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IMPACT OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP ON TURNOVER INTENTION IN STUDENTS WORKING AT A HYBRID WORKPLACE: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF WORK ENGAGEMENT

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Purpose: The aim of this study was to verify the relationship of servant leadership with employee work engagement and turnover intention.

Design/methodology/approach: A quantitative survey (N = 213) was conducted with a group of young respondents (aged 20-29) from various companies in Poland. Correlation and mediation analyses were conducted in addition to path analysis based on maximum likelihood (SEM).

Findings: Service leadership was negatively correlated with the intention to leave work. Work engagement was a partial mediator of the influence of superiors' servant leadership on subordinates' turnover intention. The examined phenomena were independent of the respondent's hybrid workplace or gender.

Research limitations/implications: Limitations include a lack of representativeness and nonrandom selection of the sample. Another limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the study. It is worth repeating this type of research with representative groups.

Practical implications: It is advisable to implement t the concept of servant leadership in enterprises to enhance the work engagement of the youngest generations of employees.

Originality/value: The study provides new information with Polish respondents.

Keywords: servant leadership, work engagement, turnover intention, remote work.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Excessive employee turnover is a problem for the performance of enterprises (Park, Shaw, 2013). Leadership has a positive impact on work engagement (e.g., Decuypere, Schaufeli, 2021), and work engagement reduces employee turnover intention (Memon, Salleh, Baharom, 2016; Halbesleben, Wheeler, 2008). This article presents the results of a research project that aimed to examine the impact of leadership and work engagement on the intention to leave. The following research questions were posed: What are the relationships among servant leadership, work engagement, and turnover intention? Are these relationships dependent on

a hybrid workplace and the respondent's gender? To address these research questions, quantitative research (N = 213) was conducted with a group of 20- to 29-year-old employees.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

2.1. Servant Leadership versus Work Engagement

One of the definitions of servant leadership states that it is "...an (1) other-oriented approach to leadership (2) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of followers' individual needs and interests, (3) and outward reorienting of [the leader's] concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community" (Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, Van Dierendonck, 2019, p. 114). The primary role of a servant leader is to build relationships with employees (Coetzer, Bussin, Geldenhuys, 2017). Studies have demonstrated the universality of servant leadership in different cultures (Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, van Dierendonck, 2019) and in various types of organizations (Van Dierendonck, Stam, Boersma, De Windt, Alkema 2014).

This article adopts the definition of work engagement as a "positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, Bakker, 2002, p. 74). Vigor involves the experience of high energy levels and readiness to make attempts and to perform the work with which one is entrusted. Commitment to work is an enthusiastic approach and a sense of significance and pride. Work absorption is a state of increased concentration in which the ability to stop working is nevertheless preserved.

Servant leadership influences employee engagement through the subjective treatment of employees (De Sousa, van Dierendonck, 2014). Servant leaders strive to understand their subordinates and adopt an individualized approach, which reinforces employees' positive energy and commitment to work (De Clercq, Bouckenooghe, Raja, Matsyborska, 2014). The influence of servant leadership on work engagement has been confirmed by Polish research in the public sector (Gigol et al., 2021). These considerations led to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. Service leadership increases subordinates' work engagement.

2.2. Work Engagement versus Turnover Intention

Turnover intention (or the intention to leave) is defined as "an individual's subjective assessment of the likelihood of leaving an organization in the near future" (Mowday, Porter, Steers, 1982). The intention to leave most commonly leads to employees actually changing jobs (Parasuraman, 1982) and is the most significant antecedent of employee turnover behaviors (Carmeli, Weisberg, 2006). Work engagement is an important factor that influences the intention to change one's employer (Rubenstein Eberly, Lee, Mitchell, 2018). Numerous

studies indicate that work engagement reduces employee turnover intention (Gigol, Grabarska, 2024; Memon, Salleh, Baharom, 2016; Halbesleben, Wheeler, 2008; Schaufeli, Bakker, 2004). The abovementioned considerations led to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. Work engagement influences a reduction in turnover intention.

2.3. Servant Leadership versus Turnover Intention

Previous studies have indicated that leadership is an important work characteristic that strongly influences the intention to leave (Wnuk 2018; Rubenstein et al., 2018). In a literature review, Eva et al. (2019), Dutta and Khatri (2017), and Parris and Peachey (2013) demonstrated that servant leadership in an organization has a significant impact on reducing the turnover intentions of staff. This was confirmed by research conducted in Poland (Bieńkowska, Koszela, Ludwikowska, Tworek, 2022). The direct influence of servant leadership on reducing turnover intention has also been demonstrated (Hunter et al., 2013; Kashyap, Rangnekar, 2016). These considerations led to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. Superiors' servant leadership reduces subordinates' turnover intention.

2.4. Mediating and Moderating Effects

The Influence of Servant Leadership on Turnover Intention through the Agency of Work Engagement

Work engagement is a common mediator of various phenomena related to work (Salanova, Schaufeli, 2008). It is sometimes a mediator of the influence of servant leadership on other positive phenomena, such as the innovativeness of staff (Rasheed, Lodhi, Habiba, 2016). Work engagement is a moderator of the relationship between mobbing and the intention to leave (Coetzee, van Dyk, 2018). Organizational commitment, which moderates servant leadership and turnover intention (Jang, Kandampully, 2018), is a phenomenon similar to and correlated with work engagement (Schaufeli, Bakker, 2010). Work engagement is also a moderator of the relationship between empowering leadership and the intention to leave (Van Schalkwyk, Du Toit, Bothma, Rothmann, 2010). These considerations led to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4. Servant leadership reduces turnover intention through the mediation of work engagement.

Moderating Role of Remote Work

Juchnowicz and Kinowska (2022) concluded that an individual's relationship with a superior is dependent on the hybrid mode of work. Tabor-Błażewicz (2022) reported both positive effects (such as a sense of agency and more free time) and negative effects of working in a hybrid system (e.g., difficulties in maintaining work-life balance, fatigue due to teleconferencing, and pressure to be available at all times). A similarly inconclusive effect of hybrid work was noted in Peprah's study (2024). On the one hand, employees can spend more time with their family, but on the other hand, they struggle with a loss of organizational identity

and a sense of loneliness at work. The results of other studies indicate that a flexible and thus hybrid work system reinforces employees' work engagement (Naqshbandi, Kabir, Ishak, Islam, 2024). However, another study points to a moderating role of a hybrid workplace that increases the impact of employees' engagement on a reduced intention to leave (Singh, Sant, 2023). Hence, the following hypothesis was formulated:

Hypothesis 5. The possibility and frequency of remote work are moderators of the relationships among servant leadership, work engagement, and turnover intention.

Moderating Role of Gender

Work engagement in men often differs from work engagement in women (Schaufeli, Bakker, Salanova, 2003). The results of some studies have indicated that the impact of work engagement on the intention to leave varies depending on gender (Gigol, Grabarska, 2024; Naveed, Zia, Cangialosi, 2022; Metin Camgoz et al., 2016). Work engagement prevents women from changing jobs to a greater extent than men (Khalid et al., 2009). Therefore, another research hypothesis was formulated:

Hypothesis 6. Gender moderates the relationships among servant leadership, work engagement, and turnover intention.

The research hypotheses are illustrated in Figure 1.

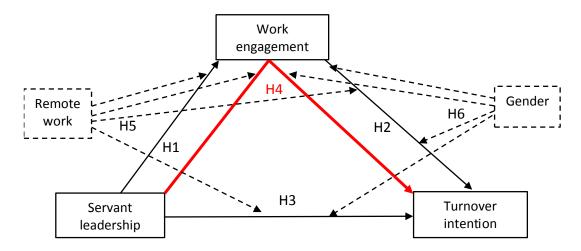


Figure 1. Research model.

Source: Authors' own study.

3. Research

3.1. Research Procedure and Respondents

The study was conducted in January and February 2023 with a group of respondents who both worked and participated in bachelor's degree, master's degree or postgraduate programs at the Warsaw School of Economics. A purposeful sampling selection was adopted (Bawden,

Robinson, 2015). The participants completed a paper version of the questionnaire in groups of 20-40 people in the presence of the author of this article. The results were subsequently entered into the SPSS program, which was used to conduct the statistical analyses.

The sample included 213 people aged 20-29 years, 116 women and 97 men. There were 170 respondents (79.8%) with higher education and 43 (20.2%) with secondary education. The largest group of respondents worked in basic positions (45.5%). The majority of the respondents (54.9%) worked at companies with at least 250 employees. Of the respondents, 172 (80.8%), were able to work remotely. In most cases, the respondents were allowed to work remotely four days a week or more (41.3%), 34.3% of the respondents worked remotely 2-3 days a week, and 24.4% of the respondents worked remotely 1 day a week or less frequently.

3.2. Research Tools

Servant leadership was tested using the Polish version of the SL-7 questionnaire (Liden et al., 2015; Gigol et al., 2021). Work engagement was examined with the Polish version of the UWES 9 – Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, which was made available by its creators (Schaufeli, Bakker, Salanova, 2003). Turnover intention was tested with a three-statement questionnaire proposed by Vandenberghe and Bentein (2009). All answers to the questions were provided on a Likert scale from 1, "strongly disagree", to 5, "strongly agree".

3.3. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the interval variables under analysis, i.e., the mean values, standard deviations and minimum and maximum values. The juxtaposition was supplemented by the values of the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients. All research tools were sufficiently reliable (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, 2019).

Table 1.Descriptive statistics for the interval variables under analysis

Variables	M	SD	min	max	α
Work engagement	3.60	1.24	0.56	6.00	0.92
Servant leadership	3.12	0.71	1.00	4.71	0.74
Turnover intention	2.88	1.19	1.00	5.00	0.87

M — mean value; SD — standard deviation; min — minimum value; max — maximum value; α — value of the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient.

Source: Authors' own study.

3.4. Research Results

Table 2 shows the Pearson's coefficients (r) of correlation between the interval variables under examination. Statistically significant correlations are highlighted. Work engagement and servant leadership were positively correlated with each other. However, the intention to leave was negatively correlated with the level of engagement and with the level of servant leadership.

Table 2. *Analysis of correlations between the interval variables under examination*

Variables	1.	2.
1. Work engagement	-	-
2. Servant leadership	0.435**	-
3. Turnover intention	-0.526**	-0.482**

^{*} p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01

Source: Authors' own study.

Next, the level of work engagement was analyzed as a mediator of the relationship between servant leadership and the intention to leave. Analyses were conducted with path analysis based on maximum likelihood. The statistical significance of the mediation effect was analyzed using the bootstrap method. The model was sufficiently well fitted to the data under examination. The obtained values of the fit indices confirmed that the model fit the data well: CFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.01. Table 3 shows the values of the regression coefficients.

Table 3.Values of regression coefficients obtained in the model

Dependencies			В	p
Work engagement	<	Servant leadership	0.44	0.001
Turnover intention	<	Work engagement	-0.40	0.001
Turnover intention	<	Servant leadership	-0.31	0.001

B – standardized regression coefficient; p – statistical significance.

Source: Authors' own study.

It was determined that work engagement was a statistically significant mediator of the relationship between servant leadership and turnover intention; B = [-0.42; -0.29], p < 0.01. The greater the level of servant leadership is, the greater the level of work engagement and, consequently, the lower the intention to leave. However, the direct negative dependency on the level of servant leadership was also statistically significant; thus, it can be concluded that the level of engagement was a partial mediator of the relationship between servant leadership and turnover intention. The model accounted for 35.9% of the variance in the intensity of the intention to leave.

In the invariance analysis, there were no statistically significant differences between women and men in terms of the relationships among the variables, $\chi^2(3) = 0.75$, p > 0.05. In terms of the pattern of dependencies between the variables, no statistically significant differences were detected among people who did not perform remote work, people who worked remotely one day a week or less often, people who worked remotely two or three days a week, and people who worked remotely four or more days a week, $\chi^2(9) = 7.03$, p > 0.05.

4. Discussion

The study revealed a positive impact of servant leadership on work engagement and reduced turnover intention. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 (i.e., the positive impact of servant leadership on work engagement) and Hypothesis 4 (i.e., the influence of leadership on reduced turnover intention) were confirmed. Work engagement also influenced a reduction in turnover intention (as expected based on Hypothesis 3). Similar to many previous studies, work engagement was found to be a partial mediator of the impact of leadership on leaving work (as per Hypothesis 4).

Hypothesis 5 (i.e., the moderating role of remote work) was not confirmed. This phenomenon is new enough to make the findings of some previous research on hybrids inconclusive (e.g., Peprah, 2024). It may not be of great importance for employees from the youngest generations, such as the respondents in this study. The results of some research indicate that work-life conflict is a serious disadvantage of remote work and point to the lack of conditions to perform it in places of residence (Peprah, 2024; Tabor-Błażewicz, 2022). This study was conducted with people aged 20–29 years who were mostly single or who maintained informal relationships without children. The respondents came from generations Y and Z, and flexible working time is a positive factor for them (Gadomska-Lila, 2015; Mazur-Wierzbicka, 2015); moreover, their organizational commitment is lower than that of older employees (Lewicka, 2017).

Hypothesis 6 (i.e., the moderating role of gender) was also not confirmed. Previous studies have shown that work engagement has a greater impact on reduced intention to leave for women (e.g., Naveed, Zia, Cangialosi, 2022) or that this effect is the same for women and men. This study does not confirm the impact of gender on the relationship between work engagement and turnover intention. In Figure 1, Hypotheses 5 and 6 are indicated with dashed lines.

5. Conclusion

This study confirmed that the relationships that are widely discussed in the relevant literature, such as the impact of servant leadership on subordinates' engagement and on the reduction in their turnover intention as well as the role of work engagement in this process, are also characteristic of employees aged 20-29. The abovementioned relationships are not influenced by gender or by a hybrid mode of work. The present study has several limitations. The most important of these are the lack of representativeness and nonrandom selection of the sample. Another limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the study. In the future, it is worth repeating this type of research with representative groups. A practical conclusion of this study

is that the implementation of the concept of servant leadership in enterprises is advisable in the context of enhancing the work engagement of the youngest generations of employees.

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