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The Mediating Effect of Employee Engagement on the Relationship Between Talent Management Practices and the Performance of MDAs in Uganda

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Abstract: The study aimed to investigate the role of Employee Engagement as a mediator variable between Talent Management Practices and the performance of Ministries, Departments, and Agencies in Uganda. The study used a quantitative study approach based on the Person-Job Fit Theory by Edwards (1991) and the Social Exchange Theory by Homans (1958). The study used a sample of 103 Ministries, Departments, and Agencies out of which 93 responses were obtained, representing 90 percent of the total population. The study used a cross-sectional study approach and ordinary least squares regression analysis based on the Baron and Kenny (1986) approach for mediation effects. The study established that Talent Management Practices have a positive and significant direct effect on MDA performance ($\beta = .545$, $p < .001$) and also have a significant effect on Employee Engagement ($\beta = .440$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, the study established that Employee Engagement has a strong predictive effect on MDA performance ($\beta = .595$, $p < .001$). However, when both variables are used, the study established that Talent Management Practice's direct effect on MDA performance was reduced to $\beta = .352$ ($p < .001$), whereas Employee Engagement was still significant ($\beta = .440$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect via Employee Engagement explained about 48 percent of the total effect, while the model explained 45.4 percent of the variation in MDA performance, $R^2 = .454$, $N = 95$. The results indicate that Talent Management Practices have a positive impact on MDA performance, both directly and indirectly via Employee Engagement, which is a critical mediator linking Talent Management Practices to MDA performance. The study recommends that MDAs in Uganda adopt a holistic and merit-based approach to talent management, employee engagement should be a strategic imperative, transformational leadership at the supervisory level should be enhanced, and supportive organizational environments should be developed to allow the returns from talent management to lead to consistent improvements in service delivery, accountability, and overall institutional effectiveness in Uganda's public sector.

Keywords: *Talent Management Practices, Employee Engagement, Performance of MDAs, Partial Mediation, Uganda*

1. Background

Globally, the performance of Ministries, Departments and Agencies has been affected by how they manage the available talent, and some UN agencies have stood out in applying deliberate talent management that boosts their internal performance (Mkamburi and Kamaara, 2017). Institutions that invest in systematic development, succession planning and employee active engagement are also likely to report higher productivity and better service delivery (Abdullahi, Raman and Solarin, 2022). Even in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations that sustained employees' engagement and knowledge sharing managed to buffer the performance decline, with higher resilience than those that did not (Ahmed et al., 2020). Moreover, where organizations link talent strategies with retention and engagement, they manage to sustain performance through retaining skilled workers' motivation and commitment (Chopra, Sahoo and Patel, 2024). This has explained that talent management aligned with career development and continuous learning drives better performance outcomes globally (Al Aina and Atan, 2020).

In Africa, the performance of MDAs has been mixed, with some institutions performing better by embracing talent management and employee engagement while others continue to grapple with high employee turnover and low morale that undermine service delivery (Barkhuizen and Gumede, 2021). There is evidence that organizations that connect performance management and employee engagement are more likely to report productivity and accountability, placing them ahead of their counterparts that do not (Govender and Bussin, 2020). State-owned enterprises and public utilities have also demonstrated that employee engagement has a direct influence on task performance, even though more overarching issues, such as poor resources and absence of managerial support, still maintain the majority of them in the low to medium scale of performance

(Ohemeng, Obuobisa Darko, and Amoako-Asiedu, 2020). Where managers provide development opportunities and ease the sharing of knowledge, the agencies record apparent improvements in service delivery, showing that engagement can enhance performance even when the environment is difficult (Kravariti, Tasoulis, Scullion and Alali, 2023). Frontline service organization research also proves that engaged employees result in customer-oriented behaviors that reflect on overall organizational performance (Ghlichlee and Bayat, 2021).

In Uganda, MDAs' performance has remained uneven, with some examples of good practice but most still bogged down by bureaucracy, limited career development opportunities and frail systems that reduce staff morale and productivity (Nachonga, Matagi and Emuron, 2021). Where talent management and engagement have been intentionally implemented, for example, through succession planning and better managerial support, some improvements have been recorded in employee performance and service delivery (Obedgiu, Lagat and Sang, 2022). Also, studies in public universities show that motivation and engagement positively affect work performance, yet the lack of standard talent practices within government agencies makes most MDAs perform below the standard that has been witnessed in the world (Otyola, Julie, Caro and Rogers, 2023). This is explained by the Person-Job Fit Theory by showing that when employees are placed where they lack the necessary skills, performance suffers unless recruitment and placement are improved (Mensah and Bawole, 2020). Social Exchange Theory also argues that without fairness, gratitude and support from management, even workers who are good fits for their positions may disengage, and this is something Ugandan MDAs need to address through stronger HR practices and empathetic leadership (Ahmad, Nawaz, Ishaq, Khan and Ashraf, 2023).

2. Literature Review

Theoretical Literature Review

The study is guided by the Person-Job Fit Theory by Edwards (1991), which states that employees are improved performers and most loyal when their competencies, skills, and orientations are well matched with what the positions demand (Edwards, 1991). It has been established through research that when such compatibility exists, employees are more efficient and likely to work, as demonstrated in the research of Aydin Kucuk (2022), which found that job fit enhances workflow experiences via supportive leadership relationships. Bui, Zeng and Higgs (2017) also supported that person-job fit increases transformational leadership's relationship with employee engagement, while Memon, Salleh and Baharom (2015) further supplemented that it reduces turnover intentions by covering organizational alignment with engagement. Mensah and Bawole (2020) demonstrated that in parastatals, person-job fit serves as a significant mechanism through which talent management is to be translated into improved employee performance, and Zhu et al. (2018) emphasized that correct talent in the proper jobs eliminates role stress and maximizes performance. On the other hand, Social Exchange Theory, developed by Homans (1958), explains that working relationships operate on reciprocity, fairness, and mutuality (Ahmad, Nawaz, Ishaq, Khan and Ashraf, 2023). Studies proved that where there was perceived support and justice, there was a chance that employees would share knowledge and innovate in their actions, according to Arsawan, Wirga, Rajiani and Suryantini (2020). Meira and Hancer (2021) also showed that positive interactions strengthen the employee-organization relationship in service settings, and Xu, Wang and Ma (2022) found that reciprocal interactions stimulate citizenship behaviors beyond formal job requirements. Together, these theories suggest that Uganda's Ministries, Departments and Agencies' performance can be optimized when talent management practices not only put the right individual in the right position but also create fair and enabling transactions, which would lead to employees' involvement and commitment.

Talent Management Practices and Performance of MDAs

The effect of talent management practices on Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) performance in Uganda has been under more scrutiny due to the significant role that these practices play in the performance of an organization. Al Aina and Atan (2020) examined talent management practices among UAE real estate companies and observed that not all practices equally affect sustainable performance. Their findings show that learning and development and career management activities drive organizational performance hugely, while talent attraction and retention contribute less. This means that employee development initiatives, acquiring skills, and mobility within the company are more successful than the classic recruitment and retention strategies. These conclusions are particularly pertinent to MDAs in Uganda because it is generally recognized that in the public sector, there is often a rigid structure, limited opportunities for career progression, and wasted

human potential. If MDAs were to target learning programs, training, coaching, and job rotation as talent management approaches, it is clear that an effective workforce in terms of enhanced operational effectiveness and service delivery in the long term could be achieved. Further, it is critical to align talent management practice with general strategic and operation-related goals; that is, engage in employee development that has an immediate effect on organizational success and sustainability in the public sector. Meyers et al. (2020) studied the effect of HR managers' talent philosophies on talent management practices; in so doing, they were able to illustrate a multi-dimensional understanding of organizational beliefs and how these influence workforce approaches.

By categorizing four basic talent philosophies into exclusive/stable, exclusive/developable, inclusive/stable, and inclusive/developable, the study demonstrated the impact of HR managers' mental models on inclusiveness and differentiation of talent management. Not surprisingly, while the talent philosophies have been seen to impact workforce engagement and TM strategy in later stages, they have had little impact on talent identification criteria. The implications of MDAs in Uganda are quite significant, as managerial attitudes and leadership beliefs can have a direct impact on the success of talent management programs. The pursuit of inclusive and developable philosophies can lead to greater employee engagement and fairness in employee growth and development, creating a fertile ground for the development of talent at all organizational levels. This has synergies with public sector goals by focusing on sustained human capital building, turnover reduction, and organizational power in a system that is typically characterized by political stresses and bureaucratic ineffectiveness, undermining the effectiveness of conventional talent management approaches. Atwood (2025) provides a case study of talent management in a high-risk and highly hierarchical organization in the US Navy acquisition workforce.

The study was instrumental in proving that by reshaping talent identification, recruitment, development, and management practices, the Navy was in a position to enhance accountability and responsiveness in its management processes to enable managers to make prompt decisions and incorporate innovation. In MDAs in Uganda, which are normally characterized by inflexibility in management processes and decision-making, the implications of the findings of Atwood's study necessitate the realignment of talent management processes to ensure agility in leadership processes and innovation. Imitating the strategies will enable MDAs to develop a responsive workforce that can address emerging problems and maximize the delivery of services to enhance public sector performance. In addition, Atwood's findings also imply the applicability of selective talent development strategies and mentoring programs. This implies that MDAs can benefit from developing strategies to identify high-performing employees and equipping them with the skills and authorities to enhance organizational performance. Barkhuizen and Gumede (2021) also explored the relationship between talent management and job satisfaction and voluntary turnover in a government agency in South Africa.

The study established that talent development, performance management, retention, and compensation were all very low, resulting in low levels of job satisfaction and high turnover intentions. In addition, a vast majority of employees were contemplating leaving their jobs. In this regard, Kravariti et al. (2023) cited the need to consider line manager support and organizational development as mediating the effect of talent management on performance, highlighting the need for robust support structures to achieve the benefits of TM programs. In another study by Obedgiu, Lagat, and Sang (2022), the study established that transformational leadership had a strong positive effect on TM-worker performance interaction in public universities in Uganda. This study, therefore, highlights the need for leadership to motivate workers to perform. All these studies, therefore, show that when talent management practice is implemented in public institutions like Uganda's MDAs, its effectiveness will depend on participation, support from line managers, and organizational culture. By ensuring effective managerial support and linking TM to workers' motivation and job satisfaction, the MDAs are in a position to facilitate workers' performance and, by extension, public service delivery. By and large, these studies suggest that by and large, while TM practices constitute the building blocks to improved performance, connecting leadership, engagement, and organizational support is what makes them operational realities.

The Relationship Between Employee Engagement and The Performance of MDAs

The linkage of employee engagement and Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) performance in Uganda is significant to the development of public sector organizations to leverage human capital for more efficiency and accountability. Employee commitment, defined as psychological and emotional involvement

expressed by employees towards work and the organization, has been widely linked to productivity, motivation, and work quality (Tensay & Singh, 2020; Zondo, 2020). More motivated employees have higher commitment, influencing individual and organizational performance in the quality of work, fewer absences, and better services (Ahmed et al., 2020). Participation is more important to MDAs because public organizations are typically constrained by bureaucratic systems, tight budgets, and severe accountability mechanisms that might undermine motivation and performance (Ohemeng, Obuobisa Darko, & Amoako-Asiedu, 2020). Tensay and Singh (2020) established that HRM practices enhance participation that mediates organizational performance using the AMO and Social Exchange Theory models. Ahmed et al. (2020) also demonstrated that engagement, in combination with knowledge sharing, enhances crisis performance during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, with adaptive responses being emphasized as the required response. The focus of tertiary learning limits direct applicability to Uganda's MDAs, where service demand and operational concerns are extremely diverse. All these studies refer to the contribution of engagement as a performance driver but point to the need to situate this within Uganda's peculiar public sector context, due to bureaucratic and political considerations. Leadership, employee engagement, organizational culture, and technology infrastructure are key drivers of employee engagement, and MDAs in Uganda can learn from them.

Heslina and Syahruni (2021) noted that IT infrastructure, HR capability, and engagement are interdependent of performance in Indonesia's Makassar Regional Revenue Agency, an instance of the role played by technology and effective HR systems to enable workers to perform effectively. Liu et al. (2022) further noted that empowerment, effective leadership, and a collaboration-oriented culture have strong impacts on engagement, moderated by an innovation culture between engagement and performance. Boccoli, Gastaldi, and Corso (2023) further developed the engagement concept by situating it as a dynamic, socially relational construct particularly useful in distributed and hybrid work environments. Govender and Bussin (2020) highlighted the managerial communication and performance management key roles influencing engagement, with disempowerment and confusion reducing the effect of engagement. These studies collectively show that although technical and structural assistance are crucial, leadership and management reaction are also crucial in translating participation to measurable performance. For the MDAs of Uganda, therefore, both synergy of supportive systems and strong leadership are crucial in overcoming bureaucratic stiffness, resource inadequacy, and uneven managerial conduct in translating participation to superior organizational performance. Certain research points out the mediating and contextual factors that decide the impact on performance of engagement, and with it, uncover issues specific to public sector organizations.

Zondo (2020) demonstrated that engagement in itself would not necessarily drive productivity but may have an indirect influence on performance by reducing absenteeism, and accordingly, reinforcing mechanisms are needed. Nguyen and Nguyen (2023) found that job attractiveness positively influences engagement and performance, but not that engagement will necessarily result in enhanced performance, showing the organizational climate and image. Ghlichlee and Bayat (2021) investigated the mediating mechanism of customer-centric behaviors where perceived employee engagement serves to better deliver outcomes of service through enhanced interaction and responsiveness. In contrast to other research, these findings imply that the engagement effect is differential by organizational context, attitudes among employees, and complementary factors such as leadership, reward schemes, and role clarity. For Uganda MDAs, the findings imply that engagement initiatives need to be complemented with performance management, citizen orientation in delivering services, and working environments that enable actual efficiency gains, accountability, and service delivery outputs. While a lot of research has been done, spaces of employee engagement in Uganda's MDAs are vast and therefore context-based studies are called for.

Nachonga, Matagi, and Emuron (2021) and Otyola et al. (2023) provide insight into engagement and performance in the context of higher learning, but MDAs operate in varied contexts defined by bureaucratic institutions, constraints in resources, and surveillance through politics, which can alter the nexus of engagement and performance. Adhitama and Riyanto (2020) validated the use of adaptive engagement strategies in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, by emphasizing the need to prioritize workers' health as well as productivity. Ohemeng, Obuobisa Darko, and Amoako-Asiedu (2020) also indicate the need for a feeling of awareness of how engagement affects task performance by public sector agencies in developing nations to facilitate effective policies to be formulated. Together, these studies suggest that MDA's involvement should be addressed multidimensionally via the convergence of HR practices, leadership, IT systems, and

motivational mechanisms to flip performance. This knowledge gap is likely to be filled to develop accurate strategies to increase employees' commitment, decrease turnover, and improve service quality in Uganda's public sector based on aligning engagement measures with the unique operating, socio-economic, and political environments of MDAs.

The Mediating Effect of Employee Engagement

The relationship between talent management practice and performance has been extensively examined using the shared agenda of exploring the mediating role of employee engagement. Yuniati et al. (2021) researched Indonesian midwives and found that talent management in itself was not sufficient to affect organizational performance, concluding that engagement translated recruitment, development, and retention efforts into enhanced performance. Likewise, Khairina and Games (2022) also carried out research among bank employees and established that engagement mediated the effects of talent management to a greater extent, while job satisfaction mediated to a smaller extent. Abdullahi et al. (2022) evidenced empirically in Malaysian private universities that engagement partially mediated the effects of training, development, and compensation on performance, while talent recruitment influenced it directly, revealing the fact that the mediating effect of engagement varies depending on the talent management practice type. Sumarto and Rumaningsih (2021) also demonstrated in Indonesia's Social Security Administration that participation served as a mediator for the indirect effects of knowledge management and talent on employee performance, demonstrating the way participative employees utilize organizational resources more effectively. All the studies establish that engagement is among the most vital mechanisms through which talent management exerts its influence, but the level of mediation depends on organizational environment, sector, and intervention type.

Additional research builds on these findings by examining allied mechanisms and industries. Chopra et al. (2024) examined the mediating effect of engagement in the employer branding-employee retention relationship within the IT industry, predicting that engagement could influence increased performance indirectly through commitment and retention. Hakro et al. (2022) studied Malaysian universities and posited succession planning, promotion, and performance appraisal to influence performance indirectly through the mediation of engagement, further establishing its position as a driver of talent management effectiveness. In comparison to the above research, one observable trend is that where direct effects of talent management on performance are displayed, engagement always supports and sustains these effects in all sectors. However, the bulk of the work has been done in private or near-public institutions, and hence not much is known about how these dynamics occur in Uganda's Ministries, Departments, and Agencies, where low morale, lack of resources, and bureaucracy are the order of the day. Combining these studies, it can be understood that talent management initiatives need to incorporate engagement-oriented initiatives like career development, rewards, and ease of working conditions to be able to translate investments into tangible improvements in performance, especially within public sector environments where motivation and resource paucity can hijack results.

Additionally, research still indicates that the success of talent management programs in determining employees' performance depends largely on the experience of high employee engagement. Ekhsan, Parashakti, and Perkasa (2023) demonstrated that in Indonesian manufacturing firms, engaged employees were likely to push talent management programs toward the enhancement of performance, thus showing that employee engagement optimizes the positive effect of hiring, training, and development. The same results were observed by Hussain et al. (2024) in the banking industry of Pakistan, where employee engagement acted as a mediator between talent management and organizational commitment, but with partial mediation, establishing the fact that engagement increases the commitment of employees towards organizational objectives. Riyanto, Endri, and Herlisha (2021) corroborated in the IT sector that motivation and job satisfaction, along with engagement, exercised a significant influence on performance outcomes, as they demonstrated that engagement is an important medium for motivational determinants to have an effect on outcomes. This was echoed by Ateeq (2023), demonstrating in Bahraini retail firms that engagement mediated the equal opportunity practices-employee performance relationship, depicting the combined importance of fairness and engagement in influencing outcomes. Abdullahi, Raman, and Solarin (2022) also confirmed that succession planning in Malaysian universities improved performance through the involvement of staff, adding that in-house development opportunities in a formal structure create motivation as much as output. Goestjahjanti et al. (2020) also demonstrated how talent management in the automotive industry strengthened job satisfaction

through engagement, whereas leadership alone was less effective, emphasizing that engagement is the most important mechanism by which organizational programs are connected to intended employee outcomes.

These findings collectively indicate that employee engagement is not a random variable but a central mediator of the effectiveness of talent management practices in industries and contexts. Synoptic comparison of the studies indicates that engagement strengthens the impact of talent management on performance, commitment, and satisfaction, whether in manufacturing, banking, IT, retail, education, or automobile industries. The study also illustrates that the nature of talent management practice, be it recruitment, development, succession, or equal opportunity, interacts with engagement in differing ways, the implication being that organizations will need to tailor their interventions individually to maximize their effects. Most significantly, much of the research is focused on semi-public or private organizations, and hence, there is a very large knowledge gap on how these processes emerge in Uganda's Ministries, Departments, and Agencies, where bureaucratic processes, limited resources, and low motivation can reverse engagement. To put these findings into practice for the Ugandan MDAs to improve performance, it is through connecting talent management with strategic engagement practices, like career development, rewards, good working conditions, and equity-generating policies, in a way that investments in talent are converted into lasting gains in performance and improved delivery of public services.

3. Methodology

The research was based on a positivist research PARADIGM that suggests that social factors such as talent management practices, employee engagement, and performance can be quantified and tested through statistical analysis (Creswell, 2014; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). This research philosophy is appropriate for research studies that aim to test relationships and mediation effects through structured tools and quantitative data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In line with this research philosophy and approach, this study employed a quantitative research approach to investigate how employee engagement acts as a mediator for the relationship between talent management practices and the performance of MDAs in Uganda.

A cross-sectional survey design was used to gather data from MDAs at one specific point in time, and this enabled the study to evaluate relationships between variables within their real-life setting (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The population of interest to this study comprised 146 MDAs in Uganda. The MDAs comprise ministries, semi-autonomous agencies, and other departments within the government (Ministry of Public Service, 2023). According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a sample of 103 MDAs was used to represent the population. This was done through proportionate stratified sampling and then simple random sampling. Data was collected through structured self-administered questionnaires targeting senior executives, departmental heads, and human resource managers within MDAs because these individuals are directly involved in talent management, employee engagement, and performance management within MDAs.

For the analysis of the data, SPSS was used following the steps of Baron and Kenny (1986) in testing mediation. These steps involve conducting an ordinary least squares regression test to examine the direct relationship between talent management practices and MDA performance. Regression analysis was also conducted to examine the relationship between talent management practices and employee engagement. Additionally, regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between employee engagement and MDA performance to ascertain its independent relationship. Further, regression analysis was conducted including talent management practices and employee engagement to ascertain the mediating effect of employee engagement in the relationship between talent management practices and MDA performance by confirming the reduction of the relationship between talent management practices and MDA performance. Further, Pearson correlation analysis was used to ascertain the nature of the relationship between variables before conducting regression analysis as suggested by Gujarati & Porter (2009).

To improve the quality of the study, common method bias was managed by using various methods such as ensuring anonymity of the respondents, making questions clear and simple, as well as separating scales of measurements, as indicated by Podsakoff et al. (2003). The validity of the study was ensured by checking it among experts; in addition, convergent validity was used to test construct validity, as indicated by Hair et al. (2019). Reliability was examined using alpha reliability test values above 0.70 as acceptable by Nunnally &

Bernstein (1994). This study ensured that the results of the mediating effect of employee engagement in the relationship between talent management practices and MDA performance in Uganda were objective, reliable, and generalizable.

4. Findings

Out of the 103 MDAs that were sampled in this study, it was able to achieve a 90% response rate. This means that there were 93 valid responses. The descriptive study indicates that there is a good number of these MDAs that have been in operation for quite some time. For example, 41% of these MDAs have been in operation for more than 15 years. Additionally, 31% of these MDAs have been in operation for between 10 and 15 years. On the other hand, 20% of these MDAs had been in operation for 5 to 10 years. However, only 8% of these MDAs had been in operation for less than five years. Regarding funding, it is clear that most of these MDAs, 58%, depend mostly on government budget allocations. Others depend on donor funding, 18%, while 16% of these MDAs depend on government funding combined with internal revenue generated by these MDAs. Additionally, 8% of these MDAs depend mostly on their own internal revenue generated.

Looking at the location of these MDAs, it is evident that nearly half of them, that is, 45%, are located in the Central Region. This is followed by the Western Region, which has 26%. The Eastern Region has 16%. The Northern Region has the lowest number of MDAs located in the region, that is, 13%. If one looks at the way these MDAs operate, it is evident that the majority of them, that is, 64%, operate at the national level. This is followed by the ones operating regionally, which is 18%. The ones operating at the district level are 11%. The ones operating at the local level are only 7%. If one looks at the budget of these MDAs, it is evident that 35% of them operate on a budget of more than UGX 2 billion. This is followed by the ones operating on a budget of between UGX 1.5 and 2 billion. This accounts for 27%. The ones operating on a budget of between UGX 1 and 1.5 billion are 19%.

In terms of sector, more than half of the MDAs, 55%, belong to the service sector, while 30% are engaged in agriculture and natural resources, and 15% in industrial and infrastructure activities. In terms of their status, 60% are fully government-owned, 27% are semi-autonomous agencies, and 13% are run as parastatals. Overall, this mix in terms of age, funding, sector, and scope provides a fair and well-balanced view in terms of how employee engagement plays a role in talent management practices and performance.

Mediation of employee engagement between talent management practices and the performance of MDAs in Uganda

Mediation Results

Table 1 presents the regression results for the mediation of Employee Engagement in the relationship between Talent Management Practices and the Performance of MDAs in Uganda, tested following the four-step Baron and Kenny (1986) procedure.

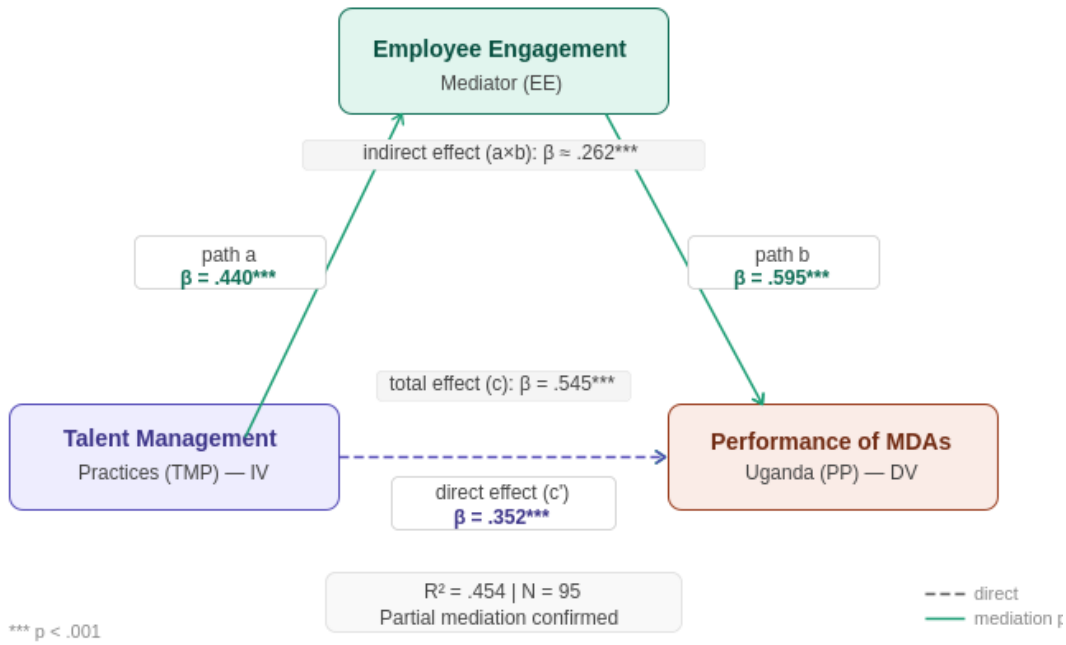
Table 1: Regression Results for Mediation of Employee Engagement between Talent Management Practices and the Performance of MDAs in Uganda

Steps	Regressions	B	SE	Beta	Sig.
IV & DV	TMP → PP (Performance of MDAs)				
	TMP → PP	.806	.057	.545	.000
IV & MV	TMP → EE (Employee Engagement)				
	TMP → EE	.418	.039	.440	.000
MV & DV	EE → PP (Performance of MDAs)				
	EE → PP	.927	.058	.595	.000
IV, MV & DV	TMP & EE → PP (simultaneous)				

Steps	Regressions	B	SE	Beta	Sig.
	EE → PP	.686	.059	.440	.000
	TMP → PP	.520	.056	.352	.000
Part correlations	EE = .395 TMP = .316				
R^2	.454				
N	95				

Source: Primary data, 2025

Figure 1: MedGraph Path Diagram for Mediation of Employee Engagement between Talent Management Practices and the Performance of MDAs in Uganda (Jose, 2013)



Source: MedGraph output (Jose, 2013); Primary data, 2025

Discussion

The results obtained in this study generally support the Person-Job Fit Theory (Edwards, 1991) and the Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958), and they are also in line with the general body of empirical literature on talent management and employee engagement in public sector organizations. The significant positive direct effect of Talent Management Practices on the Performance of MDAs in Uganda (.545, $p < .001$), along with the partial mediation role of Employee Engagement (.262), not only confirms that person-job fit does enhance organizational performance but also that the nature and quality of social and psychological exchange do enhance this effect.

The significant direct effect of Talent Management Practices on MDA Performance is strong empirical support for the proposition that investment in HR yields significant institutional returns before even accounting for engagement. This is consistent with Al Aina & Atan's (2020) study showing that learning and development activities, as well as career management activities, were significant influencers of organizational performance. Similarly, Atwood's (2025) study found that adaptive talent identification, empowerment, and development approaches significantly enhanced accountability and responsiveness in a hierarchical public institution. Additionally, Kravariti et al. (2023) found that talent management practices were effective in enhancing

organizational performance in public sector organizations where there was strong line manager and organizational support. These findings imply that in Uganda's MDAs, investment in integrated talent management practices such as talent recruitment, talent development, talent performance management, and talent succession directly translates to performance returns before even considering their contribution to staff morale.

The partial mediation effect of Employee Engagement is, however, the most theoretically significant of all. The indirect effect of Employee Engagement was found to be significant ($\beta \approx .262$, $p < .001$), explaining 48% of the total effect of Talent Management Practices on performance. This suggests that almost half of the performance returns obtained by investing in talent management practices can be explained by the psychological and behavioral effects of Employee Engagement. These findings align with those of Yuniati et al. (2021), who found that talent management practices were not enough to obtain organizational performance without the mediation effect of Employee Engagement. These findings also align with those of Khairina & Games (2022), who found that Employee Engagement was a stronger mediator of talent management practices than job satisfaction in mediating the relationship between talent management practices and performance among bank employees. Similarly, Abdullahi et al. (2022) found partial mediation in Malaysian private universities to establish that different dimensions of talent management practices engage the mediation effect to varying degrees. The convergent validity of these findings in different sectors is likely to increase confidence in Employee Engagement as an important rather than an ancillary correlate of organizational outcomes.

The fact that Talent Management Practices were a significant predictor of Employee Engagement ($\beta = .440$, $p < .001$) echoed the fundamental proposition of the Social Exchange Theory, which asserts that employees return organizational investment in the form of increased work efforts, loyalty, and commitment (Homans, 1958; Ahmad et al., 2023). Arsawan et al. (2020) supported the fact that employees who experience supportive and fair organizational climates were more likely to engage in sharing knowledge and innovating, while Meira & Hancer (2021) supported the fact that positive organizational interactions serve to enhance the employee-organization relationship in service contexts. In the Ugandan MDA organizational setting, which is characterized by bureaucratic rigidity, lack of career mobility, and variable management support (Nachonga, Matagi, & Emuron, 2021), the positive relationship between talent management practices and employee engagement indicated that HR investment facilitated the sense of reciprocity and fairness to offset disengagement forces. Obedgiu, Lagat, & Sang (2022) supported the consistency of this relationship in the Ugandan public universities, which indicated that transformational leadership strengthened the relationship between talent management performance and employee engagement, thereby reiterating the role of leadership as a driver of engagement.

The substantial influence of Employee Engagement on MDA Performance is evidenced by a Beta Value of .595 and is statistically significant at $p < .001$. This is also the highest Beta Value for this model and points to the substantial influence of Employee Engagement on MDA Performance. Tensay and Singh (2020) established, via AMO and Social Exchange Theory frameworks, that HRM practices boost levels of Employee Engagement, which in turn mediates organizational performance—a finding that is identical to this study's results. Ekhsan, Parashakti, and Perkasa (2023) established that engaged Employees amplify the influence of talent programs on organizational performance, while Riyanto, Endri, and Herlisha (2021) established that Employee Engagement channels Motivational Energy into organizational performance. The substantial influence of Employee Engagement on MDA Performance is especially important for Uganda's MDAs because it points to a situation whereby once Employee Engagement is triggered, substantial levels of organizational performance ensue, whereby even marginal increases in how engaged Employees feel towards their work and organization result in substantial increases in organizational performance. Goestjahjanti et al. (2020) established that Employee Engagement is more influential in mediating the influence of organizational programs on Employee Outcomes than leadership interventions.

The partial mediation result is noteworthy. It suggests that, while engagement is a key mediator, Talent Management Practices also have a substantial direct effect ($\beta = .352$, $p < .001$) on performance that is not mediated through engagement. This is similar to the Hakro et al. (2022) study, which found that succession planning, promotion, and performance management all have effects on performance that are partly mediated through engagement and partly through direct structural and procedural effects. Barkhuizen and Gumede

(2021) similarly found that low-quality talent management practices result in low job satisfaction and high turnover intentions, regardless of engagement levels. The direct effects speak to structural HR quality. For MDAs in Uganda, this partial mediation result suggests that managers face a dual imperative to enhance structural quality (merit-based staffing, development, and performance management) and to build psychological conditions for engagement (fairness, recognition, career clarity, and managerial support). One side of this equation without the other represents substantial unactualized potential for improved performance.

The overall model explains 45.4% of the variance in MDA performance (R^2 = .454), which is a strong explanatory model for organizational research, indicating that the role of talent management and employee engagement as a whole is a strong explanatory framework for MDA performance in the public sector of Uganda. The remainder of the variance can be explained by other factors outside the scope of this research, which include resource sufficiency, political interference, and technological infrastructure, as all of which have been identified by Heslina & Syahruni (2021), Govender & Bussin (2020) and Ohemeng, Obuobisa-Darko, & Amoako-Asiedu (2020), as contextual moderators that shape the relationship between engagement and performance. The above considerations highlight the need for a more holistic approach to the delivery of talent management and employee engagement interventions as a whole, in order for the full performance-generating potential of the two to be realized in the Ugandan public sector.

5. Recommendations

The MDAs in Uganda should adopt a holistic, evidence-based approach to talent management, including the entire employee lifecycle, with merit-based recruitment and competency profiling aligned to the Person-Job Fit Theory (Edwards, 1991), and moving beyond ad hoc training to include career management, coaching, job rotation, and succession-based approaches as recommended by Al Aina & Atan (2020) and Meyers et al. (2020). Employee engagement should also be taken to the next level, from being a secondary consideration for HR to a core organizational imperative, as its role as a mediator of approximately 48% of the total impact of talent management on organizational performance (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2018, p. 522) warrants its elevation to a strategic imperative by the organizational apex, with a working environment of fairness, mutuality, and openness, as recommended by the Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958), as supported by the findings of Arsawan et al. (2020) and Xu, Wang & Ma (2022). Line managers should also be developed as champions of talent management and employee engagement via specific intervention programs to enhance transformational, as opposed to merely transactional, management styles, as supported by the findings of Kravariti et al. (2023) and Obedgiu, Lagat & Sang (2022).

In conjunction with these human capital interventions, the MDAs must also develop formalized succession planning systems that recognize and develop future leaders early in their careers and establish transparent progression routes to the conditions of leadership that Hakro et al. (2022) and Abdullahi et al. (2022) demonstrate motivate and enhance performance through the engagement lens. Crucially, however, none of these interventions will achieve their maximum effect without the appropriate organizational enablers, and the Government of Uganda and the MDA leaders must also invest in improving the digital infrastructure, working conditions, and financial and political independence of HR decisions, addressing the contextual factors identified by Heslina and Syahruni (2021) and Ohemeng, Obuobisa-Darko and Amoako-Asiedu (2020), to develop the self-reinforcing cycle of improved talent practices leading to enhanced engagement, which in turn drives improved organizational performance and thereby encourages further organizational investment in human capital development in the public sector MDAs in Uganda.

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