

THE EFFECT OF WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY ON EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN THE TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

THE MODERATING ROLE OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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Abstract: *The importance of workplace flexibility in fostering employee engagement has gained significant attention, particularly in the dynamic context of the tourism industry's human resource management. This study examines the influence of four dimensions of workplace flexibility (working time flexibility, workspace flexibility, functional flexibility, and operational flexibility) on employee engagement, specifically focusing on the moderating role of transformational leadership. The study utilized a structured online questionnaire, completed by 400 employees from tourism enterprises. Data were analyzed using SPSS 22, employing regression and moderation analyses. The findings indicate that all four dimensions of workplace flexibility exhibit significant positive relationships with employee engagement. Additionally, transformational leadership significantly moderates these relationships, enhancing the positive impact of workplace flexibility on employee engagement. This study offers practical implications for tourism managers seeking to enhance workforce engagement through flexible practices and effective leadership strategies, while providing valuable insights into the scholarly understanding of workplace flexibility and employee engagement in the tourism sector.*

• Keywords: workplace flexibility, employee engagement, transformational leadership, tourism industry.

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1. Introduction

The tourism and hospitality industry relies on workplace flexibility to improve work-life balance, well-being, and job satisfaction (Kossek et al., 2015). Flexibility, encompassing working time, workspace, functional, and operational dimensions, enhances organizational efficiency, particularly during disruptions like pandemics. Flexible arrangements foster autonomy and employee engagement, but mismanaged flexibility, such as excessive remote work, may lead to burnout, disengagement, and turnover, reducing productivity (Lee et al., 2024). Limited research explores flexibility's impact on engagement in this sector, especially under transformational leadership, which promotes motivation, innovation, and goal alignment through inspirational and supportive practices (Ullah et al., 2021). Such leadership mitigates flexibility challenges, like work-life conflicts, via trust and communication, vital in high-pressure service settings (Asad et al., 2021).

This study investigates how four flexibility dimensions affect employee engagement in tourism, moderated by transformational leadership. It aims to guide HR strategies for organizational efficiency and sustainability (Lee et al., 2024). Using Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), Transformational

Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985), and Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 2017), it explains how leadership enhances resources and employee-employer relations to boost engagement. The study offers empirical insights for tourism, where engagement impacts service quality, and practical recommendations for leveraging leadership to optimize flexibility, ensuring employee well-being and organizational resilience (Davidescu et al., 2020).

2. Literature review

2.1. Theory background

This study examines the influence of workplace flexibility on employee engagement in the tourism and hospitality sector, with transformational leadership serving as a moderator, grounded in Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985), and Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 2017). COR Theory posits that workplace flexibility, such as adjustable schedules, restores resources like time and energy, reducing stress and enhancing engagement in the high-pressure tourism sector (Beigi et al., 2018). Transformational Leadership Theory suggests that leaders, through inspiration and individualized consideration, align employee goals with organizational objectives, thereby amplifying the benefits of flexibility by fostering autonomy and

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commitment (Krishnan, 2005). Social Exchange Theory suggests that flexibility fosters reciprocal obligations, leading to increased employee support and engagement, which is further strengthened by transformational leadership's trust-building efforts (Blau, 2017). This framework highlights the role of flexibility in enhancing engagement, moderated by transformational leadership in a dynamic industry.

2.2. Employee engagement

Employee engagement (EE), defined by vigor, dedication, and absorption, encompasses job engagement (role dedication) and organizational engagement (organizational commitment) (Saks, 2006). Engaged employees exceed job requirements, driving organizational success (Mercer, 2008). In tourism and hospitality, engagement reflects positive attitudes toward organizational values, enhancing service quality and effectiveness (Bin, 2015). Human resource practices, including training, rewards, and information sharing, foster engagement (Bin, 2015). Supportive work environments, positive relationships, competitive pay, and adequate supervision further enhance engagement, while negative perceptions reduce it (Robbins & Judge, 2013). Factors like gender, age, and education influence engagement levels. Aligning strategies with employee needs is critical for fostering engagement in this sector.

2.3. Hypothesis development

Workplace flexibility is vital for attracting talent, enhancing motivation, productivity, and engagement, and ultimately improving organizational performance in the tourism and hospitality sectors (Govender et al., 2018). Flexible arrangements enable a better work-life balance, reducing turnover and absenteeism while boosting performance during disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Davidescu et al., 2020). Flexibility, involving control over work location, timing, and methods, fosters job satisfaction and productivity (Rastogi et al., 2018; Davidescu et al., 2020). This study examines working time, workspace, functional, and operational flexibility.

Working time flexibility, such as flextime and compressed workweeks, reduces commuting time and work-life conflict, thereby decreasing stress and absenteeism in the tourism and hospitality industry (Rastogi et al., 2018). COR Theory suggests it preserves resources like time and energy, enhancing engagement (Hobfoll, 1989).

H1: Working time flexibility positively impacts employee engagement.

Workspace flexibility, including control over personalization and environmental factors (e.g., temperature, lighting), as well as options like flex offices, reduces work-life conflict and enhances engagement (Roskams & Haynes, 2020; Davidescu et al., 2020).

COR Theory posits that it provides resources, such as autonomy and comfort, which mitigate stress (Hobfoll, 1989).

H2: Workspace flexibility has a positive impact on employee engagement.

Functional flexibility, involving multi-skilling and task diversification, enables employees to adapt to varied roles, enhancing job variety and engagement (van den Berg & van der Velde, 2005). COR Theory suggests that it provides resources, such as skill development and stress reduction (Hobfoll, 1989).

H3: Functional flexibility positively impacts employee engagement.

Operational flexibility enables autonomous task management, which reduces turnover intentions, work-family conflict, and stress, while improving overall well-being (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Social Exchange Theory suggests it fosters reciprocal engagement through trust (Blau, 2017). Result-Only Work Environments prioritize performance, supporting flexibility (Govender et al., 2018). Transformational leadership amplifies the impact of flexibility on engagement (Ullah et al., 2021; Asad et al., 2021).

H4: Operational flexibility positively impacts employee engagement.

Moderating Effect of Transformational Leadership

Working time flexibility, such as flexible hours or compressed workweeks, enhances engagement by improving work-life balance and reducing stress (Hill et al., 2008). Transformational leaders amplify this by inspiring employees to align personal and organizational goals, strengthening engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Workspace flexibility, like remote or hybrid work, boosts engagement by offering autonomy and reducing commuting stress (Allen et al., 2013). Transformational leadership moderates this through individualized consideration, preventing isolation and aligning employees with organizational goals (Purvanova & Bono, 2009). Functional flexibility enhances engagement through skill development and job enrichment (Karatepe, 2013). Transformational leadership amplifies this by fostering intellectual stimulation and goal alignment (Avolio et al., 2004). Operational flexibility empowers proactive responses to disruptions, enhancing engagement (Deery & Jago, 2015). Transformational leadership moderates this by framing changes as opportunities for innovation (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

H5: Transformational leadership moderates the relationship between working time flexibility and employee engagement.

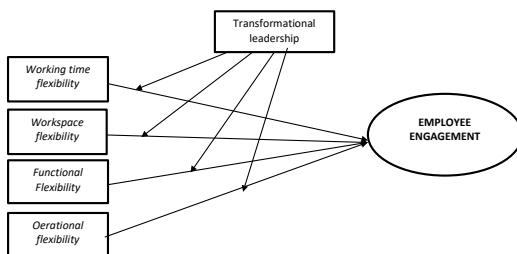
H6: Transformational leadership moderates the relationship between workspace flexibility and employee engagement.

H7: Transformational leadership moderates the relationship between functional flexibility and employee engagement.

H8: Transformational leadership moderates the relationship between operational flexibility and employee engagement.

We present a proposed research model based on the hypotheses above in Figure 1

Figure 1. The proposed research model



3. Research methods and materials

3.1. Sample and data collection

This study on the impact of workplace flexibility on employee engagement in Vietnam's tourism and hospitality industry collected 400 surveys from 450 diverse employees. For this research, the rules of Hoang & Chu (2008) are applied. The online survey, conducted from March 1 to May 1, 2025, was distributed via email and social media. An online survey was conducted from March 1 to May 1, 2025, and distributed via email, social media, and various communication platforms. Participants completed the questionnaire using a link provided. The collaboration between the researcher and alumni, who assisted in distributing the survey, facilitated the process. The study was further streamlined because many alumni from the Faculty of Tourism and Hotels at the University of Commerce are currently employed in the tourism industry. These alumni consistently supported the research by dedicating time to respond to the survey questions. Ultimately, 400 completed surveys were successfully collected, providing a substantial dataset for analysis with a high response rate.

3.2. Instrument development

The statements regarding the factors of working time flexibility, workspace flexibility, functional flexibility, operational flexibility, and employee engagement were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree." In this study, the measurement scales for these variables were adapted from previous research. Specifically, the independent variables were measured as follows: working time flexibility (3 items), workspace flexibility (6 items), functional flexibility (5 items), operational flexibility (5 items), and employee engagement (9 items). All measurement scales were appropriately adapted from the study by Lee et al. (2024). Additionally,

the moderating variable transformational leadership was developed based on the research by Carless et al. (2000), utilizing seven items.

4. Results

4.1. Demographic profile

Table 1: Demographic and organizational characteristics

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	185	46.25
	Female	215	53.75
Years of Experience	< 2 years	60	15
	2-5 years	198	49.5
	> 5 years	142	35.5
Business Establishment	Before 2000	75	18.75
	2000-2010	145	36.25
	After 2010	180	45

Table 1 shows that the sample consists of a slight majority of female respondents (53.75%), indicating a balanced yet slightly female-dominated workforce. Most employees (49.5%) have 2-5 years of experience, suggesting a moderately experienced group, while the majority of businesses (45%) were established after 2010, reflecting a trend toward newer organizations in the sector.

4.2. Reliability and validity of constructs

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and cronbach's alpha

	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	Standard Deviation
WTF	0.712	3.8633	.61919
WF	0.831	4.0621	.55293
FF	0.849	3.8940	.61049
OF	0.829	3.9855	.58063
TL	0.887	3.9471	.57835
EE	0.898	3.848	.62351

Table 2 indicates that the constructs (WTF, WF, FF, OF, TL, EE) exhibit good to excellent reliability (Cronbach's Alpha ranging from 0.712 to 0.898), with mean values between 3.848 and 4.0621 and low standard deviations (0.55293 to 0.62351), reflecting consistent data and moderate to high evaluations. WF shows the highest mean and lowest variability, while EE demonstrates the highest reliability.

Table 3: Rotated component matrix

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
WF4	.787			
WF1	.742			
WF2	.724			
WF6	.709			
WF3	.700			
WF5	.646			
FF4		.794		
FF5		.793		
FF1		.782		
FF3		.777		
FF2		.714		
OF2			.787	
OF1			.757	
OF4			.750	
OF3			.740	
OF5			.724	
WT1				.803

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
WT2				.761
WT3				.721

Extraction method: Principal component analysis.

Table 3 shows reliability test and EFA. It can be seen that Cronbach's Alpha of all constructs ranged from .646 to .803 (all > 0.6), hence, these constructs were reliable, and factors loadings were loaded into their own constructs.

4.3. Regression Analysis

Table 4: Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics
	B	Std. Error			
1	(Constant)	.522	.142	3.662	.000
	OF	.309	.027	11.501	.000
	FF	.230	.025	9.122	.000
	WF	.251	.029	8.682	.000
	WTF	.083	.026	.113	3.237

R Square: 0.610

F: 154.536

Source: SPSS calculation

Table 4 shows that the regression model has a strong fit ($R^2 = 0.610$, $F = 154.536$, $p < .001$), with OF ($\beta = .395$, $p < .001$), FF ($\beta = .309$, $p < .001$), WF ($\beta = .306$, $p < .001$), and WTF ($\beta = .113$, $p = .001$) all significantly predicting the outcome.

4.4. Moderation Analysis

Table 10 summarizes the regression results examining the direct and moderating effects of four flexibility variables (Operational Flexibility, Functional Flexibility, Workspace Flexibility, and Working Time Flexibility) on Employee Engagement, with Transformational Leadership (TL) as a moderator.

Table 5: Moderating effects of transformational leadership on flexibility variables and employee engagement

Model Summary (OF, TL, EE)						
R	R-square	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.6167	.3803	.1286	81.0061	3.0000	396.0000	.0000
Model						
Constant	3.9905	.0180	221.6960	.0000	3.9551	4.0258
OF	.4612	.0315	14.6627	.0000	.3994	.5231
TL	-.0327	.0312	-1.0453	.2965	-.0941	.0288
Int_1	.1499	.0637	2.3522	.0192	.0246	.2752
Conditional effects of the focal predictor at values of the moderator(s)						
TL	Effect	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
-.5784	.3745	.0523	7.1557	.0000	.2716	.4774
.0000	.4612	.0315	14.6627	.0000	.3994	.5231
.5784	.5479	.0442	12.3898	.0000	.4610	.6349
Model Summary (FF, TL, EE)						
R	R-square	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.538	.289	.147	53.673	3.000	396.000	.000
Model						
Constant	3.989	.019	207.288	.000	3.952	4.027
FF	.378	.032	11.783	.000	.315	.441
TL	-.040	.033	-1.200	.231	-.106	.026
Int_1	.125	.060	2.084	.038	.007	.243
Conditional effects of the focal predictor at values of the moderator(s)						
TL	Effect	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
-.578	.306	.051	5.945	.000	.205	.407

.000	.378	.032	11.783	.000	.315	.441
.578	.451	.043	10.544	.000	.367	.535
Model Summary (WF, TL, EE)						
R	R-square	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.551	.304	.144	57.666	3.000	396.000	.000
Model						
Constant	Coefficient	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
3.992	.019	209.421	.000	3.955	4.029	
WF	.393	.036	10.771	.000	.321	.464
TL	-.049	.033	-1.474	.141	-.114	.016
Int_1	.242	.071	3.420	.001	.103	.382
Conditional effects of the focal predictor at values of the moderator(s)						
TL	Effect	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
-.578	.252	.063	4.002	.000	.128	.376
.000	.393	.036	10.771	.000	.321	.464
.578	.533	.045	11.798	.000	.444	.622
Model Summary (WTF, TL, EE)						
R	R-square	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.436	.191	.168	31.070	3.000	396.000	.000
Model						
Constant	Coefficient	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
3.995	.021	194.058	.000	3.955	4.036	
WTF	.273	.038	8.199	.000	.208	.339
TL	-.035	.036	-.994	.321	-.105	.035
Int_1	.266	.062	4.271	.000	.144	.389
Conditional effects of the focal predictor at values of the moderator(s)						
TL	Effect	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
-.578	.119	.051	2.345	.000	.020	.219
.000	.273	.033	8.199	.000	.208	.339
.578	.427	.048	8.982	.000	.334	.521

Source: SPSS calculation

Table 5 summaries for the models (OF, FF, WF, WTF with TL and EE) show R-square values ranging from 0.191 to 0.380, with significant overall model fits ($F(3, 396)$ from 31.070 to 81.006, $p < .001$). The effects of OF ($B = .461$, $SE = .032$, $t = 14.663$, $p < .001$), FF ($B = .378$, $SE = .032$, $t = 11.783$, $p < .001$), WF ($B = .393$, $SE = .036$, $t = 10.771$, $p < .001$), and WTF ($B = .273$, $SE = .033$, $t = 8.199$, $p < .001$) on the outcome are statistically significant, with positive impacts. Significant interaction effects (Int_1) between each predictor and TL ($p < .05$) indicate that TL moderates these relationships, with conditional effects varying across TL levels. Thus, all hypotheses (H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6, H7, H8) were supported.

5. Discussion

5.1. General discussion

This study examines the influence of workplace flexibility on Employee Engagement (EE) in the tourism and hospitality industry, with Transformational Leadership (TL) serving as a moderator. Findings reveal that Operational Flexibility (OF), Functional Flexibility (FF), Workspace Flexibility (WF), and Working Time Flexibility (WTF) significantly enhance EE, with OF showing the strongest effect. These findings align with prior research emphasizing the role of flexible work arrangements in improving engagement, autonomy, and well-being in service-oriented sectors (Kossek et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2024). TL significantly moderates these relationships, particularly for WTF, by fostering a supportive culture, aligning employee and organizational goals, and mitigating work-life balance conflicts (Avolio & Bass, 2004; Asad et al., 2021). The regression model explains 60.6% of EE variance, highlighting the

synergistic effect of flexibility dimensions. Hospitality managers should implement flexible policies adaptive operations, role versatility, workspace options, and time management while promoting TL to enhance engagement and organizational resilience.

5.2. Theoretical implications

This research advances human resource management and organizational behavior literature by integrating the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Social Exchange Theory. COR Theory is extended by demonstrating that flexibility (e.g., adjustable schedules, workspaces) reduces stress and enhances engagement, which is amplified by TL's motivational resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Transformational Leadership Theory is reinforced, as inspirational motivation and individualized consideration strengthen the flexibility-engagement link, fostering commitment and innovation (Bass, 1985). Social Exchange Theory is supported, with flexibility creating reciprocal obligations, enhanced by TL's trust-building, leading to higher engagement (Blau, 2017). Reliable constructs (Cronbach's Alpha > 0.6 , KMO > 0.5 , variance explained $> 50\%$) provide a robust foundation for future flexibility and leadership research.

5.3. Practical implications

Workplace flexibility boosts EE, with TL as a critical moderator. Hospitality organizations should adopt flexible practices (operational adaptability, role adjustments, workspace designs, and time management) to enhance engagement and productivity. TL development programs, emphasizing inspirational motivation and individualized support, can maximize the benefits of flexibility, particularly for working time arrangements that address work-life balance (Ullah et al., 2021). Managers should train leaders and design tailored, flexible policies to reduce turnover and enhance service quality, thereby fostering a sustainable competitive advantage in the tourism and hospitality sectors.

5.4. Limitations and future research

This study has limitations. Self-reported survey data may introduce common method bias or social desirability effects; future research should use multi-source or longitudinal data (Kossek et al., 2015). Other moderators, such as organizational culture or job autonomy, were unexplored and warrant further investigation. The sample, collected from Vietnam's tourism and hospitality industry (March 1 to May 1, 2025) using a convenience sample of 400 participants via alumni networks, limits generalizability. Online survey distribution may exclude less tech-savvy employees, introducing bias. Future studies should employ diverse, randomized samples across regions and mixed-method designs to enhance robustness.

6. Conclusions

This study highlights the impact of workplace flexibility on Employee Engagement in tourism and hospitality, moderated by Transformational Leadership. Operational, Functional, Workspace, and Working Time Flexibility positively influence EE, explaining 60.6% of its variance, with TL enhancing these effects, particularly for WTF (Avolio & Bass, 2004; Asad et al., 2021). Grounded in COR Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Social Exchange Theory, the findings underscore flexible practices and leadership as key drivers of engagement (Hobfoll, 1989; Bass, 1985; Blau, 2017). Hospitality organizations should invest in flexible policies and TL training to foster an engaged workforce, enhancing service quality, efficiency, and sustainability.

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