

# Workplace Flexibility as an Engagement Strategy for the Multigenerational Workplace in the Thai Marketing Research Industry

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**Abstract:** *This study was performed to determine the impact of workplace flexibility on employee engagement in the Thai marketing research industry, especially among the multi-generational environment. The study involved a mixed-methods methodology, consisting of a qualitative in-depth interview among the top management persons to assess their views on flexibility policy and its effect on employee engagement, a quantitative online self-completion questionnaire among marketing research employees to assess their needs on flexibility policy and a qualitative group discussion to elaborate the quantitative findings in terms of meaning and expectation of employees on flexibility policy. The statistical results indicated that flexibility did not have a direct impact on engagement nor job satisfaction, but on the relationship with supervisors and co-workers. From the qualitative investigation, flexibility was described as the understanding of a person's requirement and situation rather than a policy. This situational understanding helps others which is highlighted as one of the key drivers to satisfaction and engagement respectively. The findings reported in this article make a significant contribution to various organizations of the Thai marketing research industry as a practical and strategic guideline to engagement strategy construction.*

**Keywords:** Multigenerational Workforce, Workplace Flexibility, Engagement, Continuous Development of Marketing Research Industry, Thailand

## Introduction

Generational differences have become popular and discussed widely in business and society. Diversity in organizations has been growing with the three generations: namely Baby Boomers who were born in the period of 1945-1964, Generation X who were born in 1965-1981 and Generation Y or Millennials who were born in 1982-2000 (Wong, Gardiner, Lang & Coulon, 2008). Given the current population scenario in Thailand, Baby Boomers are gradually leaving the workforce, while the new generation has become the main group of the workforce (National Economic and Social Development Board, 2012).

Employee engagement has become an important issue in many organizations. Employee engagement is noted to have a direct contribution to organizational success and financial performance (ArunKumar & Renugadevi, 2013). Several studies have highlighted the relationship between engaged employees and positive business performance. Employee engagement is a win-win situation for both employees and organizations, as the engaged employees are healthier and have a better lifestyle than their disengaged counterparts. The engaged workers also show a more positive workplace experience which leads to a positive impact on the organization. They appear to be more productive and customer-centric and this translates into healthy business performance of their organization (Gallup Organization, 2015, para 8).

Various studies have indicated that there are many factors driving engagement, including policies and programs offered by the employers to fit with the employees' needs. Recently, there

is an ample evidence that flexibility leads to the positive outcomes within the organization including positive feelings towards work-life balance. Pitt-Catsoupes, Matz-Costa, and Besen (2009) cited research conducted by National Study of the Changing Workforce that two-thirds of employees felt that there was a high likelihood that they would stay with the organization for the next year, while another one-third mentioned that they were willing to work harder than required to help their employers succeed under the high availability of flexible work.

Although employee engagement and flexibility are not new dimensions in HRD, there has been no or little empirical research addressing its relationship with job performance, especially across different generations in Thailand. With the growth of emerging technologies and the increase of the generation Y workforce in the organization, this study put the focus on exploring the impact of flexibility on enhancing engagement among different generations, younger generation in particular. The study provides the practical and essential guideline to increase multigenerational employee engagement for the continuous development of the Thai marketing research industry.

### **Research Objectives**

The main objective of the study was to formulate the practical and effective engagement strategies/practices that fit with the needs of employees in the marketing research industry in Thailand by deep understanding of key relevant drivers, flexibility policy or practice in focus.

### **Research Questions**

The study's research questions were:

1. What are the significant engagement drivers in Thai marketing research industry?
2. How significant is having access to workplace flexibility affecting employee engagement, especially among the younger generation?
3. What are the meaning and dimensions of flexibility in the views of different generations?
4. What strategies/practices can be constructed from this research in relation to workplace flexibility and employee engagement?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Importance of Employee Engagement**

Employee engagement has become one of the key topics in HRD. The use of the term 'employee engagement' goes far beyond satisfaction. It has become one of the key business indicators as it is believed that engaged employees drive positive business outcomes. As ADP Research Institute (2012, p. 3) asserts, "while the exact definitions of employee satisfaction and employee engagement may differ from organization to organization, HR professionals would generally agree that satisfaction refers to how employees feel-their "happiness"-about their job and conditions, such as compensation, benefits, work environment, and career development opportunities. Engagement, on the other hand, refers to employees' commitment and connection to work as measured by the amount of discretionary effort they are willing to expend on behalf of their employer. Highly engaged employees go above and beyond the core responsibilities outlined in their job descriptions, innovating and thinking outside the box to move their organizations forward-much like volunteers are willing to give their time and energy to support a cause about which they are truly passionate."

The study of Aon Hewitt (2015) indicates the financial implication of an engaged workforce. The study found that a 5% increase in employee engagement leads to a 3% increase in financial performance in the following year.

According to Deloitte Insights (Deloitte, 2016, para 30) “Engagement is not reactive but proactive. Efforts to build engagement should be ‘always on’ through extensive data use and analysis by business leaders. HR, too, must be proactive in engagement efforts. Leading companies have made this their goal and are reaping the benefits; all organizations that want a passionate workforce should follow suit.”

### **Why Generations Matter**

The Millennial generation will shape the world of work for the coming years. Their career aspirations and attitudes about work differ from those of the older generations, especially the soon-to-retire Baby Boomer generation. According to PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) (2016), Millennials will form 50% of the global workforce by 2020. However, they are also seen as one of the biggest challenges the organization will face. Not only motivated by the creative reward package, they may require a different way of work – how and where they work.

Understanding the differences in generations is vital to meet diverse employees’ needs for higher engagement respectively. The study of PwC (2016) indicates that the majority of the Millennials prefers electronic communication to face-to-face communication or even over the telephone. Another study, The NextGen, conducted by PwC in 2013 among one in four of the 180,000 employees of PwC firms globally pinpoints that Generation Y tends to look for the flexibility option in the workplace. A total of 64% prefers to occasionally work from home, while 66% would like to shift their work hours.

The researcher found that the majority of the literature reviewed for this study discusses the key characteristics, values and behaviors of different generations, and that there is a lack of empirical studies proposing practical engagement strategies/ practices to companies in Thailand, particularly for the marketing research industry.

### **Engagement Drivers**

It is believed that engagement drivers drive the engaged feeling which consequently leads to the engaging behavior. Robinson, Perryman, & Hayday (2004) described the key behaviors associated with employee engagement including belief in the organization, desire to work to make things better, understanding of the business context and the bigger picture, being respectful of and helpful to colleagues, willingness to go the extra mile and keeping up to date with development in the field.

Robinson, Perryman and Hayday (2004) concluded that the strongest driver of engagement was a sense of feeling valued and involved which was linked to various factors including training & development, immediate management, performance & appraisal, communication and equal opportunities & fair treatment. Institute for Employment Studies (2003) included the other drivers including job satisfaction, feeling valued and involved, equal opportunity, health and safety, length of service, communication and cooperation (as cited in Robinson, 2007, p. 3).

On the other hand, Aon Hewitt’s 6 Engagement Drivers have been much referred to in the commercial segment. Their drivers include Brand, Leadership, Performance, Work, Basics and Company Practices while Say, Stay and Strive are the Engagement Outcomes.

### **Workplace Flexibility**

There are many factors that drive employee engagement, including workplace flexibility options which allow employees to have job characteristics which fit their needs. A flexible work environment is one of the five key elements driving engagement of a simply irresistible organization according to the Deloitte Review (2015, p. 150).

There are different types of workplace flexibility. The key categories of work options defined by the Sloan Center on Aging & Work (Pitt-Catsouphes, Matz-Costa & Besen, 2009) included flexibility in the number of hours worked, flexible schedule, flexible work place, and options for time-off. The flexibility in the number of hours worked consisted of work part-year or work part-time, input into the amount of overtime hours and phased retirement. The flexible schedule included work-shift choices and compressed work week. The flexible place included remote work location and worksite choices. The options for time-off consisted of taking paid time-off to volunteer in the community, taking sabbaticals or career breaks, taking paid or unpaid time for education, taking extra unpaid vacation days and taking paid leave for personal or family responsibilities.

### **Research Design**

The study consisted of a three-phase sequential transformative mixed-methods research design. The first phase was a qualitative exploration, gathering points of view of key marketing research companies' top management personnel on what they perceived to be the critical factors driving engagement and disengagement in their organizations and how they saw flexibility-at-workplace as one of the key drivers to improve engagement. The in-depth interviews were conducted at the organization's facility, each interview taking approximately 90 minutes. The findings were translated and used as input in the following phase of a quantitative study among the employees in marketing research organizations.

Attributes in relation to engagement were developed to assess employees' expectations and attitudes towards their workplace. The existing literature review threw light on various drivers to engagement and how employee engagement can be measured. The findings from the in-depth interviews among management personnel were analyzed and applied to the final attribute list in order to make it relevant to the Thai marketing research context. The content validity was tested using the index of item-objective congruence (IOC) by the four top members of management who joined the in-depth interview. The rater reviewed and rated the engagement drivers attributes by giving the item a rating of 1 (for clearly measuring), 0 (unclear) and -1 (clearly not measuring). The IOC score for each attribute was acceptable, none got score lower than 0.5. Additionally, the Cronbach's alpha based on standardized items was .92, which was accepted in terms of reliability statistics test.

The third, and final, phase was designed to deep dive into the meaning of workplace flexibility and its roles in driving employee engagement. This phase was conducted in the qualitative manner, with a group discussion among employees of mixed generations.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection consisted of three various types according to each phase's objectives. The 1st phase method was an in-depth interview among top management persons of the top marketing research organizations. The selection criteria of participating organizations included the size of the organizations and the country of origin of the organizations. The organization size was defined by the organization's annual revenue reported to the Ministry of Commerce, the top

10 organizations were asked to join the study as their revenue's size correlated with the size of employee numbers. From the list of the top 10, 4 organizations agreed to participate in the study. The 4 participating organizations consisted of 2 international organizations and 2 local organizations to cover the diverse views about how flexibility was seen between the international management persons and the Thai management persons. The 2nd phase method was the online self-completion questionnaire. To be consistent with the first phase in terms of the type of organization composition, the second phase was conducted among employees of those four organizations whose management persons agreed to participate in the 1st phase. There were 336 employees in the four marketing research organizations, 2 international and 2 local organizations, who voluntarily joined the study and completed the questionnaire. The final stage was conducted in the form of a qualitative group discussion among 8 participants consisting of 3 Gen Y employees, 3 Gen X employees and 2 Baby Boomer employees to understand the dimensions, expectations and scope of 'needed' flexibility options among different generations, and the underlying reasons of the requested options.

### **Data Analysis**

For the 1st phase in-depth interview, Content Analysis was used, as suggested by Creswell (2014). For the 2nd phase, the data of completed quantitative self-completion questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics to describe the main features of the data in order to summarize the data in the form of mean and standard deviation. An Anova F-Test was used to determine the statistical significance of differences between generations and type of companies. SPSS software was used for analyzing the frequencies, descriptive and cross-tabulations. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was used to reduce number of variables for ease of analysis and used as the framework for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) which was used to identify the level of relationship among variables. The final phase of group discussion adopted ATLAS.ti software which was useful for analysis with the visual presentation of the data. Krippendorff (2013, p. 356) noted the advantage of using the software was that the text explorations were systematic "countering the natural tendency of humans to read and recall selectively."

### **Ethics Consideration**

Participants joined the study on the basis of informed consent and voluntary participation. They were informed that they had rights to withdraw from the study at any stage they felt uncomfortable. All obtained information was confidentiality and anonymity protected. For quantitative part, the data was aggregated into groups of generations and types of organization.

### **Results and Discussion**

This section will be structured by answering the four research questions.

**Response to research question one:** "*what are significant engagement drivers in the Thai marketing research industry?*" In responding to this question, it was found that there were four key areas of engagement driver which can be named as the 4Cs drivers. They are characteristics of job and work-life quality, corporate equity, capability and relationship with immediate boss and career development opportunity, respectively.

**Response to research question two:** "*how significant is having access to workplace flexibility affecting employee engagement, especially among the younger generation?*" The

findings clearly indicated that workplace flexibility policy/practice was not relevant to Thai marketing researchers' needs.

Looking into influencing factors of employees' intention-to-stay, compensation ranked top almost in all generations as illustrated in Table 1. There was not much difference among generations in most attributes. The significant differences included job characteristics which was of more concern to Gen X than Gen Y, contribution to organization's success which was more important to Baby Boomers than Gen Y, while job rotation opportunity was more relevant to Gen Y than the older generation of Gen X and Baby Boomers.

**Table 1.** Importance-to-Stay Attribute Rating

	Total	Gen Y	Gen X	Gen BB
Compensation	4.40	4.37	4.43	4.50
Capability of top management	4.30	4.26	4.33	4.67
Relationship with co-worker	4.28	4.31	4.23	4.17
Organization financial stability	4.27	4.21	4.35	4.67
Career advancement	4.23	4.29	4.14	4.08
Job characteristics	4.22	4.14	<b>4.34<sub>Y</sub></b>	4.50
Capability of supervisor	4.22	4.21	4.21	4.42
Involvement of top management	4.21	4.15	4.27	4.58
Technical/ job-related training	4.19	4.22	4.15	4.08
Work-life balance/ workload	4.17	4.14	4.20	4.50
Organization culture	4.01	4.01	4.03	3.92
Work time flexibility	4.01	4.02	3.97	4.17
Contribution to organization's success	3.95	3.89	4.00	<b>4.42<sub>Y</sub></b>
Soft skill training	3.85	3.88	3.81	3.75
Work location flexibility	3.84	3.84	3.84	3.83
Organization reputation	3.67	3.62	3.68	4.00
Job rotation opportunity	3.47	<b>3.58<sub>X</sub></b>	3.29	3.08

To statistically verify the result that flexibility had less impact on both satisfaction and employee engagement, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was adopted to test the level of relationship among variables. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was used to simplify the data by reducing the number of variables from 18 attributes into 5 factors; namely Corporate Equity, Career Development Opportunity, Relationship with Others, Job Characteristics and Flexibility Practice. The common variables were grouped together under the common factor.

Factor 1 (FF1): Corporate Equity consisted of 6 loading attributes including organization reputation, organization financial stability, involvement of top management, capability of top management, organization culture and compensation. Clearly this group factor did not involve any personal relationships, nor employee related attribute. The members of this factor were related to the organization's broad picture.

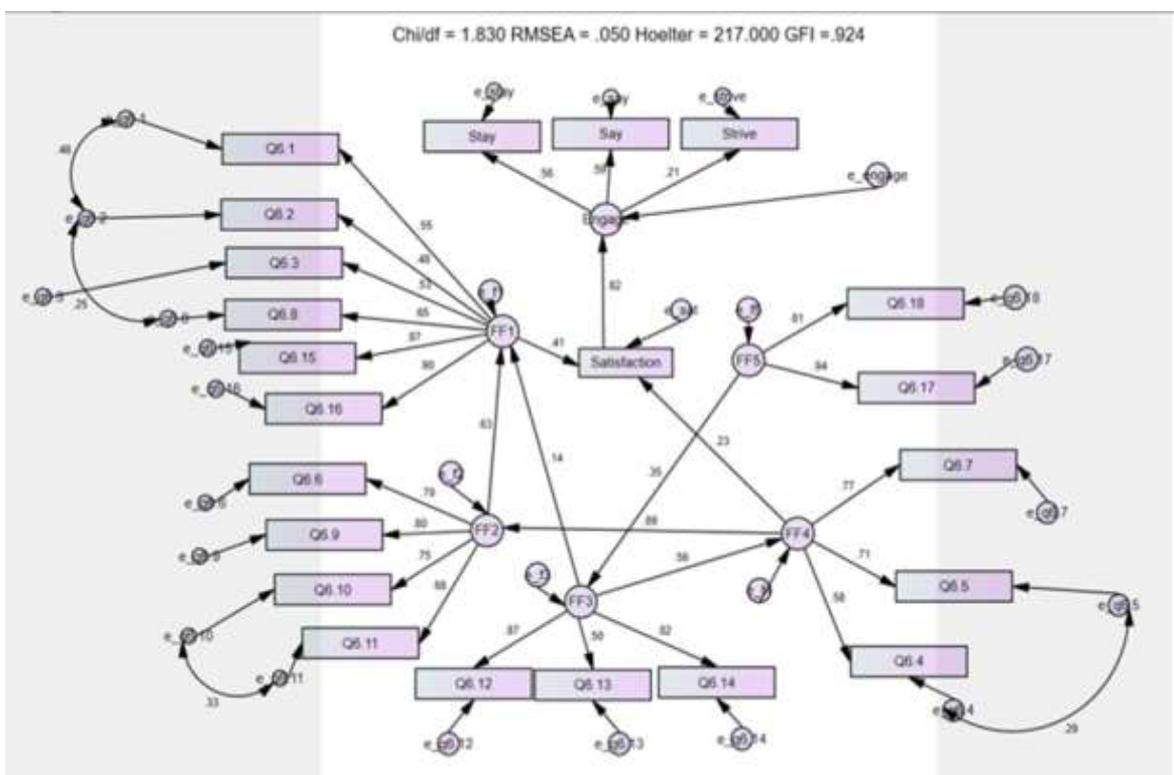
Factor 2 (FF2): Career Development Opportunity consisted of 4 loading attributes, including soft skill training, technical skill training, career advancement opportunity and job rotation opportunity. This group was more directly related to an employee's development.

Factor 3 (FF3): Relationship with Others consisted of relationship with supervisor, supervisor's capability and relationship with co-worker. Clearly, this group factor was heavily involved with people in the organization.

Factor 4 (FF4): Job Characteristics consisted of 3 loading members namely job characteristics, work-life balance/workload and contribution to the company's success.

Factor 5 (FF5): Flexibility Practice consisted of 2 unique members namely work place flexibility and work time flexibility.

The 5 factors were used as the framework in the SEM analysis. From the SEM analysis as illustrated in Figure 1, it was clear that workplace flexibility was not yet the main driver to either engagement or job satisfaction. However, it affected the quality of relationship with others, including both boss and colleagues. Between work time flexibility and place flexibility, the former appeared to be more compatible to Thai marketing researchers. Place flexibility was less relevant, with employees still wanting to come to the office where they have interaction with other people. The office is seen as being like a community, not only a workplace.



**Figure 1** SEM Analysis of five group factors of employee engagement.

**Response to research question three:** “*what are the meaning and dimension of flexibility in the views of different generations?*” From the qualitative in-depth interviews with top management persons, as well as the group discussion among marketing research employees, flexibility was not about the standard policy, but more about the understanding of each employee's situation which could be defined as ‘situational flexibility’. This understanding enriched the relationship with others in the workplace which was identified as one of the key drivers to satisfaction and engagement, respectively. Figure 2 illustrated the relationship with other people.



Figure 2 Word Cloud Generated from atlas.ti

(This figure illustrates that the relationship with other people was more relevant to Thai marketing researchers than the flexibility policy.)

**Response to research question four:** “*what strategies/ practices can be constructed from this research in relation to workplace flexibility and employee engagement?*” The study highlighted the difference of values among different generations. While Gen Y employees focused on themselves, including how much they could earn or how they could grow, the Baby Boomers placed more importance on the organization’s stability and top management’s capability. As a result, different expectations led to different degrees of fulfilment. Additionally, life stage also influenced the expectation of employees. Work-life balance was more important to those with a family than to the single employees; therefore, good career advancement or higher compensation were less impactful to them than the manageable workload or the quality of life. Flexibility was not yet relevant to any generations’ needs. The study highlighted the 4Cs Drivers as key drivers to improve employees’ satisfaction and consequently the engaged-behaviors among Thai marketing research industry employees. The 4Cs Drivers included Characteristics of Job and Workplace-Life Quality, Corporate Equity, Capability and Relationship with Direct Report and Career Development Opportunity.

1. Characteristics of Job and Workplace-Life Quality: Work-life balance had become one of the key words in the organization, especially among gen X and workers with a family. It was not about the quantity of work they have to do, but more about the quality of workplace-life perceived by the employees. Thai marketing research employees accepted that they spent long hours in the workplace. Therefore, it was important they had to enjoy both the work they did as well as the working relationship and work environment.

2. Corporate Equity: External brand building was as important as the internal brand building. Top management persons played a crucial role in building the corporate equity. Their visions and actions were critical in driving, not only the business success, but also driving trust among employees.

3. Capability and Relationship with Immediate Boss: The importance of the relationship with their immediate boss appeared to be part of the hierarchical culture. Unlike the non-hierarchical culture where all people were equal and had the same rights, Thai marketing research employees felt that their supervisor or immediate boss had a certain level of power which could influence their career path. The healthy relationship impacted career advancement opportunity.

4. Career Development Opportunity: Soft skill training was as important as technical skill training. It gave employees updated skills that responded to the changing needs of customers, as well as the business context. One of the essential soft skills in this multigenerational-organization era was empathic communication.

### Recommendations for Future Research

As marketing research relies heavily on the expertise of analytical and consulting skills, the knowledge and experience of senior research consultants are essential. This may be one of the reasons why flexibility policy is not yet compatible with the marketing researchers' needs, as they need to discuss with senior research consultants in performing a piece of good work. Therefore, face-to-face communication is essential. Future research in other non-marketing research organizations would help elaborate how an organization can use flexibility policy as one of the engagement strategies.

### Conclusions

The results of the 3 stages of this study are quite consistent that flexibility policy/practice is not yet the key driver in enriching engagement among marketing researchers in Thailand. It may work well in a more individualistic culture and more stand-alone type of work where team discussion is not necessary.

The study also highlights that Thai marketing researchers define flexibility as 'understanding' among people rather than a policy. They do not yet need a workplace flexibility policy as the office is defined as a 'community' where friends are located and supported. They feel that face-to-face discussion is helpful with the work itself and lessens the degree of problems. Time flexibility is more compatible with employees' needs. Again, it is about the understanding of a person's situation rather than a policy.

Although flexibility is not clearly stated as an important engagement driver among Thai marketing researchers, it is seen as one of the 'latent needs' among employees in this digital-driven era. The emerging digital lifestyle has affected how people do things in the workplace. Therefore, the flexibility option should be available and clearly stated for employees' choices in the future.

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