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**CERTIFICATE OF RESEARCH  
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**Understanding Work Engagement of Contingent Professionals**

A Narrative Inquiry into Contract-based Medical Staff

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***Abstract:***

*Work engagement, a significant concept in human resources management, has evolved significantly over the past years. This study explores work engagement among skilled contract workers through a narrative inquiry. Guided by the Job-Demand-Resources (JD-R) model, this research focuses on the antecedents and mediators of work engagement of skilled contract workers, by understanding their lived experiences as highly-skilled, voluntary contract workers. The increasing prevalence of contingent employment (i.e. non-standard employment), necessitates this investigation. Traditional research has predominantly focused on standard, full-time employment, leaving a gap in understanding non-standard, voluntary skilled contract work. This study aims to contribute to academic literature by examining work engagement among this under-researched group, addressing how job demands and resources impact their engagement. By providing insights into the lived experiences of skilled contract workers, this research intends to inform both academic and practical perspectives on sustaining engagement in non-standard work arrangements.*

***Keywords:***

*Work engagement; Employee Engagement; Contingent employment; Skilled Contract Workers; Labor Market Trends; Job-Demand-Resources (JD-R) Model; Narrative inquiry*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Historic Context

*Work engagement*, often used interchangeably with *employee engagement*, has gained significant popularity within the field of human resources management over the past 35 years. Since the recent COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2023, *quiet quitting*, that is, the manifestation of a lack of work engagement by workers who are not willing to go above and beyond the minimum of their job descriptions, has increased in prevalence (Harter, 2022) and is quoted in mainstream media, business literature, and increasingly academic literature alongside other terms linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as *The Great Resignation* (e.g., Liu-Lastres, Wen & Huang, 2023 or Formica & Sfodera, 2022).

While the definition of work engagement should be more closely examined as part of the literature review, the outcomes and consequences of work engagement appear to be exactly what most organizations need: more fulfilled, motivated, and committed employees who channel their energy toward achieving desired organizational outcomes such as job performance (Bakker & Bal, 2010; Macey & Schneider, 2008), client satisfaction (Salanova et al., 2005), and corporate financial returns (Bakker et al., 2011; Xanthopolou et al., 2009).

Much is known about work engagement and its antecedents and consequences, thanks in large part to an extensive (and still expanding) range of academic literature on this topic (see Saks, 2006, Schaufeli 2013, or Bakker et al., 2023). A simple literature search of the academic database ABI/INFORM in May 2024, using the interchangeable search terms '*work engagement*' and '*employee engagement*,' found that more than 26,500 peer-reviewed articles on this topic were published over the past five years alone.

The existing literature on work engagement, as extensive as it may be today, has been mostly established within the paradigm of the prevalent form of employment, that is, standard, permanent, and full-time employment relationships (Cappelli & Eldor, 2021; Djibo et al., 2010). In recent decades, however, the employment landscape has been experiencing a seismic shift: a substantial proportion of today's workers no longer fit into the definition of a “*standard, permanent, full-time employee*” (e.g., Charalampous et al., 2022, Osterman 1988, Handy, 1994).

Global surveys show that more than 37 percent of the US workforce (Deloitte, 2018) and 14 percent of the European workforce (OECD, 2021) now find themselves in contingent, ‘atypical’ or ‘non-standard’ employment, for example, employee temps (on-call workers), agency temps, leased employees (employees of agencies), and independent contractors (Cappelli & Eldor, 2021). A more exhaustive classification of the various types of non-standard contingent employment can be found in the literature review section below.

Cappelli and Keller (2013) eloquently noted that:

*“[...] alternatives to the archetypal model of full-time regular employment are now both prevalent and wide-ranging”* (p575).

However, the authors further explained:

*“[...] most of our management and social science notions about economic work are based on the full-time employment model. We know relatively little about the operation and consequences of alternative arrangements [...]”* (p575).

Non-traditional work arrangements are a universal and growing phenomenon (McKeown and Cochrane, 2017). Given this fundamental evolution in the world of work, which includes the proliferation of contingent work across all hierarchical levels in an organization, serious

academic exploration into work engagement – specifically in the context of contingent work – appears justified and necessary.

## **1.2. Rationale for this Research**

Much has yet to be understood about the context in which skilled contract workers operate, how they think about career development and how they perceive their respective professional environments, what types of incentives motivate them, how they develop belonging and organizational identification (e.g. Spreitzer et al, 2017). The relevance of investigating work engagement in the context of contingent employment becomes even more pronounced when considering the unique challenges and dynamics associated with non-standard work arrangements, which often adversely affect their engagement levels (Ashford, George, & Blatt, 2007; Kalleberg, 2009). Understanding the factors that drive work engagement among this growing segment of the workforce is crucial for developing tailored strategies and interventions that can foster motivation, commitment, and well-being in these employees, ultimately contributing to organizational success.

Furthermore, the shift toward a more flexible and decentralized workforce has significant implications for organizational practices and policies. As businesses increasingly rely on contingent workers at all hierarchical levels to meet evolving business demands and maintain competitiveness, it becomes essential to recognize and address the unique needs and expectations of this workforce. In industry particularly, however, there remains almost total absence of any consideration or understanding of non-standard workers (McKeown & Pichault, 2021). By exploring work engagement in the context of contingent employment, this research aims to provide valuable insights that can inform the development of inclusive and adaptive

management practices, promoting a more engaged, productive, and resilient workforce across all employment types.

### **1.3. Research Question & Contribution to the Area**

The overall goal of this study is to assess and explain whether the concept of work engagement and its antecedents manifest themselves in the same way for non-traditional, skilled, voluntary contract workers as they do with ‘traditional, full-time, permanent employees. Steering this proposed study is the well-established “Jobs Demands-Resources” model (Bakker, Demerouti & Sanz-Vergel, 2023; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001), which will be further elaborated on in a following sub-chapter.

The development of academic literature in this field lags significantly behind the rapid developments and lived experience in industry (Sulbot et al, 2022; Cascio & Boudreau, 2015; Cappelli & Keller, 2013 and Connelly & Gallagher, 2004). And of those empirical studies into work engagement of contingent workers that do exist, much is based on the premise that *“nonstandard [work] is substandard compared to standard work arrangements.”* (Broschak et al., 2008, p8). In academic literature, discussions around employment contracts and contracting models, typically make a distinction in two groups of workers: lower-skilled and higher-skilled contractors (Bryant & McKeown, 2016). As earlier eluded to, the former group is mostly associated with precarious work and thought to lack autonomy over their work choices (Boyce, Ryan & Morgeson, 2007), whereas the latter group are understood to be self-directed professionals with marketable skills, predominantly in professional, technical, and managerial roles and voluntarily venturing into contingent work arrangements (Kunda, Barley & Evans, 2002).

As and when work engagement has been studied in the context of contingent employment, the research focus has been particularly on precarious work, i.e. involuntary, blue collar work (Sulbout et. al., 2022; Cascio & Bourdreau, 2015). However, little to no attention has so far been given to those groups of workers who do not fall into the category of precarious work. This includes workers with unique skill sets who are willing to sell their unique skills on fixed-term project bases on a fully voluntary basis (e.g. this (Roberts & Douglas, 2022; Djibo et al, 2010).

The overarching research question is proposed as:

**What are the antecedents and mediators of work engagement in the context of skilled, voluntary, fixed-term contractors?**

The purpose of this research, therefore, drawing from existing models of work engagement, is to develop a deeper understanding of the factors that determine work engagement in the context of skilled, voluntary contingent workers by contrasting the known antecedents and mediators of work engagement from the prevalent form of employment (full-time, permanent) to (non-traditional) skilled, voluntary contingent workers. This research, thereby, shines a light on an area that has until now been insufficiently researched and understood by academics and practitioners alike. Djibo et al. (2010) stressed that in order to define and implement congruent managerial strategies and interventions to sustain individual performance of contingent workers, a better understanding of predictors and antecedents of their performance is first required. By doing so, this research makes an important contribution to an academic body of knowledge that to date lags behind the developments in industry.

On a practical level, this study intends to inform practice by providing salient perspectives of lived experiences of a critical & growing – yet insufficiently understood – community of an organization’s workforce. Understanding the antecedents and mediators of work engagement of the various types of workers within an organization, will better enable HR practitioners, business leaders, and people managers alike to develop, deploy and execute meaningful standards and interventions.

**1.4. Theoretical Framework Guiding this Research**

Guiding this study will be the Job-Demand-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti 2007, 2014; Demerouti et al. 2001), providing a theoretical foundation and framework for this

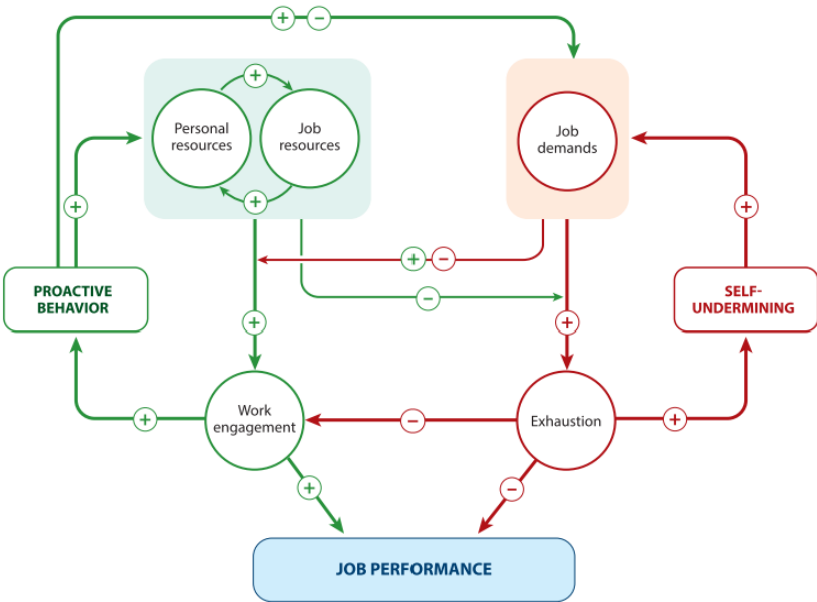


Figure 1: Updated Job-Demand Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2023)

research. This model offers a framework to understand how job demands and job resources, which are further discussed below, influence individuals’ possible engagement with their work and their possible exhaustion from work, such as fatigue or burnout (Moeckli et al, 2020; Han 2016; Demerouti et al, 2001). Preference for the JD-R model stems from the fact that it is one of the most well-established and most widely used models to explain work engagement &

disengagement (also referred to in literature as ‘work exhaustion’ at times) and related impact on job performance, thereby enabling the researcher to establish probable cause and effect and to adequately explore the relation between antecedents and work engagement (Singh & James, 2016). In essence, the JD-R model proposes two psychological processes:

1. ‘Job Demands’ leading to negative consequences like exhaustion or burnout, and
2. ‘Job Resources’ leading to a positive consequence of work engagement.

While Job demands are those “*aspects of a job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs*” (Demerouti et al, 2001, p. 501); Job resources, on the other hand, are defined as “*those physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of the job that are either/or (1) functional in achieving work goals, (2) reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, (3) stimulate personal growth, learning and development*” (Demerouti et al, 2001, p. 501). In addition, the JD-R model has over the years been validated across many countries and a wide range of industries, including healthcare (e.g. Kohnen et al, 2023; Keyko et al, 2016; Kutney-Lee et al, 2013), which will also form the setting of this proposed research.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Exhaustive as the literature on the topic of work engagement has become since Kahn's publication in 1990, the focus for this research has been on seminal literature with a clear & narrowly defined focus and based on a robust theoretic foundation.

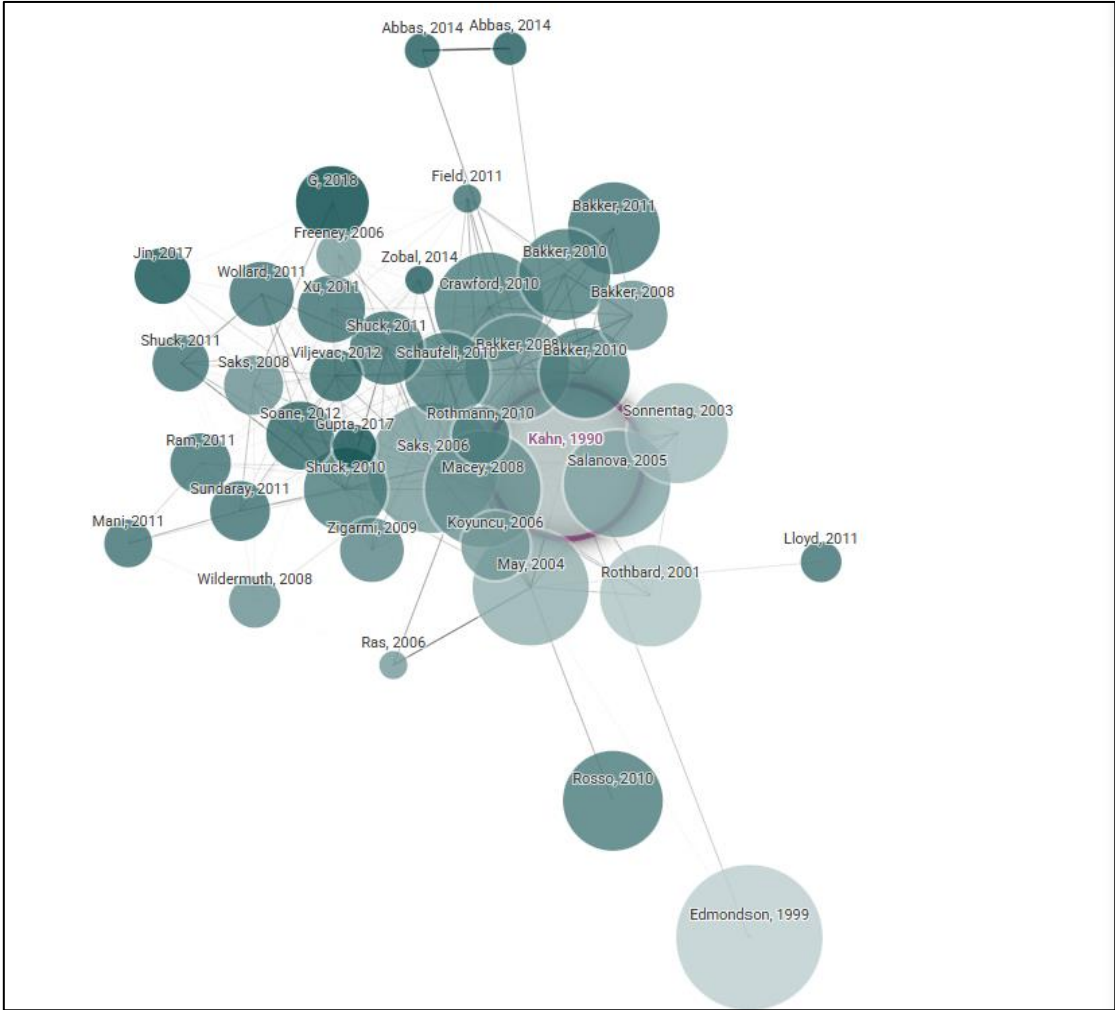


Image 1: Literature Heat Map citing Kahn (1990)

By reviewing the seminal literature of the past three decades, specifically where the research focus was on the engagement of skilled contract workers, three points start to emerge, which will be explored and highlighted further in the coming sub-chapters:

1. **A Common Definition of Engagement:** While the topic of work engagement has been well researched by academics and business consultants alike, it continues to mean different things to different people (see, for example, Kahn (1990), Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter (2001), Saks (2006), Bakker et al. (2008) or Kim et al. (2012)).
  
2. **Quantitative vs Qualitative Understanding of Engagement:** According to an exhaustive review of seminal literature by Singh & James (2016) across a range of computerized databases in the years up to their publication, most empirical research into the topic of work engagement has been quantitative in nature. Indicative findings from the ongoing literature review since Singh & James’s publication, point towards a continuation of this trend also in more recent years.
  
3. **Engagement in the Context of Contingent Work:** As already highlighted in the introduction section, significant gaps exist in understanding whether existing engagement theories apply to the rapidly growing population of ‘non-standard’ employees. While some effort has been made in recent years, progress in academic literature lags significantly behind developments in industry. Where academic research has focused on work engagement in the context of contingent work, it was mostly based on the premise that “*nonstandard [work] is substandard work*” (Broschak et al., 2008, p8) and hence focused specifically on the lower-end talent spectrum, i.e. workers in precarious, involuntary, blue-collar roles (Sulbout et. al., 2022, Cascio & Bourdreau, 2015). Insufficient attention has been given to date to skilled, voluntary contingent workers who sell their unique skill sets on fixed-term, project bases (Djibo et al, 2010).

## 2.1. Definition of 'Work Engagement'

William Kahn (1990) was the pioneer in investigating engagement and disengagement at work and in his ground-breaking article he defined engagement as:

*"[...] the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence, and active full role performances"* (p. 700).

A different perspective was provided by Maslach et al. (2001), who conceptualized engagement as the antithesis of burnout, namely a positive affective state of work-related wellbeing. Building on this view, Schaufeli et al. (2002) introduced the concept of work engagement, consisting of three components: vigor, dedication and absorption. Similarly, Bakker et al. (2008) define work engagement as: *"a positive, fulfilling, affective-motivational state of work-related well-being"* (p. 187), focusing on one's motivation and well-being. The main difference between Kahn's model and Schaufeli et al's or Bakker et al's is that the former is based on the analysis of needs and motives, while the latter aims to describe an emotional state (Imperatori, 2017).

Another significant contribution to the academic foundations of employee engagement was made by Saks (2006 & 2019), who defined employee engagement as: *"a distinct and unique construct consisting of cognitive, emotional and behavioral components associated with individual role performance"* (p. 602). Yet another noteworthy definition, offered by Kim et al. (2012), define it as: *"an individual employee's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral state directed toward desired organizational outcomes"* with the focus being particularly on the organizational outcomes.

While no single definition of work engagement has yet emerged – in large part due to a lack of consensus among scholars and practitioners as to what exactly it is (Schaufeli, 2013), what these various definitions of engagement seem to have in common is that they all have an attitudinal and a behavioral component, i.e. a shared notion that engagement is “[...] a desirable condition, has an organizational purpose, and connotes involvement, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, focused effort, and energy [...]” (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p.4). Given the unique characteristics of contingent work and contingent workers, this research will adopt Bakker’s and Schaeufeli’s definition of work engagement, i.e. “a positive, fulfilling, affective-motivational state of work-related well-being” (Bakker, 2008).

**2.2. Research into the Work Engagement of Contingent Workers**

The rapid proliferation of non-traditional forms of work arrangements in the past decades had the unintended consequence that interested scholars pursued their research without an accepted

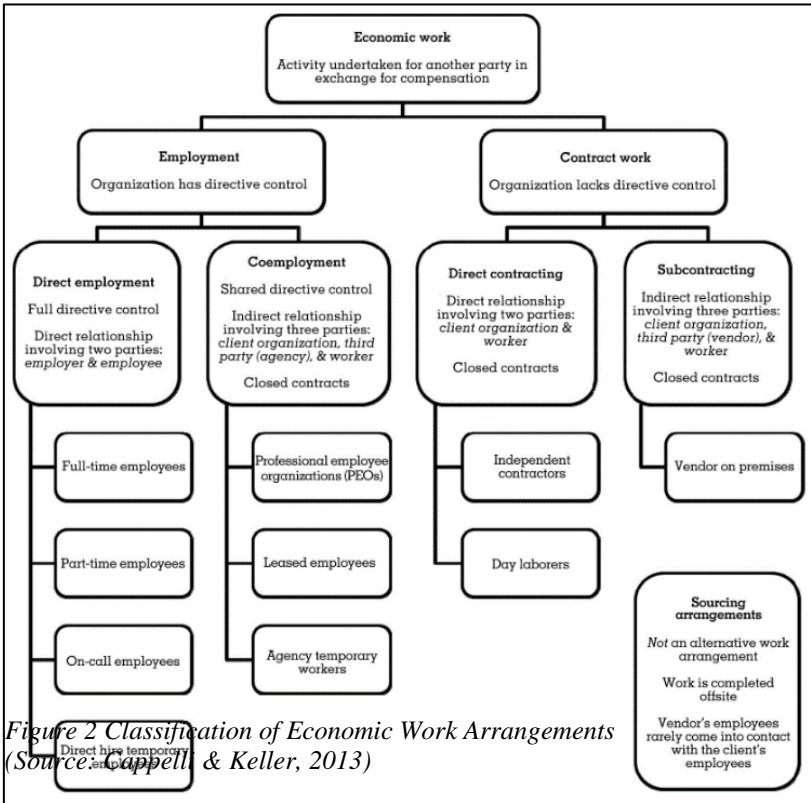


Figure 2 Classification of Economic Work Arrangements (Source: Cappell & Keller, 2013)

and shared vocabulary, often leading to the use of opaque or nebulous concepts – i.e. applying wide & overly generic terminology – thereby offering subsequent researchers little guidance for forming hypotheses across the different work arrangements on basic questions such as what factors explain individual work engagement, attitudes, and performance (Capelli & Keller, 2013). Capelli & Keller, building on the theoretical construct of ‘control’ (control over work process primarily), tried to offer a classification of Economic Work Arrangements that is featured in Figure 2.

While some progress has been made in past years to expand studies from the traditional employee-organization relationship (EOR) into the contingent domain (Yang, 2023; Solaqua, 2022; or Glavin & Schieman, 2022), prominent scholars in this field share the conclusion that work engagement in the context of contingent work relationships remains insufficiently researched (see, for example, Gallagher & McLean Parks, 2001; Connelly & Gallagher, 2004; Djibo et al., 2010; Cascio & Bourdreau, 2015; Abraham, et al., 2018; or, more recently, Cappelli & Eldor, 2021).

Further, as highlighted in the previous chapter, as and when academic research has taken place in the context of contingent work, it was mostly based on the premise that “*nonstandard [work] is substandard work*” (Broschak et al., 2008, p8). Hence, in reviewing the seminal literature – and supported by Table 1 below – work engagement remains particularly under-researched for skilled & voluntary contingent workers.

Table 1 below categorizes existing academic studies based on the topic of behavioral research and also by type of contingent employment against which the research was conducted. It further shows the contingent workers’ skill levels from where the studies’ samples were drawn. While

Table 1 is by no means an exhaustive list, it showcases a solid selection of relevant studies and tries to highlight the apparent research gap within the academic literature.

<b>S No.</b>	<b>Author &amp; Year</b>	<b>Sample Size</b>	<b>Skill Level (Low Mid High)</b>	<b>Theory or Research Framework</b>
1	Chambel & Castanheira (2012)	393 Agency temporary workers	LOW - (Blue collar labourers)	Social Exchange Theory
2	Chambel & Sobral (2011)	240 Agency temporary workers	no mention - (Call Centre Workers)	Social Exchange Theory
3	Buch et al (2010)	2,021 Agency temporary workers	MID - (35% college or university educated)	Social Exchange Theory
4	Coyle-Shapiro et al (2006)	392 Leased employees	LOW - (Blue collar labourers)	Social Exchange Theory
5	Ang et al (2003)	213 Direct hire temporary employees	MID - (Skilled technical roles)	Social Exchange Theory
6	Ang et al (2003)	213 Direct hire temporary employees	MID - (Skilled technical roles)	Organizational Justice
7	Collinson (1999)	383 Agency temporary workers	MID - (Skilled technical roles)	Organizational Justice
8	Kutaula et al (2020)	Meta-analysis of 96 studies	Various	Psychological Contract
9	Lapalme et al (2011)	186 Agency temporary workers	MID - (Clerical, junior managerial in Banking)	Psychological Contract
10a	Chambel & Castanheira (2006)	71 Agency temporary workers	LOW - (Blue collar workers)	Psychological Contract
10b	Chambel & Castanheira (2006)	149 Direct hire temporary employees	no mention - (Call Centre Workers)	Psychological Contract
11	Guest (2004)	24 Direct hire temporary employees	HIGH - (highly skilled project engineers)	Psychological Contract
12	Ho et al (2003)	1013 Leased employees	HIGH - (highly skilled IT system developers)	Psychological Contract
13	McDonald & Makin (2000)	43 Direct hire temporary employees	MID - (Customer service staff in holiday sector)	Psychological Contract
14	Clinton et al (2011)	1,169 Contract workers (various types)	Various	Job Satisfaction
15	Aletraris (2010)	143 Agency temporary workers	LOW to MID - (Clerical admin & factory work)	Job Satisfaction
16	Torka & Schyns (2007)	24 Agency temporary workers	LOW to MID - (blue collar metal workers)	Job Satisfaction
17	De Cuyper & De Witte (2006)	189 Direct hire temporary employees	LOW to MID - (65% blue collar and 35% clerical white collar)	Job Satisfaction
18	Boswell et al (2012)	623 Leased employees	MID - (mostly some college education)	Commitment

19	Clinton et al (2011)	1,169 Contract workers (various types)	Various	Commitment
20	Chambel & Sobral (2011)	240 Agency temporary workers	no mention - (Call Centre Workers)	Commitment
21	Liu et al (2010)	234 Agency temporary workers	no mention	Commitment
22	Galais & Moser (2009)	151 Agency temporary workers	LOW to MID - (Clerical admin & facility work)	Commitment
23	Slattery et al (2006 & 2008)	1,290 Agency temporary workers	MID (57% higher than high school)	Commitment
24	Van Breugel & Van Olffen (2005)	116 Agency temporary workers	MID (79.3% completed secondary education or above)	Commitment
25	Liden et al (2003)	98 Agency temporary workers	LOW to MID - (Clerical admin & factory work)	Commitment
26	Chiu et al (2015)	155 Agency temporary workers	MID - (Customer contact employees across 3 industries)	Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB)
27	Connelly et al (2011)	157 Agency temporary workers	MID - (88% college entry qualification or above)	Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB)
28	George et al (2010)	4,500 Agency temporary workers	MID - (87% high school education or above)	Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB)
29	Broschak et al (2008)	49 Agency temporary workers	LOW to MID - (Clerical staff in financial institutions)	Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB)
30	Moorman & Harland (2002)	117 Agency temporary workers	no mention	Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB)
31	Chattopahyay & George (2001)	137 Direct hire temporary employees	LOW to MID - (Clerical admin & factory work)	Social Identity Theory

*Table 1 Seminal literature focused on the study of engagement theories in the context of contingent work (Source: Cascio & Bourdreau, 2015)*

Looking at the period since 2015, several researchers have conducted studies focusing on the engagement of temporary agency workers, exploring various dimensions such as well-being, organizational support, and the implications of temporary employment on work attitudes.

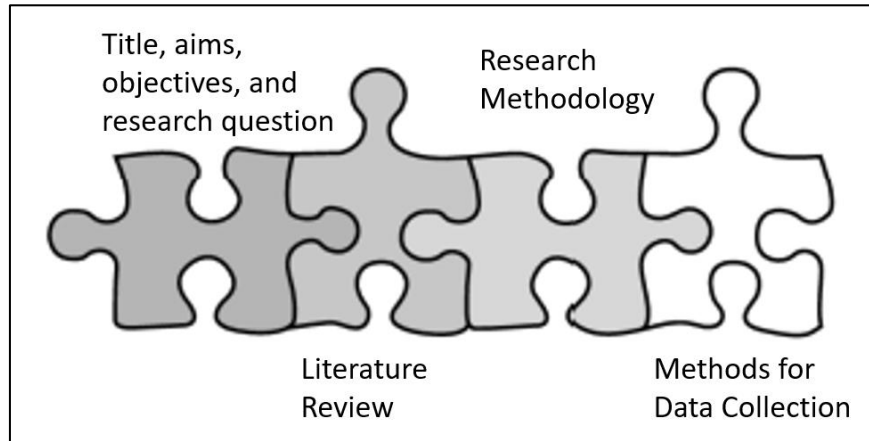
- Lopes, Chambel, & Cesario (2019) investigated the relationship between perceptions of organizational support (POS) and the well-being and engagement of temporary agency workers. Their hypotheses were tested with a sample of 3,983 temporary agency workers from across the services, manufacturing, construction, and other sectors.
- Chambel & Sobral (2018) focused on the effects of temporary agency work on workers' well-being. This study, based on Self-Determination Theory, was based on a sample of 3,300 Portuguese temporary agency workers in precarious work relationships.
- Liu, Qin, Liu & Lu (2022) researched into the 'why & when' of counterproductive behaviours of temporary workers in Chinese state-owned organizations, by studying 210 temporary workers across various levels of seniority and departments, with 76% of participants having college degree or above education level.
- Further, Hühnefeld, Gerstenberg & Hüffmeier (2020) conducted a systematic literature review to analyse the association between contingent work contract and job satisfaction, and of the twenty-eight scientific articles identified (covering a time period from 2004 to 2020, hence potentially overlapping with the literature review shared above), the vast majority of research focused on temporary agency workers in precarious roles.

Hence, the indicative results here echoes that of the research conducted up to 2015, i.e. that highly skilled, voluntary contractors remain an under-researched group and hence warrant closer examination.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Ensuring methodological fit, i.e. creating an internal consistency among various elements of

the research project (research question, state of the literature to date, the research design, and the expected contribution to the body of academic), is a critical component in academic research (Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Stokes & Wall, 2014). Beyond this methodological fit,



**Figure 3:** *The jigsaw concept of how all parts of research thinking should fit together (Source: Stoke & Walls, 2014)*

however, it is worthwhile to highlight the researcher's underlying research philosophy, that is the "system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge" (Saunders, et al., 2019). This helps frame the world views of the researcher, his assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology), about what constitutes acceptable knowledge (epistemology), and about the impact of one's own role and values on the research process itself (axiology) (Saunders, et al, 2019).

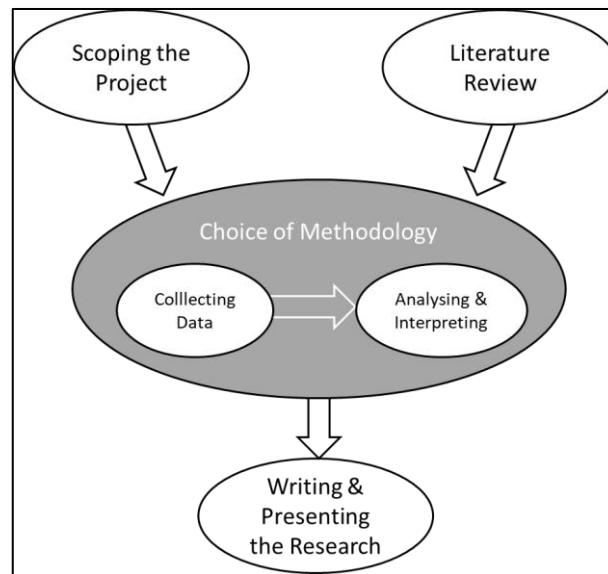
Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007) aptly pointed out that the kind of method(s) a researcher chooses is directly impacted by one's underlying assumptions. Given that "*the act of research is intrinsically linked to choices about the way you see and form opinions about the world*" (Stokes & Wall, 2014, p. 86), such choices and assumptions need to be outlined and articulated to help justify one's own decisions in relation to the chosen research method (Saunders, et al., 2019). Those choices mostly pertain to the following three assumptions:

- Ontological assumptions ('nature of reality'): The lived experiences of work engagement by skilled, voluntary contract workers is highly subjective and linked to

one's unique experiences. It is argued here, therefore, that reality is socially constructed and requires interpretation to understand the individual, experienced meaning.

- Epistemological assumptions ('acquisition of knowledge'): Acquiring knowledge about the lived experiences of skilled, voluntary contract workers requires the researcher to understand the world from the research subject's unique viewpoint and is gained from interpreting the meaning and perspectives of participants.
- Axiological assumptions ('role of values in research'): Given the interpretivist stance of the researcher, it is argued here that research is intrinsically value-laden and that both the research subject's but also the researcher's values, beliefs, and perspectives influence both the research process and the research outcome. The focus here is on understanding the phenomena within their unique social and cultural context. Hence, meaning and interpretation are context-dependent and subjective.

Most academic research in the field of work engagement has historically been quantitative in nature (Macey, 2021), resting deep in positivistic and post-positivistic assumptions and being primarily concerned with prediction and control (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2012). Hence, researchers who adopt such positivistic approaches go to great length to follow a logical, experiment-like process, maintaining objectivity and trying to avoid subjective opinions and assumptions from impacting their studies (Stokes, 2011).



**Figure 4:** Locating ‘Choice of Research Methodology’ within the research process  
(Source: Stokes & Wall, 2014)

This historic preference for quantitative research in the domain of work engagement has been despite the fact that work engagement reflects how people *experience* work (Bakker et al., 2011), with qualitative methods perfectly suited to understand exactly that, i.e. how research subjects subjectively *experience* work and work engagement and how they *perceive* it and *ascribe meaning* (Macey, 2021). With the main research question being “*How do skilled contract workers experience work engagement and fulfillment at work?*”, the goal here is to complement existing academic research by pivoting the focus beyond the traditional cause-and-consequence positivistic approach towards understanding the subjective experiences of the research subjects.

### 3.1. Research Approach

Based on the research question(s) and adequately accounting for the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions highlighted above, the researcher will adopt an interpretivist research approach, which seeks to account for the complexity of everyday

organizational life and requires rich, deep descriptions of the social system under study (Mourey, 2022).

Research design can typically be descriptive, exploratory, or explanatory in nature.

- *Descriptive Research*: Descriptive research aims to accurately and systematically describe a phenomenon, population, or situation. It focuses on answering "what" questions by providing detailed information and portraying characteristics or functions without manipulating any variables. For instance, a descriptive study might report on the demographic characteristics of a particular community (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019).
- *Explanatory Research*: Explanatory research seeks to understand the underlying reasons, causes, or relationships behind a phenomenon. It answers "why" and "how" questions, often by testing hypotheses and establishing cause-and-effect relationships. Explanatory studies aim to provide insights into the mechanisms driving the observed outcomes (Babbie, 2010).
- *Exploratory Research*: Exploratory research is conducted to investigate an area where little is known or to explore new insights and ideas. It addresses "what" and "how" questions and is often used as a preliminary step to identify variables, develop hypotheses, or refine research questions. Exploratory research is characterized by flexibility and openness to new information (Stebbins, 2001).

The researcher deems the exploratory design to be most suitable to adequately address the research question as this research seeks to uncover and understand the depth and complexity of individuals' experiences through their personal narratives. It thereby explores how individuals construct meaning and identity and through their rich, descriptive accounts describe the nuances and subtleties of human experiences of their lived experiences.

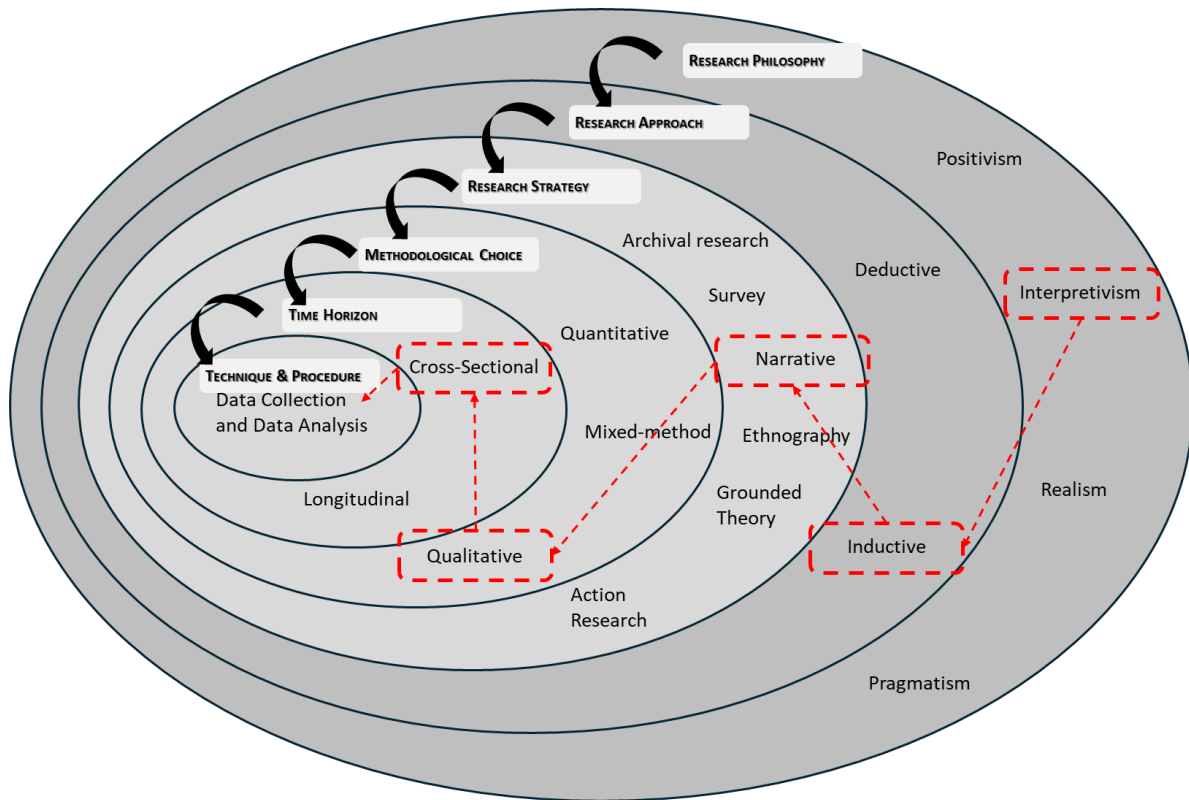


Figure 5: Research Onion (Source: Saunders, et al., 2019)

As highlighted at the outset of Chapter 2, various independent academic researchers agree that the linkage between worker engagement and performance remains insufficiently researched in the context of contingent work relationships; particularly for skilled contract workers. Further, as the initial review of seminal literature eluded to, as and when work engagement and performance have been researched within the field of contingent work, it was typically based on quantitative or mixed-method research approaches.

This research therefore adopts a qualitative research design as it intends to explore and understand the meaning individuals ascribe to a social problem (Creswell, 2014). Specifically, a narrative inquiry approach is intended for this study, which focuses on retrospection by exploring and understanding research subject’s current lived realities in the context of prior life experiences (Rossiter & Clark, 2007). The intention here is to construct coherent narratives that reconcile their lived experiences and subjective identity and sense making with existing

underlying theoretical models on the topic of work engagement. Seminal work that has influenced the field of narrative inquiry includes, besides others:

- “*Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*” by D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly (2000)
- Several seminal works by Barabar Czarniawska, including “*Narrative Construction of Reality*” (1996), “*Storytelling in Organizations*” (1998), or “*Narratives in Social Sciences*” (2004).
- Polkinghorne’s work on “*Narrative Configuration in Qualitative Analysis*” (1998).

### **3.2. Data Collection / Executive Interviewing**

While skilled, voluntary contract workers exist in pretty much all occupational fields today, this research draws its samples specifically from emergency healthcare & emergency security professionals (paramedics, physicians, specialist medical practitioners, or incidence response leaders) who are voluntarily in contingent employment relationships with their respective employer organization. The research subjects will be drawn from a contingent talent pool who are currently employed, on fixed-term contracts, by a leading multinational emergency healthcare & emergency security services firm.

Both the researcher (by merit of his position held within the organization) and the research subjects (by merit of their unique medical expertise & seniority of their roles) can be understood as ‘elite’. While there is no one single definition of what constitutes ‘elites’ in organizations, Aguinis & Solarino (2019) aptly describe elites as:

*“key decision makers who have extensive and exclusive information and the ability to influence important firm outcomes, either alone or jointly with others (e.g., on a board of directors).”*

This definition goes beyond defining elites by traditional role criteria and instead expands the definition to those who are:

*“afforded elite status because of their accumulated experience, knowledge, respect and/or notoriety.”* (Moore & Stokes, 2012).

Given this research is a narrative inquiry, conducting elite interviews, the research will focus on research subjects who will be engaged by means of semi-structured interviews, anchored around key elements of existing work engagement theories, but with a clear understanding that the narrator owns the narrative and hence the interviews will to a large extent be influenced by the research subjects themselves, depending on what experiences they ascribe what meaning and importance to. However, these interviews will have a flexible guide with above key elements at its core and allow for probing and follow-up. The contributions from these elite interviews, as Tansey (2007) emphasized, will also be helpful in making inferences about larger populations within the organization.

With the research subjects selected from within the researcher’s employer organization, this comes with some clear advantages, one such being that both research subjects and researcher are attuned to the same sociolinguistic practices, avoiding misunderstandings or lost time because the researcher is not yet familiar with the community-specific usage of language (Perera, 2021). Another advantage of such elite interviews is linked to access to research subjects and research sites and the researcher’s ability to nudge research subjects out of their comfort zone. Status and authority, paired with familiarity (presumably friendly familiarity) allows unhindered access, frank & candid conversations, and further allows the researcher who

holds status in the eyes of the research subjects, to interrupt or question without major relationship repercussions (Garton & Copeland, 2010; Perera, 2021).

### **3.3. Possible Limitations**

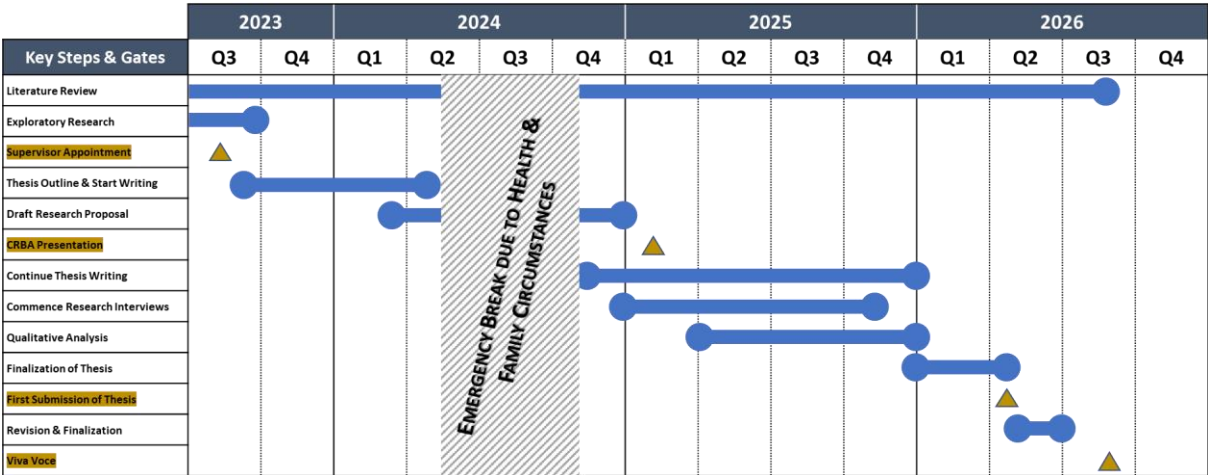
The potential limitations of this study could include the following:

- Given it is proposed to approach this study as a narrative inquiry, this research will deal with a relatively small sample size only. However, the small sample size will allow for in-depth dialogue with each research participant.
- Further, building theory from a small number of cases will require explicit justification and explanation of logic. This requires the added step of justifying why the research question is best addressed in this manner and to convince readers through sound argument that the research question is crucial for organizations and/or theory (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

# 4. WORK PLAN

## 4.1. Research Timeline

The project plan below offers an estimated timeframe for the completion of this proposed research. During the execution of this doctoral research project, the timeline and project plan will be continually updated and will form a main component of the regular progress reporting with the dissertation supervisor.



## **4.2. Estimated Research Budget**

This research will be privately funded without any financial support, such as scholarships, grants or subsidies for the research, authorship and/or publication of this proposed research work. Further, no existing or potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this proposed research has been identified.

A rough cost estimation was conducted, however, as the total cost of this research is estimated to remain well below USD 15,000, no detailed cost breakdown has been included in this research proposal. Further, this thesis is fully funded from the researcher's personal financial resources.

The main cost drivers are related to international travel, such as to join BSI's annual International Week and similar events, yet those events are not directly related to the proposed research at hand and were consequently not accounted for here.

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## APPENDIX I

### ABOUT THE PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER

#### CURRENT OCCUPATION(S):

##### **International SOS**

- Group General Manager, HR – full time
  - Member of the Group’s global Management Board & Co-Chair of the Global HR Executive Committee
  - Oversee the end-to-end human capital agenda at leadership level, for the roughly top 300 roles among a total workforce of 14,000.

##### **Singapore University of Social Sciences**

- Adjunct Faculty – part time
  - Part-time appointment at the SR Nathan Graduate School of Human Development
  - Course leader, including curriculum design & exam development, for the graduate-level courses: “Diversity, Equity & Inclusion at Work” and “Gig Economy & the Changing Workforce”

##### **Catalyse Consulting**

- Non-Executive Director – part-time
  - Governance, oversight and external counsel vis-à-vis the executive management team
  - Ensuring ethical business conduct and focus on long-term, sustainable success

##### **Strangas Coaching & Consulting**

- Executive Coach – part time
  - Freelance executive & career coach

## **PRIOR ROLES:**

### **DB Schenker**

- Director & Regional Head of Talent & Development
- Director, Global Talent Management

### **Kelly Outsourcing & Consulting Group**

- Consulting Director, Talent Supply Chain Strategy
- Regional Head of People Operations
- Regional Operations Manager, Non-employee Workforce

### **PwC Consulting**

- Consulting Manager, Business Transformation Practice
- Senior Consultant, Forensic Fraud Investigations & Business Recovery Services

### **DB Schenker**

- Internal Audit & Compliance Manager
- Logistics Operations Manager

### **Austrian & UN Armed Forces**

- Commissioned Logistics Officer, UN Peacekeeping Battalion (AUSBATT UNDOF)
- Commissioned Officer, EU Outer Border Protection

## **PROFESSIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS:**

- CNN Freedom Project: Project member exposing & preventing human trafficking in electronics supply chains across Malaysia and Taiwan.
- EICC Code of Conduct: Worked with the Electronics Industry Citizenship Coalition ('EICC') and select members, such as Motorola, Seagate, Dell to adopt, implement and audit the roll-out of EICC's Code of Conduct in order to ensure its workers are treated with dignity and respect and business operations are conducted responsibly and ethically.
- UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC): Industry adviser contributing to the publication "*The Role of Recruitment Fees and Abusive Fraudulent Recruitment Practices of Recruitment Agencies in Trafficking in Persons*".

- World Employment Confederation: Served as Asia-Pacific Board Committee Member at the WEC (formerly known as ‘CIETT’), representing Kelly Services as corporate member.
- Skills Framework Singapore: Adviser to Singapore’s Ministry of Trade & Industry and the Institute for Human Resources Professionals to guide in the development of future-ready skills development frameworks.

## EDUCATION:

### Degree Courses:

- Doctorate in Business Administration (BSI & IAE Lyon, LU & FR) - ongoing
- Postgraduate Certificate, Psychology of Leadership (Apollon Hochschule, DE)
- Masters, International Management (Fachhochschule Joanneum, AT)
- Bachelor, Strategic Military Studies (Theresian Military Academy, AT)

### Non-Degree Courses:

- International Labour Migration (University of Oxford, UK)
- Psychological Approaches to Executive Coaching (Cambridge University, UK)
- Advanced Mandarin Language & Cultural Studies (Fudan University, CN)