Title: Key determinants of interns' engagement: evidence from the UN in South Korea

Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the key determinants of intern engagement within the United Nations (UN) in South Korea, addressing growing concerns about workplace precarity. Despite the increasing significance of intern engagement, empirical research on its determinants remains limited, particularly in international organisations, such as the UN.

Design/methodology/approach: To understand the determinants of engagement and its causal relations, this study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining the Decision-Making Trial and Evaluation Laboratory (DEMATEL) method for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data. This research relies on a non-probability sampling method for collecting valid experts' opinions. Both quantitative and qualitative data collected and analysed can furnish a fresh viewpoint to Human Resource (HR) and Organisational Behaviour (OB) scholars in terms of practical and theoretical facets of intern engagement due to its exploratory nature.

Findings: Our findings identified decision-making (from the intern dimension) and working conditions (from the organisational dimension) as the two most influential determinants of intern engagement, with strong effects on other determinants. Thematic analysis complemented these findings by revealing that the broader workplace can influence engagement through working conditions and career development opportunities.

Originality: This study highlights participation in decision-making, working conditions and career development opportunities as core drivers of intern engagement. The findings suggest that intern engagement strategies should look toward these factors as key drivers of engagement.

Keywords: United Nations, Intern, Work Engagement, DEMATEL, Determinants of Engagement

1. Introduction

Employee engagement has become an increasingly critical focus for organisations worldwide due to its substantial impact on business performance, innovation, and long-term sustainability. A highly engaged workforce is linked to greater productivity, lower turnover, and improved financial performance (Timms et al., 2015). Research suggests that engaged employees demonstrate higher levels of job satisfaction, commitment, and discretionary effort; ultimately benefiting both organisational success and economic stability (Lin, 2024).

For interns, engagement takes on a developmental function, serving as a bridge between education and the workplace. Internships provide hands-on experience, skill acquisition and development, and exposure to professional environments, all of which are essential for career preparedness (Sekiguchi et al., 2023). For organisations, interns represent a talent pipeline, bringing fresh perspectives, foundational knowledge, and an appetite for growth (Rose et al., 2014). A well-designed internship can enhance employability, improve professional networks, and instil confidence, positioning interns for long-term success in the labour market while increasing organisational capacity.

The characterisation of a well-designed internship has become increasingly uncertain in recent years, where growing concerns about precarity and fairness in internship programs have emerged. Interns often face uncertain job prospects, low wages (or unpaid work), and limited career progression opportunities, all of which have been further exacerbated by global events and economic instability (Mirchandani and Bhutani, 2023). The lack of job security and financial rewards makes the work environment particularly influential in shaping their experience (Timms et al., 2015). Research suggests that younger generations, particularly Generation Z, are less tolerant of unpaid internships, expecting fair compensation and meaningful work experiences (Pandita and Kumar, 2022). A lack of engagement and investment in interns can contribute to dissatisfaction, disengagement, and missed opportunities for talent development, highlighting the need for organisations to reevaluate how workplaces are designed to support and engage interns.

Extensive research has identified key determinants of employee engagement in the general population, such as job control, compensation and a sense of community (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). These factors enhance motivation, well-being, and job satisfaction, yet there remains limited research examining whether these same determinants apply to interns. Given that interns are going through a unique transition from education to an often short tenure within the workplace, it is unclear whether traditional engagement models fulfil distinct developmental needs.

Despite the increasing prevalence of internships, little is known about how to effectively engage interns and the long-term implications of engagement during internships. If

organisations fail to prioritise intern engagement, they risk high turnover, underutilisation of talent, and diminished early-career development for interns. Given that internships serve as a key entry point into the workforce, understanding how to optimise engagement during this formative stage is crucial (Lin, 2024). However, existing research on engagement largely focuses on permanent employees, leaving a gap in understanding how engagement determinants operate within internship programs.

As an exploratory study, this research seeks to address this gap by identifying the key determinants of intern engagement through a mixed-methods approach. Exploratory studies that integrate the Multi-Criteria Decision-Making (MCDM) method and thematic analysis can be suited to contexts where theoretical developments and sample sizes are limited. Such approaches can enable researchers to identify emerging patterns and relationships among variables for theoretical development (Kazemi et al., 2025). Given that work engagement is a multidimensional construct, we also investigate interactions between different determinants of intern engagement. We use the United Nations (UN) internship programme as a research context for studying intern engagement for two core reasons. First, the UN seeks to attract top global talent while advancing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Silva, 2021). Second, the UN's unpaid internship structure has been criticised for contributing to precarious work conditions, raising concerns about engagement and wellbeing (Rogers et al., 2021).

Specifically, this study aims to identify key determinants of intern engagement within the UN in South Korea, where more UN offices are being established in the Asia Pacific region and examine their causal relationships using a mixed-methods approach. This research employs thematic analysis for qualitative data and Decision-Making Trial and Evaluation Laboratory (DEMATEL) for quantitative data. DEMATEL is regarded as one of the MCDM methods that helps map cause-and-effect relationships among engagement factors (Yoo et al., 2024), which is also suitable for small sample sizes due to relying on expert knowledge to map out the causal relationships among the criteria of variables. Prakash and Srivastava (2019) also underlined sample size of 8 is suitable for balancing diverse opinions of experts. As South Korea's contributions to the UN continue to grow (UN, 2024), understanding intern engagement is essential for optimising recruitment and retention strategies.

Thus, this study seeks to address the following research question: Which determinants of work engagement are most influential for interns, and how do they interact? By understanding drivers of engagement and interdependencies, we argue that interns in the UN should receive structured support to maximise their professional development and organisational impact. Given the limited survey access to UN interns, this study utilises a non-probability sampling method to capture meaningful insights. Our findings contribute to both theoretical and practical discussions on intern engagement, offering insights that can inform HR practices, policy development, and organisational strategies to better support interns in the modern workplace.

2. The Determinants of Work Engagement

Work engagement is defined as 'a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption'. (Schaufeli et al. 2002, p. 74). Both OB scholars and HR practitioners have called to revisit current approaches to intern engagement due to the lack of understanding of what more can be done to enhance engagement in different working conditions (Kakkar et al., 2024). An internship represents a developmental transition from the classroom to the workplace, requiring cognitive, psychological, and social resources to facilitate skill development, social integration, and cultural alignment. Indeed, classroom performance is not a reliable predictor of internship performance (Felicen et al., 2014), so understanding the interdependency of determinants and key determinants that keep interns engaged during their tenure is essential.

This study applied Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as an organismic framework to identify determinants of intern engagement (Deci and Ryan, 2012). SDT has been empirically validated as a model of employee engagement (Forest et al., 2023) and, when applied to the work setting, offers a basis for understanding how specific factors function as antecedents to the satisfaction (or frustration) of the three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 2017). We conceptualise these determinants across two dimensions. The intern dimension includes job involvement, decision-making, job autonomy, recognition, responsibility, communication skills, and accomplishment, which are factors that directly shape the intern's experience of need satisfaction. The organisational dimension reflects the broader social-contextual path offered by SDT, which can either support or undermine these psychological needs. These factors include organisational policies, working conditions, and leadership competence.

2.1 Intern dimension

Job involvement

Job involvement refers to a belief or attitude underpinned by a judgement of whether one's job can meet one's needs (Kühnel et al., 2009). Highly job-involved employees are likely to perform their duties with vigour, confidence, and independence (Chen and Chiu, 2009). Although closely aligned with work engagement, job involvement represents an intermediary mechanism between task characteristics and work engagement, such that when task characteristics sufficiently satisfy employee needs, they are more cognitively and affectively involved with the job, thus leading to higher work engagement (Kühnel et al., 2009). For

instance, employees or interns who are afforded job autonomy are more highly job-involved and, in turn, exhibit higher levels of work engagement (Shuck et al., 2013).

Decision making

This paper also adds decision-making as a related yet distinct construct, by referring to employees' involvement in organisational decisions and problem-solving (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007).

Taking part in decision-making helps interns actively influence an organisation's strategy and direction, with evidence suggesting that such participative chances can reinforce performance through self-efficacy (Lam et al., 2002). For interns, having job autonomy and being involved in decision-making may reduce work-related stress and anxiety during their personal development or learning (Van Wingerden et al., 2018). For instance, ownership over decision-making and increased control over work responsibilities have been shown to improve the work engagement of younger workers (Bal and De Lange, 2015). In contrast, avoidance-coping strategies are employed in controlling work environments. Therefore, many firms invest in structured training to enhance decision-making skills.

Job autonomy

Job autonomy refers to having ownership over how individuals do their work, which is key to engagement. When employees have ownership to perform tasks, their need for autonomy can be met (Humphrey et al., 2007). As a result, they are more engaged, exhibit greater discretionary effort, perceive goals as more meaningful, and experience higher levels of positive affect and lower levels of burnout and job stress (Ng and Feldman, 2015).

UN interns, as young individuals moving from school to work, aim to expand skills and knowledge to facilitate future career goals. As such, interns are likely to be attracted to jobs which afford higher levels of job autonomy, which has been shown to contribute to work engagement (Sekiguchi et al., 2023).

Recognition

This study defines perceived recognition as the praise, appreciation, acknowledgement, and positive feedback interns receive for their efforts (Wang et al., 2020). Such recognition plays

a crucial role in supporting employees' capacity to cope with challenges, adapt to changing environments, and proactively work toward their goals (Bakker et al., 2007).

For interns' attitudes, recognition can be deemed a crucial engagement mechanism because it represents the nonfinancial rewards or incentives provided by organisations in appreciation of not only work performance but also personal dedication, engagement, and contributions (Brun and Dugas, 2008). Empirical studies have shown that interns reporting higher levels of recognition, such as positive feedback from supervisors or others, perceive their need for competence and relatedness as satisfied, which may reinforce both motivation and engagement. (Van Wingerden et al., 2018).

Responsibility

Job responsibility refers to the extent to which individuals perceive accountability over their tasks and outcomes (Maaravi et al., 2021). When interns or individuals experience high levels of autonomy and decision-making, interns may feel more responsible for their work of outcomes, which can foster self-efficacy. While job responsibility may function as a job demand, it can increase engagement by allowing more ownership in how work is planned and undertaken, thus providing a sense of challenge and purpose over the task at hand. This is because job responsibility is associated with increased ownership over a task or role; job responsibility may be considered a job demand. However, when provided in an environment that does not thwart personal growth, interns' engagement can be reinforced (Rashed et al., 2025).

Skills

Owing to the importance of communication skills in a team, this study considers the intern's communication skills as one of the vital factors towards one's engagement. Many interns are expected to work in a team rather than solely for learning and development progress in the UN in South Korea. As part of skill variety, interns' ability to communicate effectively can relate to their vigour and dedication to work engagement (Jenaro et al., 2011). Communication skills, such as relatability, can facilitate effective information exchange in the workplace, which in turn helps employee engagement.

When communication occurs among employees responsible for effective information exchanges, messages are conveyed more efficiently and without distortion, leading to higher degrees of energy and enthusiasm (Welch, 2011). To help interns learn better communication skills, HR practitioners may utilise internal communication strategies such as sharing

recognition stories to foster a positive working climate. According to Mishra et al. (2014), internal communication features a two-way exchange of information, facilitating mutual understanding and responsiveness. Thus, efforts to enhance workplace communication should cover informal and formal practices for both leaders and team members, including interns. These competencies can extend beyond internal communication dynamics to external communication, such as interactions with clients where transparency is essential to gaining strong professional relationships (Coffelt and Smith, 2020).

Accomplishment

According to Bellani et al. (2017, p. 18), an engaged or intrinsically motivated employee believes '… that they have the competency for the job and feel a sense of accomplishment when they finish the job'. Accomplishment stems from achievement events, such as goal attainment and problem-solving. When employees perceive that they have effectively caused or contributed to valued work outcomes, they feel a sense of accomplishment, and their need for competence is satisfied. Indeed, research has provided evidence to support a positive association between feelings of accomplishment and employee engagement (Shuck and Reio Jr, 2014).

On the other hand, a reduced sense of accomplishment is characterised by impaired productivity, reduced self-efficacy, and an increased likelihood of burnout. Because interns are typically comprised of younger workers transitioning from classroom to workplace, a sense of accomplishment plays an important role in reinforcing the feeling of competence, thus providing additional personal resources that can help sustain engagement and increase the proactive pursuit of future goal accomplishment (Shahanaz and Masthan, 2025).

2.2 Organisational dimension

Policies

According to Wood et al. (2020, p. 247), 'policies, procedures, structures, and systems decide the extent to which employees are satisfied, committed, or engaged in work within their organization.' Indeed, Schnieder et al. (2018) advocated organisational practices to be a key influential driver in engagement. In a similar vein, it is also suggested that organisational policies and people practices as influential in the development of engagement. When considering the strategic policy of the organisation and its support for engagement, SDGs may help facilitate interns' engagement (Mishra and Mohanty, 2016).

Anitha (2014) also argue that the presence of employee-friendly organisational policy (e.g., flexible working hours) can have a positive impact on employee engagement. Workplace policies which were supportive of flexible working and work-life balance were influential in employee engagement. During the pandemic period, the affirmative impacts of online internships were also discussed and found based on the employee-friendly policy (Teng et al., 2021). Bal and De Lange (2015) discovered that such flexible working practices were even more important in engaging younger employees.

Condition

The working conditions in which interactions occur and tasks are performed can affect the extent to which needs are satisfied. As such, the right working conditions and surrounding environment play a key role in shaping employee engagement (Bakker et al., 2011). Anitha (2014) found the supportive working environment to be one of the most influential drivers of engagement. This suggests that conditions characterised by emotional and physical safety for employees foster increased employee engagement. In addition to safety emotions, positive emotions, in particular, are a core factor in reinforcing performance (Wall et al., 2017). This is even more important for interns experiencing the developmental transition, which is likely to elicit feelings of stress and uncertainty, particularly when afforded responsibility without the necessary support mechanisms to perform effectively (Azila-Gbettor et al., 2021). Within a study of interns, work environments providing ample job resources supportive of social, cognitive, and psychological needs resulted in higher levels of engagement (Van Wingerden et al., 2018).

Leadership competence

According to Abun et al. (2023, p. 258), 'organizations can enhance employee work engagement by improving their leaders' competencies'. Thus, in this paper, competence refers to leadership competencies, such as vision, achievement-oriented needs, empowerment and teamwork through effective communication skills (Rabiul et al., 2023). For instance, competence-supportive leadership encompasses a focus on areas such as development, knowledge sharing, guidance, feedback, and encouragement. Indeed, research has demonstrated the link between effective leadership and employee engagement, where transformational leaders and those who foster trust and interpersonal communication can effectively engage their employees (Antony, 2018). Interestingly, Maertz Jr et al. (2014) stated that leaders' competence in guiding and developing young talent is essential throughout the internship process, such as from goal setting to delivering feedback upon completion. While

rewards are also deemed important for interns, a lack of supervisory guidance and leadership competence can significantly diminish the overall quality of the internship experience.

Overall, Table 1 provides an overview of the determinants of interns' engagement.

Table 1. Determinants of Interns' Work Engagement

Determinant	Definition	Dimension
1. Job involvement (E1)	Interns' judgment of whether one's job can meet one' needs	Intern
2. Decision making (E2)	Interns' active participation in decision-making	
3. Job autonomy (E3)	The degree of ownership over one's job by interns	
4. Recognition (E4)	Praise, appreciation, acknowledgement and positive feedback to interns	
5. Responsibility (E5)	The degree to which interns perceive that they have accountability	
6. Skills (E6)	Interns' communication skills	
7. Accomplishment (E7)	The successful achievement of a task by interns	
8. Policies (E8)	Organisational policies	Organisation
9. Condition (E9)	Safe and supportive work condition	
10. Competence (E10)	Leaders' competence	

The variable E1-E10 will be presented in the analysis and finding section.

3. Method

3.1 Sample and procedures

Before conducting the thematic and DEMATEL analyses, Table 1 listed 10 determinants of engagement. For the preliminary and DEMATEL analyses, the convenience sampling method was used to collect data sets; 8 employees in the UN in South Korea who held administrative duties participated in the survey in 2023. This study was conducted in accordance with the relevant statistical law and research principles under Article 13 of the Statistics Act in South Korea. Moreover, this study adhered to the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (Praums, 2024).

A preliminary analysis for the DEMATEL analysis was undertaken, whereby 10 determinants of engagement were presented to 8 participants. To assess the relevance of determinants of interns' engagement, a 5-point Likert Scale was used. We contemplated a mean value of higher than 3 to pursue the validity of the three-step analysis for DEMATEL (Yoo et al. 2024). Resultingly, all 10 determinants of interns' engagement were demonstrated by participants, as a mean value of each factor is higher than 3.

Following this, for the analysis of DEMATEL, a survey comprised of closed-ended questions was provided to 8 employees in the UN. We collected data using the Jisc tool to help respondents comprehend the flow of the survey. Respondents' corresponding office includes climate change, governance and human rights. After completing the DEMATEL analysis, for comprehensive insight, we additionally collected qualitative data sets from 3 experts in the UN who have managed interns as leaders or experts. Qualitative data sets were analysed through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006).

3.2 Research Technique

DEMATEL

The DEMATEL technique, developed by the Swiss Battelle Institute between 1972 and 1979, has gained widespread recognition as an effective tool for elucidating causal relationships among evaluation criteria (Yang et al., 2014). As one of the expert evaluation methods, this method is used in decision-making processes and categorising causal relationships among factors or determinants. Hence, it can contribute to the identification of interrelationships between factors for the development of theories (Yoo et al., 2024).

In addition to identifying key factors and distinguishing cause-and-effect relationships, DEMATEL excels in untangling the complexities inherent in the causal connections within a given system (Tooranloo et al., 2017). That is to say, this technique stands out as an invaluable resource for decision-makers seeking comprehensive insights. DEMATEL's exploratory nature proves to be a versatile and effective tool, playing a pivotal role in diverse fields such as logistics, engineering, etc., but is rarely found in HR and OB studies.

Compared to statistical methods (e.g., regression or correlation analysis), expert evaluation methods (e.g., the DEMATEL) are adequate in this study due to the limited samples in the UN in South Korea and its exploratory nature. 'Sample size for the use of DEMATEL is prescribed to be in the range 8-45' (Prakash and Srivastava, 2019, p. 37). Moreover, compared to other expert evaluation methods, such as the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), the use of the DEMATEL method is appropriate for this study, as it captures the interdependence among factors, aligning well with the objective of this research.

DEMATEL as an expert evaluation method contains several steps, which are specified as follows:

1) The initial step involves the systematic creation of a direct relation matrix. Each causal relationship is carefully evaluated and categorised according to its influence, ranging from 0 (i.e., no influence at all) to 4 (i.e., a very high degree of causality) (Wu et al., 2017).

2) The data was collected through a survey in the form of an N × N matrix and then averaged for each item to directly generalise the direct matrix ($Z = [z_{ij}]$)

The assigned scores represent the degree of influence exercised by each causal factor (i) upon the resulting factor (j).

To develop the average direct relation matrix (Z), given by the expression as follows:

$z_{ij} = \frac{1}{n}\sum_{k=1}^{n} x_{ij}^{k}$ --- (1)

3) The third step involves deriving a normalised direct-relation matrix (X), given by the expression as follows:

$\lambda = \text{Min}\left[\frac{1}{max\sum_{j=1}^{n} a_{ij}, max\sum_{i=1}^{n} a_{ij}}\right], i, j = 1, 2, \dots, n.$ --- (2)

$X = \lambda \times Z$ --- (3)

4) The fourth step entails the calculation of the total relation matrix (T). This matrix, denoted as 'T' and analogous to the inducement coefficient, is computed through the application of the following equation, wherein 'I' signifies the identity matrix.

$T = X + X^2 + X^3 + \cdots X^m = X(I - X)^{-1}$--- (4)

5) The fifth step involves calculating the summation of row (D) and the summation of columns (R) by using Eq. (5) and Eq. (6) as given below:

$$D = \left\{ \sum_{j=1}^{n} t_{ij} \right\}_{n \times 1}$$ --- (5)

$$R = \left\{ \sum_{i=1}^{n} t_{ij} \right\}_{1 \times n}$$ --- (6)

D stands for the net effects provided by one critical factor, say (i), to the other critical factor (j), and R refers to the net effect received by the critical factor (j) from the other critical factor (i).

6) The sixth step concerns the development of the cause-and-effect graph. The vertical axis (R − C) and significance (R + C) are established (Wu et al. 2017).

Thematic Analysis

To analyse and comprehend patterns (i.e., themes) in qualitative data, thematic analysis is employed in this study. By referring to phases of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006), six steps are covered in this study. Moreover, by referring to the coding template by Fiorini et al. (2018), sub-themes and themes are determined.

The thematic analysis contains several steps, which are specified as follows:

First phase (familiarisation): Reading through data sets multiple times.

Second phase (initial codes): Coding key patterns or features of the qualitative data from experts.

Third phase (searching for themes): Organising initial codes into potential themes and sub-themes.

Fourth phase (reviewing themes): Reviewing and refining themes for accurate analysis.

Fifth phase (defining themes): Confirming each theme before presenting it.

Sixth phase (reporting): Writing a report to discuss the findings of thematic analysis.

3.3 Analysis and Findings

DEMATEL Analysis

The DEMATEL analysis was carried out to identify the complex relationships among the determinants of interns' engagement. Datasets (D + R) for prominence and (D – R) for the cause-and-effect groups are calculated, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. (D+R) and (D-R)

Variables	D	R	D + R	Rank	D – R	Cause/Effect
Job involvement (E1)	29.94	29.36	59.3	5	0.58	Cause
Decision making (E2)	30.58	29.79	60.37	1	0.79	Cause
Job autonomy (E3)	29.7	29.36	59.06	7	0.34	Cause
Recognition (E4)	29.37	29.92	59.29	6	-0.55	Effect
Responsibility (E5)	29.23	29.59	58.82	8	-0.36	Effect
Skills (E6)	30.28	29.8	60.08	3	0.48	Cause
Accomplishment (E7)	29	29.68	58.68	9	-0.68	Effect
Policies (E8)	28.43	29.91	58.34	10	-1.48	Effect
Condition (E9)	30.37	29.92	60.29	2	0.45	Cause
Competence (E10)	30.13	29.7	59.83	4	0.43	Cause

For the interpretation of the analysis, this order of importance is shown as 1) decision making, 2) condition, 3) skills, 4) competence, 5) job involvement, 6) recognition, 7) job autonomy, 8) responsibility, 9) accomplishment and 10) policies.

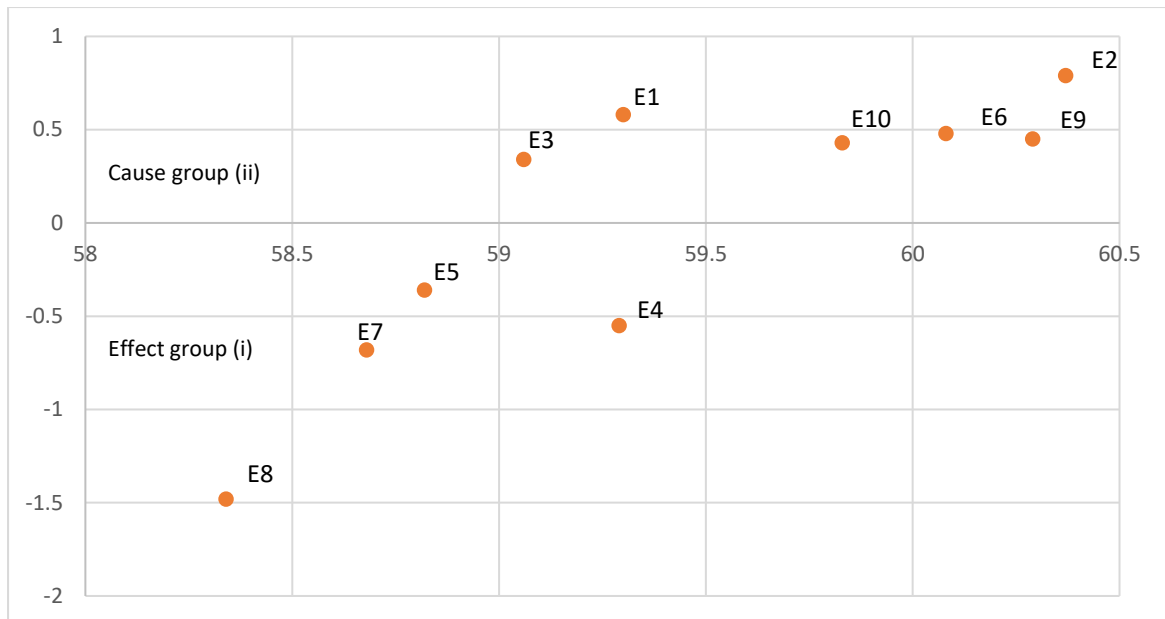**Figure 1. The Cause-and-Effect Diagram**

Figure 1 illustrates that decision-making (E2), condition (E9), skills (E6), competence (E10), job involvement (E1) and job autonomy (E3) are grouped as the cause group (ii). Furthermore, recognition (E4), responsibility (E5), accomplishment (E7) and policies (E8) are grouped as the effect group (i) in this paper. We have newly found that the organisational dimension is likewise crucial to actualising interns' engagement in the UN in addition to the intern dimension, which in turn contributes to interns' personal growth (Van Wingerden et al. 2018).

Thematic Analysis

By utilising NVivo 14 software, three themes were reviewed and found through thematic analysis: 1) career development for interns, 2) working conditions and 3) rewards for interns. In Table 3, themes and sub-themes are presented along with theme descriptions.

Expert 1 (E1) has managed interns for over 2 years and has also been involved in HR activities for over 3 years at work.

Expert 2 (E2) has managed interns for over 6 years and has also been involved in HR activities for over 6 years at work.

Expert 3 (E3) has managed interns for over 1 year and has also been involved in HR activities for 1 year at work.

Table 3. Coding template

Theme	Sub-themes	Description
Theme 1: Career development	Learning and development	Growing opportunities
	Skill development	Skill development opportunities
Theme 2: Working condition	Supportive environment	Positive and supportive environment
	Ethical work environment	Ethics at work
Theme 3: Compensation	Financial rewards	Financial support
	Non-financial rewards	Respect and recognition

Theme 1: Career development

Learning and development: Experts in the UN in South Korea highlighted learning and development as a key determinant of engagement, which is related to a study by Lin (2024). For instance,

 E2: "As interns see more opportunities in growing, they will have more affection and respect for the organisation and the team and, as a result, they can show more dedication and engagement…".

Skill development: Experts in the UN in South Korea stressed skill development as a key determinant of engagement, which is relevant to a finding by Rashed et al. (2025). For instance,

E3: "The key factors include the need to get involved in service to mankind, improve their skills, and make the worthwhile…".

Theme 2: Working condition

Supportive environment: Supportive environment was regarded as a notable determinant of engagement, which is aligned with the implications by Van Wingerden et al. (2018). For instance,

E1: "A positive and supportive work environment can significantly enhance an intern's ability to contribute effectively, learn and feel valued…".

Ethics at work: Ethical work environment was determined as a meaningful determinant of engagement (Rashed et al., 2025). For instance,

E2: "When interns learn that the organisation that they are working for demonstrates transparent work ethics and administration, they will know that they can depend on the system and be more motivated…".

Theme 3: Compensation

Financial rewards: Financial rewards were captured as a meaningful determinant of engagement for their livelihoods and work-based learning (Hurst et al., 2023). For instance,

E3: "Interns should be compensated financially in all the UN organisations; some UN agencies don't provide stipends to their interns, which affects their motivation and performance…".

Non-financial rewards: Non-financial rewards were found to be a notable determinant of engagement (Jeske and Axtell, 2017; Van Wingerden et al., 2018). For instance,

E2: "Interns can be motivated and engaged, such as respect for diversity, responsibility, recognition and acknowledging credit…".

Discussion

Internships represent a critical developmental stage in individuals' transition from education to the workforce. However, concerns about precarious employment conditions, particularly within international organisations such as the UN, have prompted questions regarding how best to support and engage interns. While the importance of intern engagement is increasingly recognised, empirical research examining its specific determinants remains limited. This study investigated the key determinants of intern engagement within the UN in South Korea through a mixed-methods design. Drawing upon SDT, the study examined how intern and organisation-level factors interact and contribute to intern engagement. The DEMATEL method was used to identify causal relationships among determinants of engagement, supplemented by thematic analysis of expert opinions. Findings showed that decision-making and working conditions were the most influential determinants, exerting strong causal effects on other variables within the engagement framework. Thematic findings further pointed to the significance of career development opportunities and supportive work environments.

Overall, the findings contribute to existing engagement theory by identifying specific mechanisms that appear particularly salient for interns in the UN in South Korea. Key factors include decision-making opportunities, supportive work conditions and career development opportunities. In the South Korean cultural context, high power distance may limit interns' involvement in decision-making procedures and affect their relationships with leaders related to supportive conditions, while collectivist cultural values enhance the importance of career growth as a team for sustained engagement (Jang et al., 2025; Oh and Jang-Tucci, 2023). These findings can support theoretical understanding and practical implications in the South Korean context. On the other hand, given the cultural similarities among East Asian countries, particularly concerning power distance, our findings may also be relevant to other UN offices

in the Asia-Pacific regions, where the role of international organisations has been expanded to support SDGs and decent work for young professionals (UN, 2024). By referring to our analysis and findings, other UN offices can develop tailored intern engagement strategies.

Theoretical implication

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of interns' engagement in the UN for the first time to the best of our knowledge.

First, the findings of this paper suggest that interns' engagement in the UN can be facilitated by decision-making, work conditions and career development opportunities in practice, rather than vigour, dedication and absorption. HR and OB scholars, even leaders in higher education or firms today, are recommended to grasp key determinants of engagement for job satisfaction and better outcomes (Kakkar et al., 2024).

Second, our findings introduce work conditions from the organisational dimension as a key determinant that influences other variables, to the best of our knowledge. Given the critical role of work conditions in interns' engagement, our results underline the importance for organisations to establish a stable and psychologically safe environment where work can be performed with the confidence and energy of interns (Azila-Gbettor et al., 2021).

Third, our findings support the use of SDT as a foundation for developing a conceptual model of intern engagement. Drawing on Forest et al. (2023), who identify job design, leadership, and compensation as key antecedents of need satisfaction, our findings highlight specific workplace factors, such as decision-making, recognition, and opportunities for development, that align with these domains. For instance, participation in decision-making supports autonomy, while recognition and development opportunities satisfy the need for competence. These findings reinforce the relevance of SDT for understanding and enhancing intern engagement, particularly in international organisational settings, and suggest that interventions should focus not only on removing barriers but on actively fostering conditions that support psychological needs.

Practical implication

There are several practical implications based on our findings.

First, to enhance interns' engagement in the UN, decision-making is crucial. Hence, UN officers should encourage interns to participate in decision-making, such as the organisation's

strategy and directions. Interestingly, this could extend to the existing research evidencing a strong relationship between autonomous needs satisfaction and the vigour, dedication, and absorption components of work engagement among Dutch interns (Van Wingerden et al., 2018). When considering our thematic analysis capturing the importance of working conditions, practically, leaders should establish an autonomy-supportive environment first, which could facilitate interns' participation in decision-making.

Second, when contemplating our findings, UN officers in South Korea should provide an optimal or supportive work environment that also fosters career growth for interns. In a highly controlled culture, job resources (e.g., job responsibility) can lead to burnout instead of engagement. This is because it may exacerbate the stress and uncertainty commonly experienced by interns (Azila-Gbettor et al., 2021). In contrast, in an organisational environment that promotes growth and facilitates goal attainment, job resources can promote a sense of challenge and self-efficacy, causing engagement (Lin, 2024). Job resources are also reflected in the compensation theme emerging from thematic analysis, which aligns with the findings of Forester et al. (2023). Specifically, the impact of compensation on psychological need satisfaction is not solely dependent on financial rewards received, but on the perceived fairness of how resources are distributed and decisions are made. Specifically, procedural justice (i.e., the transparency and equity of decision-making processes) is more influential than distributive justice (i.e., the quantity of compensation) in shaping motivation and engagement. In this context, ensuring clarity, consistency, and fairness in how interns access developmental opportunities, recognition, and material support is critical. A perception that these resources are equitably and justifiably allocated can foster a sense of inclusion and value, thereby enhancing engagement (Adamovic et al., 2022).

Third, to facilitate interns' engagement, interns' communication skills are crucial as part of their skill variety in a team. Thus, leaders in the UN should establish effective communication channels to help interns enhance their communication skills (Lan, 2021). Practically, an effective communication channel should emphasise active listening from leaders, which can positively impact team commitment (Rusdi and Wibowo, 2022).

Limitations and Future Study

Although this study extends our understanding of core engagement factors for interns, such as participation in decision-making, working conditions and career development opportunities, there are some limitations. First, even though the DEMATEL does not require a large number of data sets, this study underlines that the limited data sets may entail bias or subjectivity, due to the limited opinions of experts (Prakash and Srivastava, 2019). Hence,

future studies collect more data sets to reinforce the robustness of the findings. Second, to validate the analysis and findings, other MCDM techniques may be employed as a combined approach to ascertain the prominence of determinants of interns' engagement, such as AHP (Tooranloo et al., 2017). Third, owing to the importance of cross-cultural knowledge for interns' skill development, cross-cultural studies can be contemplated in different locations to support interns in different locations. Fourth, structural equation modelling can be used to test a theoretical framework suggested for a better understanding of interns' engagement (Prakash and Srivastava, 2019). Last but not least, longitudinal study designs can be employed to have more reliable findings for interns' engagement.

Conclusion

This study extends our understanding of how to support interns' engagement in the UN in South Korea by identifying which determinants of work engagement are most influential for interns and examining how these determinants interact. Our findings based on DEMATEL highlight that decision-making and working conditions are the two most vital elements which can affect other determinants. Particularly for internships where tenure is short and emphasis is placed on growth and development, psychologically safe and supportive conditions are crucial in addition to involvement in decision-making. Moreover, our findings based on thematic analysis underline the importance of working conditions and career development opportunities. Therefore, this research focuses on decision-making, working conditions and career development opportunities as core elements in the UN in South Korea, where an unpaid internship is predominant. Our findings align with previous research, showing that transparent conditions and active involvement aid employee development and result in higher levels of engagement.

Conflict of interest

No conflicts of interest are involved.

Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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