targeted 250 healthcare workers chosen through purposive sampling. Data collection included interviews and surveys, analyzed through content analysis and descriptive statistics. Findings indicated a 10% reduction in absenteeism post-implementation of wellness programs. The study concluded that wellness initiatives reduce absenteeism and recommended sustained investment in employee health programs.

Jones et al. (2020) conducted a study titled 'The Role of Health Programs in Employee Productivity' based on the Demand-Control Model, linking workplace health initiatives to reduced stress and improved control. Using a descriptive survey design, the study involved 400 manufacturing employees selected through simple random sampling. Data collection was done via surveys, analyzed with correlation analysis. The findings revealed a positive correlation ($r=0.48$) between health programs and productivity. The study concluded that health initiatives enhance productivity and recommended routine health assessments.

Chopra et al. (2021) studied 'The Effect of Mental Health Support on Job Satisfaction' using the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model. A cross-sectional survey design included 200 tech firm employees chosen through snowball sampling. Data were gathered through surveys and analyzed using SEM. Results showed that job satisfaction increased by 22% when mental

health support was provided. The study concluded that mental health support is essential for job satisfaction and recommended periodic mental wellness workshops.

Demerouti et al. (2020) explored 'Stress Management and Employee Engagement' through the lens of the Effort-Recovery Model, which highlights stress recovery as crucial for maintaining engagement. A mixed-methods design included 350 employees from various industries chosen via cluster sampling. Data collection combined surveys and interviews, analyzed with both thematic and quantitative methods. Engagement levels were found to increase by 18% when stress management techniques were employed. The study concluded that stress management supports higher engagement and recommended integrating stress management training into organizational routines.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive research design. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2019), a descriptive design involves collecting data to test hypotheses or to answer questions about the current status of the subject being studied. In this study, the target population consists of nut processing companies in Kenya. According to the Kenya Association of Manufacturers (KAM) Report, 2023, there are 28 such companies operating in the country. The unit of analysis for this study was the nut processing companies themselves, as the research focuses on understanding how employee engagement practices affect their overall performance. The unit of observation was the management employees working within these companies. The study's sample size was reached at using Krejcie and Morgan sample size determination formula (Russell, 2019).

Table 1: Sample Size

Category	Target Population	Sample Size
Top management employees	28	17
Middle level management employees	84	51
Lower management employees	140	85
Total	252	153

Source: Author (2024)

The 153 respondents were chosen with the help of stratified random sampling technique. Primary data was used in this study. Greener (2019) indicates that primary data is made up of first-hand information that has not been processed or analyzed. A questionnaire which is a form of quantitative data collection tool was used to collect primary data. The study's primary data was obtained using semi-structured questionnaires. Quantitative and qualitative data was generated from the closed-ended and open-ended questions, respectively. Qualitative data was analysed on thematic basis and the findings provided in a narrative form. Inferential and descriptive statistics were employed for analysis of quantitative data with the assistance of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 25). Descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution, mean (measure of dispersion), standard deviation, and percentages was used. Inferential data analysis was conducted by use of Pearson correlation coefficient and multiple regression analysis. Correlation was used to test the strength and the direction of the relationship between the dependent and the independent variables. The relationship between the study variables were tested using multivariate regression models.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The study targeted a total of 153 respondents drawn from top, middle, and lower management levels in nut processing companies in Kenya. Out of these, 140 questionnaires were correctly completed and returned, resulting in a response rate of 91.5%. This is considered excellent for

survey-based research and provides a strong basis for analysis. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), a response rate of 50% is adequate, 60% is good, and above 70% is very good for survey research.

Descriptive Analysis

This section presents the descriptive statistics of the study variables as perceived by the respondents. The key variables examined include Professional Development, and Employee Wellness Programs. Each variable was measured using seven statements drawn directly from the questionnaire, with responses rated on a five-point Likert scale where 1 represents Strongly Disagree and 5 represents Strongly Agree. The analysis provides the mean scores and standard deviations. The mean scores reflect the respondents' level of agreement with each statement, while the standard deviations indicate the extent of variation in their responses. To guide the interpretation of these results, the following scale was used: a mean score between 1.00 and 1.80 indicates Strong Disagreement, 1.81 to 2.60 indicates Disagreement, 2.61 to 3.50 represents a Neutral position, 3.51 to 4.20 indicates Agreement, and a mean score between 4.21 and 5.00 suggests Strong Agreement with the statement. The findings provide an understanding of how employees in the nut processing companies perceive the various engagement practices. Higher mean scores suggest strong positive perceptions of the specific engagement aspects, while lower scores point to areas that may require attention or improvement.

Professional Development

The study sought to examine the influence of professional development on performance of nut processing companies in Kenya. This variable measured the extent of training, resource accessibility, and alignment of professional growth with employee career aspirations. Table 2 presents the findings obtained.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on Professional Development

Statement	Mean	Std Dev
My organization provides adequate training opportunities for skill development.	4.312	0.589
I have access to development resources necessary for my role.	4.278	0.612
The training I receive helps me perform my job more effectively.	4.290	0.595
Professional development programs are relevant to my career goals.	4.301	0.606
I am satisfied with the professional growth opportunities provided by my organization.	4.265	0.598
The organization invests in workshops and courses that improve job performance.	4.245	0.630
There are opportunities for career advancement in my organization.	4.298	0.599
Aggregate Score	4.284	0.604

The descriptive analysis of professional development indicates that respondents rated the provision of adequate training opportunities for skill development the highest, with a mean score of 4.312 (SD = 0.589). This suggests that employees strongly believe their organizations prioritize equipping them with essential skills for job effectiveness. Opportunities for career advancement closely followed with a mean of 4.298 (SD = 0.599), reflecting that employees perceive a clear path for professional growth within their organizations. The effectiveness of training in enhancing job performance was also positively rated at 4.290 (SD = 0.595), implying that employees find the training directly applicable and beneficial in their daily tasks.

Professional development programs aligning with career goals were rated at 4.301 (SD = 0.606), indicating that most respondents find the programs meaningful and supportive of their long-term aspirations. Access to development resources necessary for job roles scored a mean

of 4.278 (SD = 0.612), showing that resources are generally available but may vary across departments. Satisfaction with professional growth opportunities was slightly lower at 4.265 (SD = 0.598), suggesting moderate contentment but hinting at potential areas for enhancement. The lowest-rated aspect was the organization's investment in workshops and courses that improve job performance, with a mean score of 4.245 (SD = 0.630), indicating that while investment exists, there might be room to increase or diversify learning opportunities.

The aggregate mean score of 4.284 (SD = 0.604) reflects strong agreement that professional development is well-supported within the nut processing companies, enhancing employees' skills and career growth prospects. These findings align with Watson et al. (2021), who reported a 20% increase in productivity following training interventions, confirming the positive impact of continuous professional development. Similarly, Nelson and Decker (2020) found that participation in training programs increased job satisfaction by 30%, supporting the notion that access to relevant development opportunities boosts both performance and morale, as echoed by the respondents in this study.

Employee Wellness Programs

The second objective of the study was to determine the influence of employee wellness programs on performance of nut processing companies in Kenya. Wellness programs were assessed on their capacity to support employee well-being, health, and work-life balance. Table 3 presents summary of findings obtained.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics on Employee Wellness

Statement	Mean	Std Dev
My organization offers programs that promote physical health.	4.187	0.645
Employee wellness initiatives have reduced my work-related stress.	4.154	0.663
I have access to mental health support when needed.	4.201	0.651
The organization encourages work-life balance through wellness programs.	4.174	0.648
Wellness programs contribute to my overall job satisfaction.	4.167	0.651
Wellness initiatives have improved my productivity at work.	4.198	0.632
The organization provides workshops on stress management and relaxation techniques.	4.185	0.640
Aggregate Score	4.181	0.647

The descriptive analysis of employee wellness programs shows that access to mental health support received the highest mean score of 4.201 (SD = 0.651), indicating that employees generally agree their organizations recognize the importance of mental health and provide relevant support when needed. Wellness initiatives contributing to productivity followed closely with a mean of 4.198 (SD = 0.632), suggesting that employees perceive a positive link between wellness programs and their performance at work. Programs promoting physical health were rated at 4.187 (SD = 0.645), reflecting the presence of health-focused initiatives though with room for strengthening.

Workshops on stress management and relaxation techniques scored a mean of 4.185 (SD = 0.640), showing that while such programs exist, they may not be consistently impactful across all departments. The reduction of work-related stress through wellness initiatives was rated at 4.154 (SD = 0.663), indicating that while some employees feel less stressed, others might not fully benefit from existing programs. Wellness programs contributing to job satisfaction scored slightly lower at 4.167 (SD = 0.651), suggesting moderate satisfaction but signaling an opportunity to enhance these programs further. The organization's encouragement of work-life

balance through wellness programs had the lowest mean score at 4.174 (SD = 0.648), indicating that work-life balance initiatives exist but may need strengthening.

The aggregate mean score of 4.181 (SD = 0.647) reflects overall positive perceptions of employee wellness initiatives, though the scores are comparatively moderate, signaling potential areas for improvement. These findings align with Sonnentag and Fritz (2019), who reported a 15% increase in job performance following the implementation of wellness programs, confirming that wellness initiatives can enhance productivity. Similarly, Chopra et al. (2021) found a 22% increase in job satisfaction when mental health support was provided, supporting this study's findings that accessible mental health programs contribute significantly to employee well-being and performance.

Firm Performance

The general objective of the study was to assess the influence of employee engagement practices on performance of nut processing companies in Kenya. Respondents were therefore asked their perception of the firm's performance. They were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement. Table 4 presents the findings.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics on Firm Performance

Statement	Mean	Std Dev
The company has shown an increase in productivity over the past year.	4.290	0.595
Employee retention rates have improved due to better workplace practices.	4.245	0.630
The organization's profitability has increased recently.	4.265	0.612
The quality of work output has improved in my department.	4.278	0.599
Overall, I believe the company is performing well compared to industry standards.	4.301	0.606
The organization meets its strategic objectives consistently.	4.254	0.634
The company maintains a high standard of employee satisfaction and engagement.	4.287	0.601
Aggregate Score	4.274	0.617

The descriptive analysis of firm performance shows that employees rated the company's overall performance compared to industry standards the highest, with a mean score of 4.301 (SD = 0.606). This indicates strong confidence in the company's competitiveness within the industry. Improvement in the quality of work output in departments followed with a mean of 4.278 (SD = 0.599), reflecting that employees observe better work standards and operational efficiency.

The perception that the company maintains high employee satisfaction and engagement scored 4.287 (SD = 0.601), suggesting that employees feel positively about workplace morale and organizational commitment. A mean score of 4.290 (SD = 0.595) was recorded for increased productivity over the past year, confirming perceived improvement in organizational output. Profitability increases were rated at 4.265 (SD = 0.612), indicating optimism about the financial performance of the company.

Consistent achievement of strategic objectives was rated 4.254 (SD = 0.634), showing moderate confidence in the organization's ability to meet its long-term goals. Employee retention improvements due to better workplace practices were slightly lower at 4.245 (SD = 0.630), indicating positive retention but pointing to a potential area for sustained focus.

The aggregate mean score of 4.274 (SD = 0.617) confirms overall agreement that the firm is performing well in terms of productivity, profitability, employee engagement, and strategic achievements. These findings align with Jones et al. (2020), who reported a positive correlation

between health programs and productivity, emphasizing that well-executed engagement practices contribute to overall performance. Additionally, the results resonate with Hammond and Tanner (2022), who found that involving employees in decision-making improved job performance by 15%, further reinforcing the link between engagement strategies and firm success.

Correlation Analysis

The Pearson correlation coefficient was used to assess the strength and direction of the relationship between the independent variables (Professional Development, Employee Wellness,) and the dependent variable (Firm Performance). To interpret the correlation coefficients, the study adopted the scale by Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), which categorizes values as follows: 0.00 – 0.19: Very weak relationship, 0.20 – 0.39: Weak relationship, 0.40 – 0.59: Moderate relationship, 0.60 – 0.79: Strong relationship, and 0.80 – 1.00: Very strong relationship. The correlation results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Correlation Coefficients

		Firm Performance	Professional Development	Employee Wellness
Firm Performance	Pearson Correlation	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)			
	N	140		
Professional Development	Pearson Correlation	.712**	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		
	N	140	140	
Employee Wellness	Pearson Correlation	.702**	.357	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.114	
	N	140	140	140

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

Professional development recorded the strongest correlation at $r = 0.712$ ($p = 0.000$), confirming that skill development and continuous learning programs have a substantial impact on organizational performance. This is consistent with Watson et al. (2021), who demonstrated that professional development interventions directly increase productivity.

Employee wellness showed a strong positive correlation with firm performance at $r = 0.702$ ($p = 0.000$), suggesting that wellness initiatives, including stress management and work-life balance, play a significant role in improving organizational outcomes. This supports the findings of Sonnentag and Fritz (2019), who found wellness programs improve job performance.

Regression Analysis

The beta coefficients indicate the individual contribution of each independent variable to firm performance. The results are detailed in Table 6.

Table 6: Beta Coefficients of Study Variables

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.732	0.402		4.309	0.000
Professional Development	0.348	0.092	0.284	3.783	0.000
Employee Wellness	0.330	0.090	0.263	3.667	0.000

a. Dependent Variable: Firm Performance

The regression equation derived from the coefficients is:

Firm Performance = 1.732 + 0.348(Professional Development) + 0.330(Employee Wellness)

Professional Development was the strongest predictor in the model, with a coefficient of $B = 0.348$ ($p = 0.000$). This means that every unit increase in professional development activities, such as training and career growth programs, results in a 0.348-unit improvement in firm performance. This result aligns with Shaw and Chung (2019), who reported that targeted professional development reduced turnover by 15% in manufacturing, demonstrating that investing in employee growth has both performance and retention benefits.

The third predictor, Employee Wellness, also had a positive and significant coefficient ($B = 0.330$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that a one-unit increase in wellness programs improves firm performance by 0.330 units. This is consistent with Crawford and McNair (2020), who found that employee wellness programs reduced absenteeism by 10% in healthcare, further affirming the role of wellness initiatives in boosting organizational outcomes.

Conclusions

It is concluded that professional development is the most critical driver of firm performance. Providing adequate training, skill development opportunities, and clear career progression paths empowers employees to perform better, increases retention, and boosts overall organizational productivity.

Employee wellness programs positively influence firm performance. Wellness initiatives such as mental health support, stress management workshops, and work-life balance programs improve employee satisfaction, reduce stress, and enhance productivity.

Recommendations

Professional Development

The study recommends that nut processing companies expand their investment in structured professional development programs. This includes regular job-specific training, capacity-building workshops, and refresher courses aimed at improving technical skills, leadership competencies, and overall employee capability.

Organizations should develop clear career progression paths and mentorship programs that align employee growth with organizational goals. Employees should be involved in identifying their training needs through performance appraisals and skills gap analyses. In doing so, companies will not only enhance productivity but also boost employee morale, job satisfaction, and retention—critical factors for sustaining growth in the competitive nut processing industry.

Employee Wellness Programs

Nut processing companies should enhance their focus on employee wellness by developing comprehensive wellness programs that address both physical and mental well-being. This should include periodic health check-ups, physical fitness programs, mental health counseling services, and stress management workshops tailored to the unique needs of employees in the sector.

Given the physically demanding nature of some roles in nut processing, ergonomic workstations and regular safety training should also be prioritized. Additionally, policies supporting work-life balance—such as flexible work schedules, wellness days, and family support initiatives—should be integrated into HR practices. A proactive wellness strategy will minimize stress-related absenteeism, increase employee satisfaction, and improve productivity.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study focused on employee engagement practices in nut processing companies in Kenya. Future research could explore the influence of additional factors such as leadership styles,

organizational culture, or technological adoption on firm performance. Studies in other agricultural or manufacturing sectors would also provide a comparative perspective and enhance the generalizability of the findings. A longitudinal study could help assess the long-term impact of engagement practices on organizational performance.

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