

# **VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP, WORK ENGAGEMENT AND EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE OF TELECOMMUNICATION INDUSTRY IN YANGON DURING COVID-19 CRISIS**

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## **Abstract**

This study aims to examine the virtual leadership, work engagement and employee performance of telecommunication industry in Yangon due to Covid-19 crisis. It uses both primary data and secondary data. There are about 3,000 employees working in Yangon telecommunication industry. A sample of 314 employees are selected as respondents by using simple random sampling method. Primary data are collected from these respondents with structured questionnaire. Secondary data are gathered from government documents, internet websites, relevant research papers and text books. Descriptive statistics and regression analysis are used to analyze the collected data. According to regression results, communication, trust and coordination have positive effect on work engagement; more over work engagement has also positive effect on employee performance. To strengthen work engagement, virtual leadership should focus more on building effective communication, creating an environment with trust in a systematic and correct way, and working in coordination.

**Keywords:** virtual leadership practices, work engagement, employee performance

## **Introduction**

Every organization needs a leader who can set goals/objectives/vision and give clear direction to make the right decisions to achieve them. In business organizations, the activities and actions of individuals and groups play a key role in trying to achieve the goals set by the leader. Leadership is very important for every organization to achieve organizational goal and to enhance employee performance. Leadership practices, work engagement and employee performance are closely related. Leader behaviors play a critical role in shaping working engagement and employee performance. Nowadays, leaders are facing with unpredictable challenges, which required knowledgeable leadership because of global economic competitiveness and Covid-19 crisis. Especially, virtual leaders must take a different management approach compared to leading in a physical work place since team communication isn't done in person. Some of the challenges concerned with the virtual leadership are working in different time zones, sense of isolation, pressure for creating trust.

Work engagement is an important part and its outcomes will be reflected in employee performance (Borst et al., 2020). Employee performance will reach its peak when individual employee effort level is raised (Pawar, 2021). Organizations today use engaged employees as a tool for strategic partner in the business. The concept of work engagement, since many drivers have been identified, impacts employee performance and well-being at workplace. As companies across industries strive to survive and rise above the stiff competition, physical and mental well-being of employees will be one of the important aspects that every leader needs to tend focus on. Hence, work engagement is seen as a powerful source of competitive advantage in the turbulent times.

A telecommunications industry that sells products and services to many customers in a large area clearly affects the society of every country. In telecommunications, which is an

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essential pillar of every country, where operators not only produce the core telecommunications products such as mobile telephony, messaging, and the internet but also provide services such as mobile money, games, news, music, and health. When different leadership styles and approaches are used, they have different skills, thinking and qualities (Graves, 2017). The telecommunications industry is one of the sectors of the economy that is taking full advantage of its human resources and leadership. The telecommunications industry, which applies staff, technology, finance, and many other resources, is a large industry with a lot of innovative functions. Telecommunications is a booming industry and an essential sector for every country. Myanmar's telecom market, which grew rapidly from 2014 to 2020, has seen a steady economic expansion, with B2B and B2C-based products and services being marketed, with business partnerships forming in both the telecom and non-telecom industries. From now on, all four operators (MPT, Ooredoo, Atom and Mytel) are working to maintain a fixed return, looking for areas where market demand is still strong to support revenue declines and market losses, and working with their business partners to create new products and services. In this industry, the role of leadership is very important, and in the face of great challenges and competition, the organization strives to succeed and survive. Therefore, this study is to find out how leaders can better perform for an organization to fulfill the highest demand and respond to challenges during the crisis period.

### **Objectives of the Study**

Objectives of the study are:

- (1) To analyze the effect of virtual leadership practices on work engagement of the telecommunication industry in Yangon
- (2) To examine the effect of work engagement on employee performance of the telecommunication industry in Yangon

### **Research Method of the Study**

A descriptive research method and a quantitative research design are used to analyze the effect of virtual leadership practices on work engagement and on employee performance. Geographically, there are Yangon-based offices of four operators in Myanmar's telecommunications industry. The target population of telecom operators has approximately 3,000 employees and a sample of 341 employees is selected based on simple random sampling method (calculated using the Raosoft sample size calculator). Primary data are collected from these 341 respondents with structured questionnaire. Items of structured questionnaire are measured with five-point Likert scale. Secondary data are gathered from government documents, Internet websites, relevant research papers and text books. Descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis are used to analyze the collected data.

### **Literature Review**

Leadership is life blood of any organization and its importance cannot be underestimated. Many authors have studied this phenomenon, but there is no conscious definition of what leadership is, no dominant paradigm for studying it, and little agreement regarding the best strategies for developing and exercising it (Blom & Alvesson, 2014). Leadership plays a significant role in organizational development and is also a significant factor that helps and motivates employees to increase their performance.

### **Virtual Leadership Practices**

The COVID-19 crisis in 2020 has suddenly created many organizations around the world require their employees to work from home, which has led to the shift from physical leadership

to virtual leadership, and the emergence of virtual work teams (Mysirlaki & Paraskeva, 2020). A key factor in virtual leadership is that the entire organization is not active in the form of physical communication. It is necessary to exchange information to maintain productivity and maximize mutual understanding than physical contact work environment that has existed for centuries (Banfield, 2020). Global pandemics such as Covid-19 crisis, which have had a profound impact on the global economy, are constantly changing market needs. Therefore, the leaders who lead the organization have to work remotely to lead the organization during Covid-19 crisis.

It is important to note that virtual leadership has significant impact on work engagement and employee performance, which is important for business organizations. It is interesting to find out what components of virtual leadership are having these effects. The distinctive style of virtual leadership is the reason why this leadership is innovative and brings with it challenges, benefits and changes. The virtual leadership practices consist of virtual team communication, trust and coordination of leader (Kandil & Moustafa, 2021).

Communication is defined as the transmission and exchange of information and data through the use of common symbols between two or more members of the team in an appropriate manner (Gilson, 2015). In virtual leadership, communication enables the leader to systematically transmit organizational values, goals, guidelines, missions, and information to the organization and receive specific successes, needs, suggestions, and challenges from the organization. Communication is one of the most important aspects of virtual leadership, and regular communication builds connection between the organization and its employees. Leader must be able to communicate the vision, the path, the direction, the purpose of each action in line with the aims of the business.

Trust is defined as the desire of virtual team members to believe in one another based on the expectation that each team member will take actions beneficial to the team's overall success (Gilson et al., 2015). Open communication is very important in virtual leadership. It is the leader's responsibility to provide access to data to the extent necessary, clear information on the company's affairs, and on the expected results. This makes employees able to consider the depth of their responsibilities and tasks and make necessary effort to correct conclusions and increase understanding (Dinibutun, 2020).

Coordination is defined as the set of efforts exerted by team members to manage the organization's resources and the extent of consistency and coherence of the work activities of team members (Tan et al., 2019). Working well together can lead to positive results and increase the chances of success. Virtual leadership requires more than just existing methods and processes of coordination. This requires more collaborative coordination and systematic procedures. The leader must ensure that virtual teams are ready to develop tasks and share information and create knowledge, thus widening the historical heritage of the organization and participating, actively in community, in its evolution to new stages of development in line with the organizational changes imposed by a globalized and globalizing society.

### **Work Engagement**

Schaufeli and Bakker (2004). defined work engagement as positivity and loyalty, the connection of work with the mind. It is a positive attitude held by the employees towards the organization and its values. The organization must work to develop and nurture engagement, which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee (Robbins & Judge,

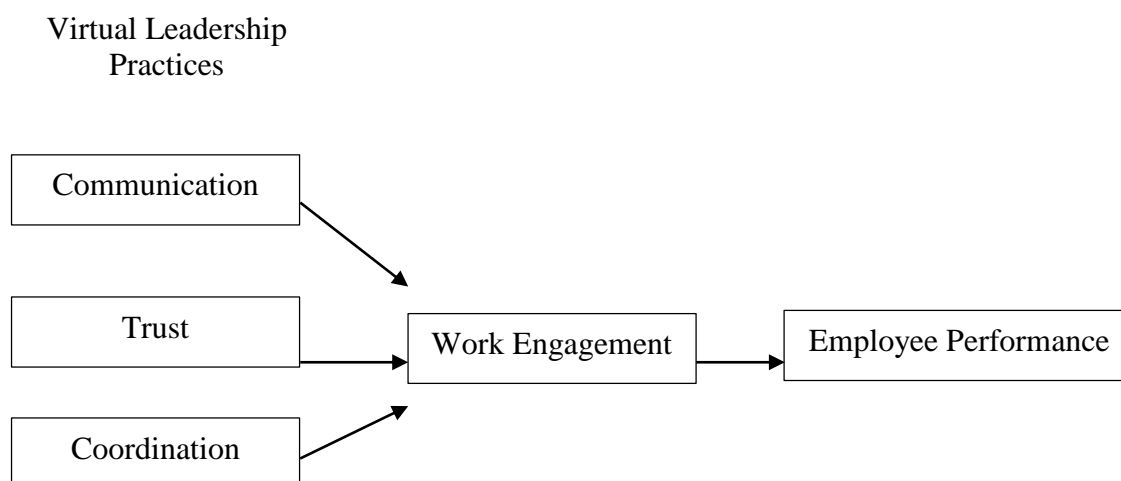
2018). Apart from this, Baig (2010) argued that employee engagement is concerned with the individual contribution under healthy working conditions, promote individual development, encourage mutual confidence and understanding between the employer and the employee, and between the employees themselves.

### Employee Performance

Performance is defined as a variable having multiple dimensions and distinct components and elements according to the job (McCloy et al., 1994). Employee performance is normally looked at in terms of outcomes. Leaders can influence the quality of an organization's human resources, which include the relevant skills and experience of members (Hitt & Ireland, 2002). Performance also depends on member motivation and the quality of their social relationships and networks. Collective work is performed more effectively by people who have strong skills, strong commitment to task objectives, confidence in their ability to achieve challenging objectives, a high level of mutual trust, and strong identification with the organization and its mission. Talented, dedicated employees are often instrumental for the achievement of both efficiency and innovative adaptation (Yukl, 2013). At the organizational level, human capital is more important when the organization is heavily dependent on people who have unique talents, require extensive training, and would be difficult to replace if they left. Employee performance determinants and their relative importance depends on the type of team and situation that the leader affects the performance, satisfaction and motivation of a group in a number of ways.

Kandil and Moustafa (2021) examined the effect of virtual leadership practices (communication, trust and coordination) on work engagement during the Covid-19 crisis. The results of this research showed that some practices of virtual leadership had a significant effect on the dimensions of work engagement. Barhite (2017) revealed that perceived organizational communication has the most significant relationship with employee engagement. Bernhardsson et al. (2021) discovered a change in work relations between leaders and followers, and further discovered a set of new challenges that managers have had to face after this sudden transition to virtual leadership. Based on the literature review, the following conceptual framework is developed in this study.

**Figure (1) Research Framework**



**Source:** Own Compilation (2022)

According to the research framework, virtual leadership practices (communication, trust and coordination) are independent variables while work engagement is dependent variable. Work engagement is independent variables and employee performance is dependent variable.

### Findings and Discussions

This study emphasizes virtual leadership practices, work engagement and employee performance of telecommunication industry in Yangon. Demographic profile of the respondents is described before the analysis of the research objectives.

**Table (1) Demographic Profile of Respondents**

Sr. No.	Description	Category	Number of Respondents	Percentage
	Total		341	100.0
1	Gender	Female Male	161 180	47.2 52.8
2	Marital status	Single Married	110 231	67.7 32.3
3	Age (Years)	20 Years and below 21-30 Year 31-40 Years 41-50 Years 51-60 Years Above 60 Years	- 124 103 75 39 -	- 36.4 30.2 22.0 11.4 -
4	Job Position of the Respondents	Manager Supervisor Specialist General Staff	118 85 72 66	34.6 24.9 21.1 19.4
5	Education	Undergraduate Graduate Post Graduate Others	7 159 173 2	2.1 46.6 50.7 0.6
6	Monthly salary (Kyats)	Below 5 Lakh Between 5 and 10 Lakh Between 10 and 20 Lakh Above 20 Lakh	67 86 97 91	19.7 25.2 28.4 26.7
7	Working experiences (Years)	Below 2 2 to 5 6 to 9 9 to 11 Above 11	49 57 31 150 54	14.4 16.7 9.1 44.0 15.8

**Source:** Survey Data (2022)

The results show that there are 341 respondents, 161 male (47.2%) and 180 female (52.8%) are involved in this survey. There are 100 single respondents and 231 married respondents in marital status. Hence, the married respondents are more than the single. In terms of age, the respondents who are 21-30 years old range is the highest with 36.4% and the 51-60

years age range is the lowest with 11.4%. There are no respondents under 20 years and above 60 years old. Among the respondents, managers are the most with 34.6%, followed by supervisors with 24.9%, specialists with 21.1%, and general staff with 19.4%. According to the results, there are only 4 types of respondents' education. Among them, regarding salary post graduate respondents are the largest with 50.7% and others are the lowest with 0.6%. 26.7% of the respondents get the highest salary range, 10-20 Lakh Kyats, and 19.7% of the respondents who earn the minimum salary range, below 5 Lakh Kyats. Most of the respondents have 9 to 12 years of working experience with 44.0%, and least of the respondents have 6 to 9 years experiences with 9.1%.

To analyze the research objectives, 341 employees who are working in telecommunication industry in Yangon are asked with structured questionnaire. To describe the overall perception of respondents towards virtual leadership practices, work engagement and employee performance, mean values are calculated. Moreover, to explain how much deviate from the mean value, standard deviation is also calculated. Means and standard deviation results are shown in Table (2) together with the Cronbach Alpha values.

**Table (2) Descriptive Statistics of the Variables**

Sr. No.	Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Numbers of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
1	Communication	3.94	0.322	5	0.787
2	Trust	3.88	0.332	5	0.798
3	Coordination	3.96	0.273	5	0.806
4	Work Engagement	3.97	0.246	5	0.729
5	Employee Performance	3.96	0.244	5	0.777

**Source:** Survey Data (2022)

This study consists of five variables. The Cronbach alpha value is applied to test the reliability of the variables. Since the values of all variables are greater than 0.7, it shows the reliability and further analysis should be conducted. Moreover, the standard deviations of all variables are below one which describes that they don't deviate from the mean value of each variable.

Among the overall mean values of virtual leadership practices, coordination has the largest mean value, 3.96 and trust has the lowest mean value, 3.88. However, all the overall mean values are at the agree level. It means that employees agree their leaders are applying all leadership practices in their business during Covid-19 crisis. Communication is achieved by providing information and advance notice for important decisions at that time. The overall mean value indicates that a strong sense of effective communication, trust and coordination generates the leader to achieve organizational goals by supporting their team members. Leaders are getting informed about company news and developments to their followers by working from home. To find the research objective for the effect of virtual leadership practices on work engagement, multiple regression analysis is applied in this study.

**Table (3) Multiple Regression Analysis of Virtual Leadership Practices on Work Engagement**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	1.309	0.131		10.032	0.000		
Communication	0.143***	0.046	0.188	3.139	0.002	0.366	2.730
Trust	0.159***	0.041	0.215	3.864	0.000	0.424	2.360
Coordination	0.373***	0.057	0.414	6.539	0.000	0.326	3.069
F	142.593***						
R	0.748						
R <sup>2</sup>	0.559						
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.555						
Durbin-Watson	2.005						

Source: Survey data (2022)

Note. \*\*\* Significant at 1% level

Dependent variable: Work Engagement

As shown in Table (3), the coefficient of determination i.e., the R-square value is 0.559. This represents that communication, trust and coordination have 55.9% variation on the work engagement. The overall significant of the model, the value of F test, comes out highly significant in telecommunication industry at 1% level. The model for telecommunication industry is a good descriptor of the relation between virtual leadership practices and work engagement.

The result of regression analysis exposes that virtual leadership practices have significant and positive effect on work engagement. These variables are significant at 1% level. Communication has positive and significant effect on work engagement at 1% level. It can be inferred that the more the leader apply communication, the more become work engagement of their employees. As the unstandardized coefficient is 0.143, one unit increase in communication can lead to increase work engagement by 0.143 units. Interpersonal skills of leaders with their followers make engaged employees in their virtual workplace. Leaders in telecommunication industry are effectively communicating the information with their followers to understand clearly.

Trust has also significant and positive effect on work engagement at 1% level. It can be concluded that the more the leader apply trust, the more increase work engagement of their employees. As the unstandardized coefficient is 0.159, one unit increase in trust can lead to increase work engagement by 0.159 units. Transparency of information and decisions practiced by leaders with their followers make engaged employees in their virtual workplace.

Coordination has also significant and positive effect on work engagement at 1% level. It can be inferred that the more the leader apply coordination, the more increase work engagement

of their employees. As the unstandardized coefficient is 0.373, one unit increase in coordination can lead to increase work engagement by 0.373 units. Leaders of telecommunication industry have strong sense of belonging to their followers. They support others in achieving their organizational goals by coordinating at virtually during Covid-19 crisis. Moreover, among the three independent variables, coordination has the most significant effect on work engagement with a coefficient of 0.373.

Communication channels are well established and effective technology is used to divide roles according to the interactions required in virtual teams. In addition, establishing policies according to communication style, setting rules and providing training to build trust, coordination and a systematic communication style promote the effectiveness and usefulness of communication and support work engagement. Linear regression analysis is applied to analyze the effect of work engagement on employee performance. The results for this second objectives are shown in Table (4).

**Table (4) Linear Regression Analysis of Work Engagement on Employee Performance**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	1.116	.148		7.553	.000
Work Engagement	0.716***	0.037	0.723	19.274	0.000
	371.473***				
R	0.723				
R <sup>2</sup>	0.523				
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.521				
Durbin Winston	1.822				

**Source:** Survey data (2022)

Note. \*\*\* Significant at 1% level

Dependent Variable: Employee Performance

According to the linear regression analysis, work engagement has significant and positive effect on employee performance at 1% level. The coefficient of work engagement is 0.716, so every unit increase in work engagement increases employee performance by 0.716 units. Work engagement can be a deciding factor for employee performance. A highly engaged employee will consistently deliver beyond expectations in the workplace. Engaged employees will stay with the company, be an advocate of the company and its products and services, and contributes to bottom line business success. They will normally perform better and are more motivated. It can be seen a significant link between work engagement and employee performance.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examines the employee perception towards their leaders' virtual leadership practices, work engagement and employee performance. The primary data needed for this study is collected from 341 respondents selected by using simple random sampling method. According to the survey results, among the respondents, the participation of female is higher than that of



male. Regarding on marital status, married people are almost half as many as single people. The largest group age of the respondents is young and middle-aged, and the rest are old. In terms of job position, the greatest numbers of the respondents are at the management level. It is found that most of the respondents are graduate and post graduate. More than half of the respondents are earning a high salary; A comparatively more respondents who have long working experiences (6 years of working experience or more) are more participated in this study.

According to descriptive statistics, coordination has the maximum overall mean value and trust has the minimum mean value. All the mean values of virtual leadership practices are at the agreed level. It means that the employees are involved in virtual leadership by role, so it is found that virtual leadership practices exist. Also, employees believe that their leaders are practicing virtual leadership practices during the Covid-19 crisis to solve the problems of the temporal and geographical dimension. Working from home during Covid-19 crisis can reduce costs, remove physical limits, form new partnerships without looking at the location, improve efficiency through virtual work teams by satisfying the social and material needs of their employees.

According to multiple regression analysis, all leadership practices have significant effect on work engagement. According to linear regression analysis, work engagement has also significant effect on employee performance. Leading in the coordination role and implementing trust and coordination will make a great impact on work engagement. To be able to achieve work engagement of the employees, the style of leadership practiced at virtually plays a very important role and creates the environment where employees can perform their utmost to their organization. In telecommunication industry, communication channels are established and effective technology is used to face the obstacles during Covid-19 crisis. Coordination is most important factors to increase work engagement when leaders are working from home during crisis. Adequate access to information and mutual understanding are important for the coordination at virtual teams.

Communication is an important practice for work engagement in telecommunication industry. This study recommends that the leaders should pay attention to provide the technological infrastructure to facilitate the communication process such as Wi-Fi internet and mobile data. And the leaders should increase the effectiveness of personal relationships with different workgroups to increase coordination and cooperation between them. Trust is also the important practice to get work engagement. The leaders should discuss with their employees in decision making, solve employees' needs and transparent in business transaction within their virtual team.

Coordination is the most influencing practice on work engagement. Leaders should work closely with internal and external parties to shape and implement an accountability culture suitable for their organization. Therefore, the virtual leadership should focus more on communication, trust and coordination in work engagement efforts in order to achieve the best employee performance. Leaders should practice suitable leadership style in the organization for turbulent situations where the employee performance need to be heightened to the utmost. For achieving work engagement and employee performance, the leader should be aware of what is important for the subordinates and the organizations as a whole and encourage the employees to see the opportunities and challenges around them creatively. The leader should have their own visions and development plan for subordinates, working in group and team work spirit. Employees would like to see more participation attributes in their leader; therefore, the leader should have to promote faith from the subordinates. They should connect with the working

groups and the individual beyond self-interest. A sense of confidence and power for the workloads should be displayed. Leader's virtual leadership practices can increase employee performance. Thus, leader should use this type of leadership practices in important situation. At the same time, leader should clarify expectations and provide goals and standards to be achieved by the subordinates.

The organization and leader should allow involvement of employees in decision making and leadership improvement and provide training and teamwork facilitation. In addition, policies and practices related to rewards or feedback system in the organization can be adjusted to meet employees need in order to improve employee performance. The most important thing is that the leader's need to explore new ways of the employees' thinking, arouse and change their awareness of problems and the capacity to solve those problems. In conclusion, the more the staffs performed very well depending upon the virtual leadership practices the more the organization would be successful. Their perception and attitude toward their leader would affect the life, efficiency and effectiveness of the organization.

### **Limitation and Needs for Further Research**

This study explores the virtual leadership, work engagement, and employee performance. Since virtual leadership is a new and emerging form of leadership, it needs to know more about it and should be widely studied. Regarding the practices of virtual leadership, further researches should study more practices. Because of Covid-19 crisis, many people around the world are adopting a work from home style, so it should also be investigated whether virtual leadership has the potential to be used by businesses in the long term. Only then, it will be able to fully understand virtual leadership and be able to predict its direction and possibilities. Further studies should be conducted regarding employee satisfaction and commitment.

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