Evaluation of Employee Engagement among Academic Staff in Ethiopian Universities

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Abstract
This study evaluates employee engagement among academic staff in Ethiopian universities, addressing a critical yet underexplored area impacting institutional effectiveness and educational quality. Employee engagement characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption is vital for enhancing academic staff productivity, motivation, and retention. Utilizing a descriptive research design with a quantitative approach, the study surveyed 383 academic staff selected through a multistage sampling technique based on Yamane's formula. Data were collected using a questionnaire comprising 12 engagement-related items and analyzed via descriptive statistics, with percentage values processed in SPSS version 26. Findings indicate notable challenges in engagement dimensions such as enthusiasm, pride in work, resilience, and concentration, where a majority of respondents exhibited low levels. For instance, 60.3% of the staff showed a lack of enthusiasm, and 73.9% did not express pride in their work, signaling motivational deficiencies that could undermine academic performance and institutional goals. Conversely, positive engagement facets such as absorption and a sense of belonging were reported by a substantial proportion of respondents, with 85.2% feeling connected to their universities and 64.7% experiencing immersion in work tasks. The study reveals a complex engagement profile driven by organizational factors like leadership quality, work environment, and recognition systems, which align with broader findings on academic staff motivation in Ethiopia and similar contexts. The mixed levels of engagement suggest an urgent need for targeted leadership development, improved workplace conditions, and enhanced career development initiatives to foster a committed and energized academic workforce.

Keywords: Employee engagement, Academic staff, Ethiopian universities, Work motivation, Organizational performance

INTRODUCTION
Employee engagement has emerged as a critical factor influencing the performance and sustainability of organizations globally, including higher education institutions (HEIs). In the context of universities, engaged academic staff are essential in fostering a productive learning and research environment, which ultimately impacts institutional success. Employee engagement encompasses the psychological investment and commitment of employees toward their work and organization, often encapsulated in dimensions such as vigor, dedication, and absorption. These elements are integral to driving higher organizational performance, innovation, and retention of talented staff in academia. Globally, research underscores the pivotal role of employee engagement in enhancing institutional outcomes, productivity, and competitive advantage in HEIs (Gede, 2024).

In Ethiopian public universities, unique contextual factors shape employee engagement levels. Resource constraints, infrastructural challenges, and specific leadership styles prevalent in these institutions have a significant bearing on staff motivation and commitment. For instance, the impact

of leadership styles—ranging from transformational to transactional—has been linked to differing engagement outcomes, thereby influencing academic staff productivity and overall organizational effectiveness. Similarly, the work environment, encompassing factors such as workplace relationships, rewards, and institutional support, plays a crucial role in fostering or hindering employee engagement. Ethiopian universities face distinct challenges in these areas due to economic and infrastructural limitations, which necessitate an in-depth examination to understand how these factors mediate engagement levels (Kassahun, 2021).

The dimensions of employee engagement that are particularly relevant to academic staff include vigor (energy and resilience in work), dedication (involvement and sense of significance), and absorption (deep concentration and immersion in work tasks). These constructs reflect the multifaceted nature of engagement within academic settings, where emotional and cognitive investments affect teaching, research, and community engagement activities. Moreover, commitment to organizational goals and values forms an essential part of engagement by aligning individual efforts with the university's mission and vision. Such dimensions collectively influence not only individual performance but also institutional outcomes, including educational quality, research productivity, and student success (Nachonga, 2022).

Theoretically, employee engagement in academic contexts can be understood through frameworks such as the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and the psychological states approach. These perspectives highlight the interaction between job demands, personal and job resources, and resultant engagement outcomes. Engagement is influenced by adequate resources—social, emotional, and structural—that buffer the effects of job demands and promote positive work-related attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, engagement has been linked to employee empowerment and organizational commitment in the academic sector, indicating that both individual psychological factors and organizational processes contribute to creating a motivated and productive workforce (Bailey, 2015).

Despite the recognized importance of employee engagement in enhancing institutional performance, Ethiopian universities confront significant challenges regarding the engagement levels of their academic staff. Empirical evidence reflects a worrying trend of low enthusiasm, commitment, and job satisfaction among scholars in these institutions. This disengagement threatens the achievement of educational excellence, research innovation, and overall university effectiveness. Several factors contribute to this predicament, including insufficient resource allocation, ineffective leadership, unsupportive work environments, and inadequacies in recognition and reward systems. As a result, the potential of academic staff remains underutilized, diminishing the universities' capacity to fulfill their mandates effectively (Gede, 2024).

Research highlights that academic staff in Ethiopia often experience mixed feelings about their work, with significant proportions reporting dissatisfaction or ambivalence toward their jobs. Issues related to motivation deficits, lack of professional autonomy, poor working conditions, and limited career development opportunities exacerbate engagement challenges. This leads to decreased job satisfaction, reduced commitment, and ultimately lower productivity. The deficient engagement levels hinder the universities' community service, knowledge dissemination, and ability to retain high-performing academics. Without systematic evaluation and strategic intervention, these challenges pose ongoing risks to institutional stability and growth (Debele, 2023).

Moreover, the repercussions of low engagement extend to critical university functions such as research output, teaching quality, and staff turnover rates. High turnover intentions among academic staff disrupt institutional continuity and impose additional recruitment and training costs. Engagement deficits negatively impact the intellectual climate, collaboration opportunities, and knowledge-sharing

practices within universities. Consequently, the overall standard of higher education is compromised, affecting student learning experiences and national development objectives tied to the higher education sector. Understanding these dynamics underlines the urgency of conducting empirical assessments to guide policy formulation and management decisions aimed at enhancing employee engagement among Ethiopian academic staff (Tolossa, 2024).

Given these pressing concerns, there is a pronounced necessity to empirically evaluate the current state of employee engagement within Ethiopian universities. Such an evaluation will provide objective data to identify engagement gaps, areas of strength, and specific factors affecting academic staff motivation and commitment. Through this, university leadership and policymakers can develop focused strategies to address systemic issues, foster a culture of engagement, and improve institutional performance. The study aims to contribute rigorously to the literature and practice of employee engagement in the Ethiopian higher education context, offering insights that can inform sustainable human resource management and organizational development practices (Gede, 2024).

Research Methodology
Research Design and Approach
This study employed a descriptive research design, well-suited for capturing the status of employee engagement at a specific point in time. Descriptive designs enable researchers to systematically observe, describe, and analyze the existing conditions without manipulating variables. Given the exploratory nature and the need to portray the academic staff's engagement accurately, this design allows for a comprehensive snapshot that can inform policy and institutional strategies.

Further, the quantitative research methodology was selected to gather objective and measurable data related to employee engagement. Quantitative methods facilitate the collection of standardized data, allowing for statistical analysis and generalizability to the larger academic staff population. This approach aligns with established research paradigms in employee engagement studies across higher education contexts, whereby survey instruments with Likert-scale measures are commonly used to quantify psychosocial and behavioral constructs.

The cross-sectional survey technique enabled the collection of data within a defined timeframe, providing an efficient means to assess the engagement levels across multiple universities simultaneously. This is a proven method for studies focusing on work engagement, allowing researchers to examine correlations and distributions of responses without necessitating longitudinal tracking, which would require more resources and time.

Sampling Technique and Size
To ensure the study's findings represent academic staff in Ethiopian universities accurately, the sample size was rigorously determined using Yamane's formula as indicated in equation 1. This statistical formula assists in calculating sample sizes that provide an acceptable margin of error and confidence level, optimizing the balance between practicality and statistical power. The derived sample size of 383 participants ensures robust data collection capable of meaningful descriptive analyses.

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2} \qquad (1)$$

Where n is the sample size, N is target population, and e is the level of precision (5%).
A multistage sampling technique was adopted to enhance the representativeness of the sample. At the initial stage, universities were selected based on relevant criteria such as establishment date and geographical distribution to capture diverse institutional characteristics. Subsequently, within each selected university, academic staff were stratified by rank, department, or faculty to ensure that the sample reflected the internal diversity of academic roles and disciplines. The final stage involved

random selection of individuals within strata, minimizing selection bias and enhancing the generalizability of the results across the Ethiopian higher education landscape.

Stratification and randomization together contribute to a balanced sample composition, allowing for subgroup comparisons and assessments of engagement differences based on staff categories. This methodological rigor strengthens the validity of conclusions drawn from the data and supports evidence-based interventions tailored to distinct academic cohorts.

Data Collection and Analysis
Data were collected using a questionnaire employing a five-point Likert scale designed to measure twelve key employee engagement items. Each item captures distinct facets of engagement such as enthusiasm, pride, extra effort, energy, resilience, concentration, absorption, psychological attachment to work, commitment to organizational goals, collegial relationships, and the sense of belonging within the university.

Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 26. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and percentage values, were computed for each survey item, providing a clear overview of the engagement levels and the distribution of responses. This analytical approach allows for straightforward interpretation of the data, highlighting predominant attitudes and identifying areas requiring managerial attention.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION
The results and interpretation of the study were presented using bar graphs to visually depict the distribution of employee engagement levels across 12 key indicators, including enthusiasm, pride in work, resilience, concentration, and sense of belonging. Each graph illustrates the percentage of respondents.


Item 1: I am enthusiastic about my job.
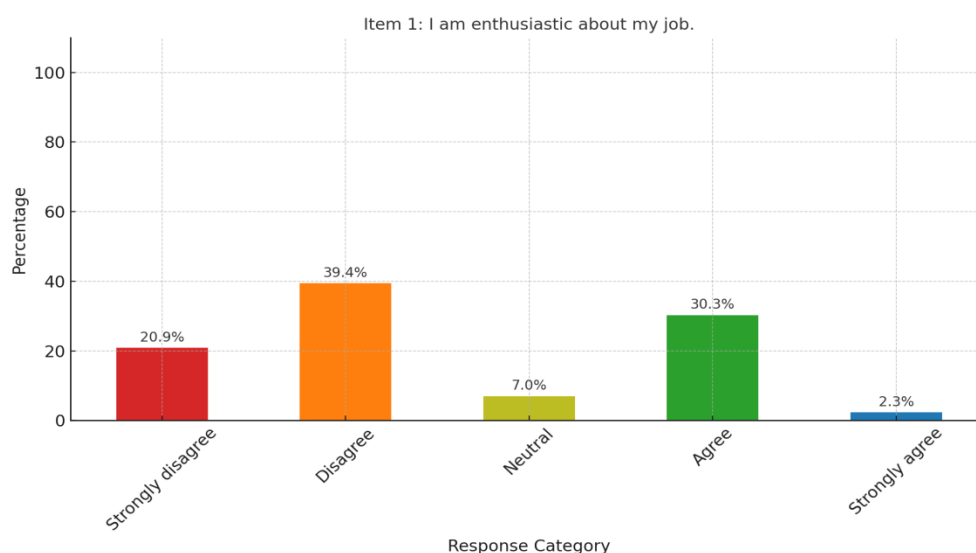
The responses to the item "I am enthusiastic about my job" reveal that 60.3% of the academic staff (20.9% strongly disagree and 39.4% disagree) expressed a lack of enthusiasm. Conversely, 32.6% agreed or strongly agreed that they feel enthusiastic about their work, while 7.0% remained neutral. The majority expressing low enthusiasm suggests that motivational deficits exist within the academic workforce, which can have serious implications for performance and productivity.

Item 2: I am proud of the work that I do.
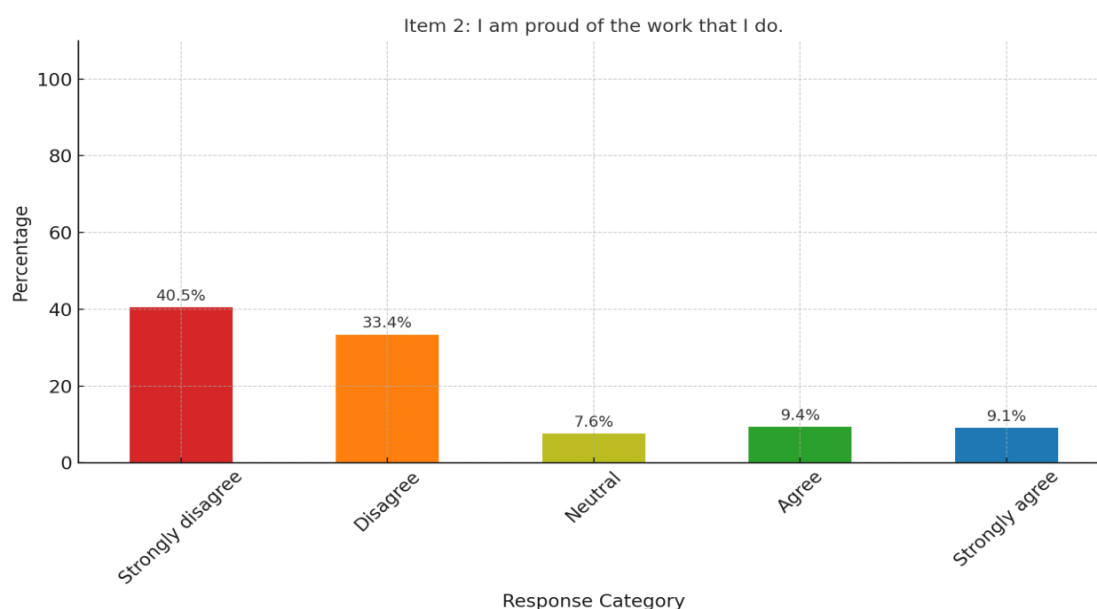
Regarding pride in their work, a substantial 73.9% (40.5% strongly disagreeing and 33.4% disagreeing) of respondents indicated that they did not take pride in their academic work. Only 18.5% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Such a pervasive lack of pride can translate into decreased organizational commitment and reduced intrinsic motivation, ultimately impacting the quality of teaching and research outputs. Pride in one's work is fundamental for maintaining professional standards and dedication in academia.

Item 3: I feel inspired to go the extra mile in my work.
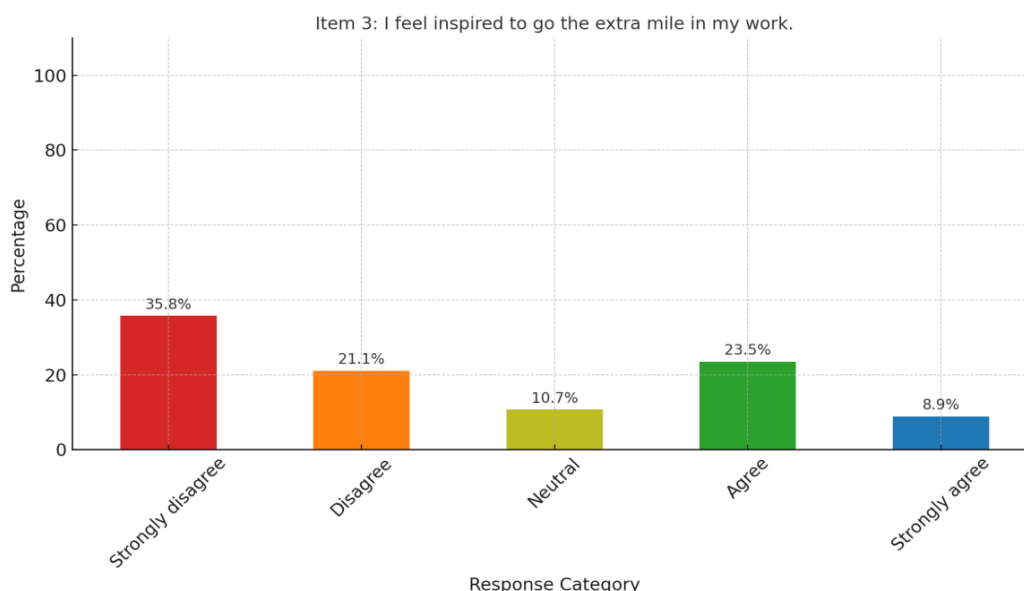
When asked if they feel inspired to exceed expectations, 56.9% of respondents (35.8% strongly disagreed, 21.1% disagreed) indicated a lack of such inspiration. Only about a third (32.4%) expressed agreement or strong agreement. This indicates that a considerable proportion of academic staff lack intrinsic motivation to engage in extra-role behaviors necessary for advancing university goals. Inspirational leadership, meaningful recognition, and supportive work environments are critical to eliciting such behavior, but these may be insufficient or absent in the current context.

Item 4: I feel full of energy when I am working.
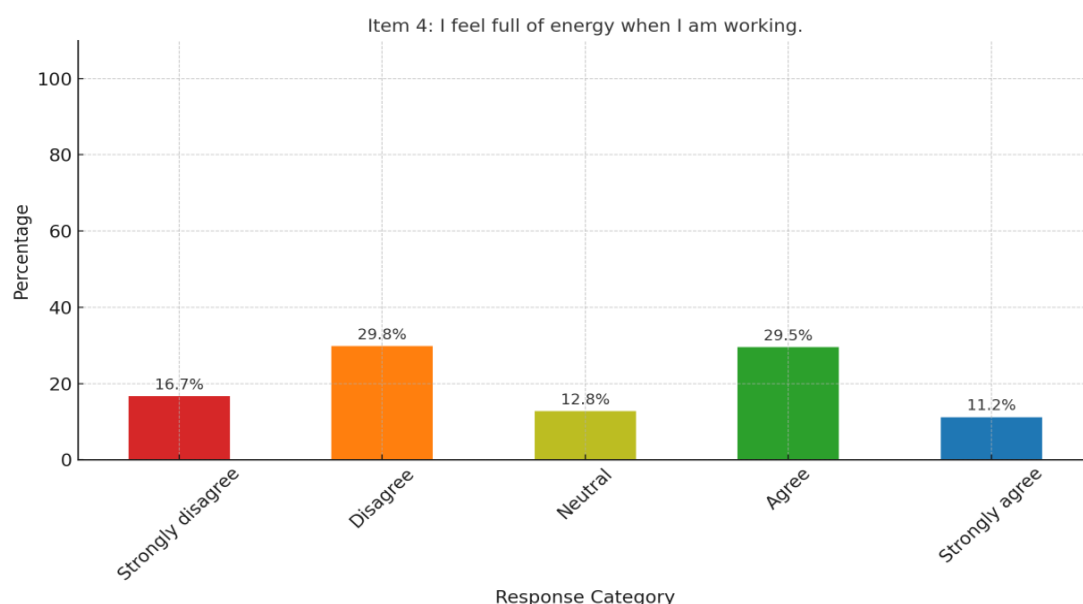
Respondents' energy levels at work presented a more balanced distribution. Approximately 40.7% (16.7% strongly disagree and 29.8% disagree) reported a lack of energy, while 40.7% (29.5% agree and 11.2% strongly agree) felt energetic during work hours. The remaining 12.8% were neutral. These numbers suggest a division among academic staff, with half experiencing work-related fatigue or disengagement.

Item 5: I am physically and mentally resilient at work.
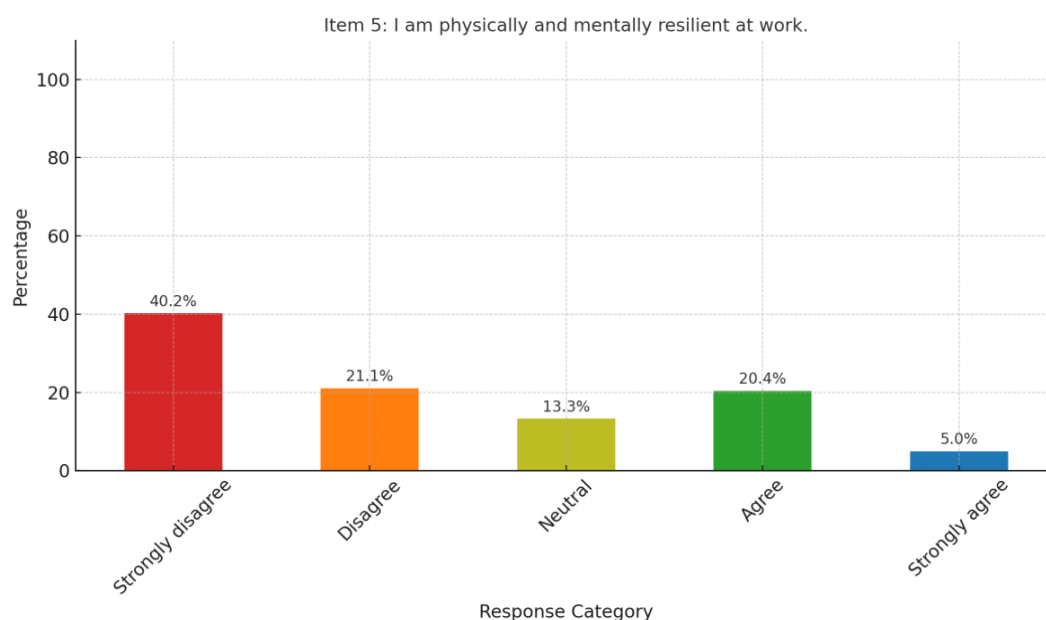
Respondents reported particularly low levels of physical and mental resilience, with 61.3% strongly disagreeing or disagreeing with the statement, contrasted with only 25.4% agreeing or strongly agreeing. The low resilience levels point to widespread vulnerability to burnout and stress among academic employees. Resilience is crucial for sustaining long-term engagement and coping with the demands of academic duties such as teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities.

Item 6: I can maintain high levels of concentration during my tasks.
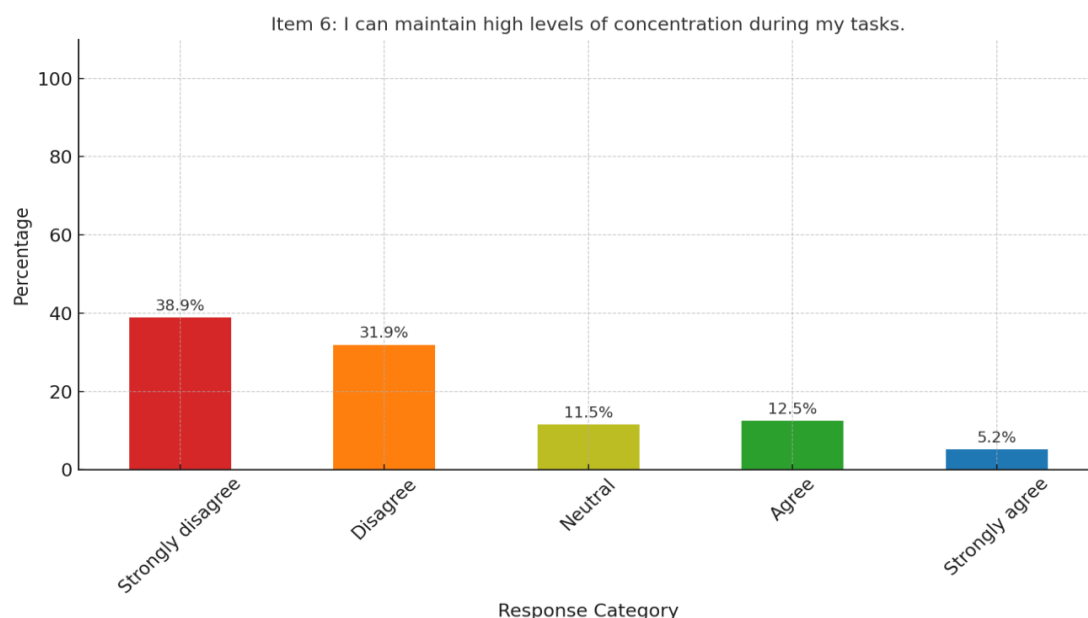
A predominant majority, 70.8% (38.9% strongly disagreeing and 31.9% disagreeing), reported difficulty maintaining high levels of concentration during work tasks. Only 17.7% affirmed concentration ability. Difficulty concentrating may reflect excessive job demands, distractions, or inadequate work environments in Ethiopian universities. Sustained concentration is vital for fulfilling complex academic tasks such as research analysis and curriculum development.


Item 7: I get completely carried away when working.
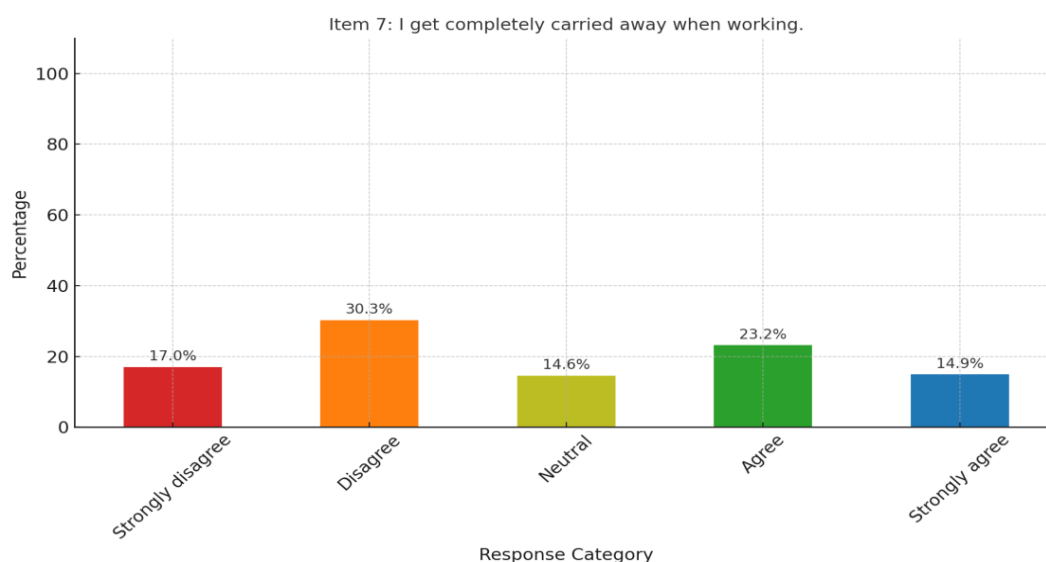
Regarding the experience of being fully absorbed or "carried away" when working, 47.3% of respondents disagreed to varying degrees, while 38.1% agreed or strongly agreed. The remaining 14.6% were neutral. The split indicates heterogeneous engagement levels, with a substantial segment of academic staff experiencing detachment from their work. Absorption is a key aspect of engagement associated with flow states, facilitating exceptional performance.

Item 8: Time flies when I am working because I am fully immersed.
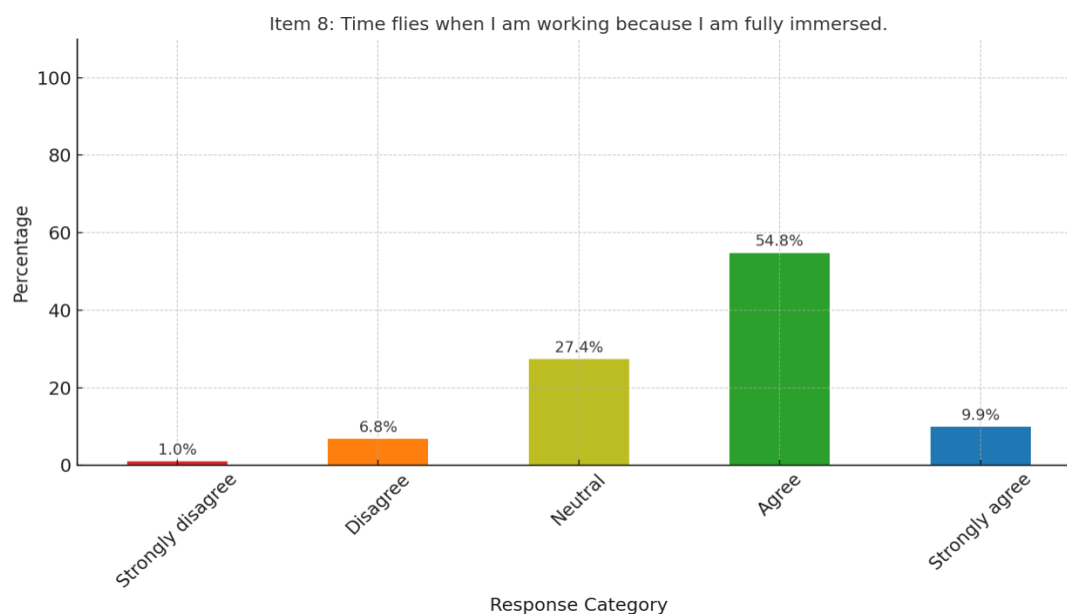
Most respondents (64.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that time flies when immersed in work, and 27.4% remained neutral. Very few (7.8%) disagreed. This high level of agreement suggests that when employees do engage deeply in their work, they experience the absorption component positively, which is consistent with engagement theory.

Item 9: I find it difficult to detach myself from work tasks.
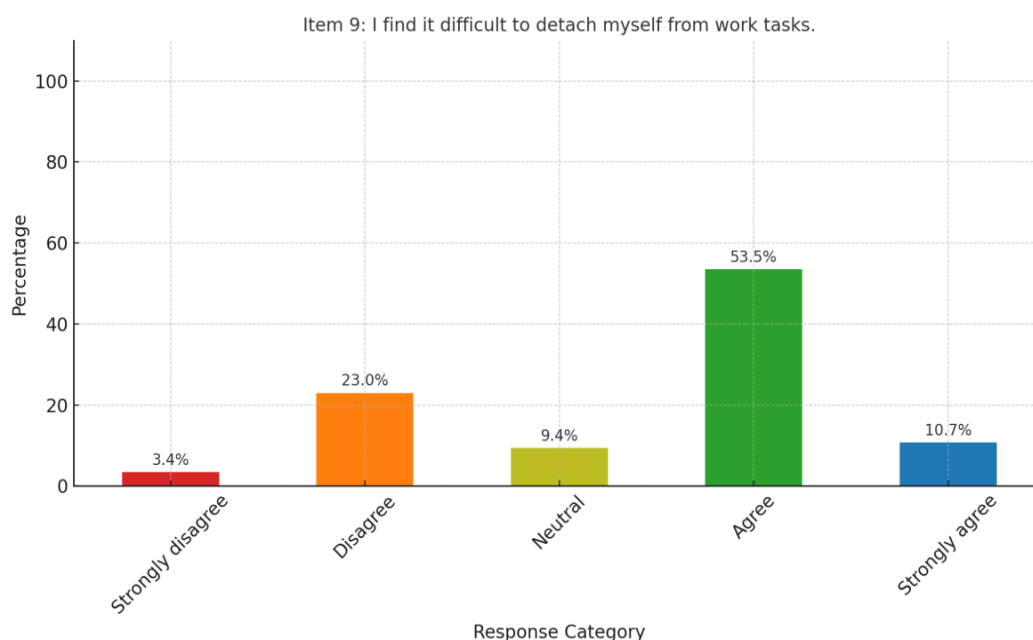
Approximately 64.2% (53.5% agree and 10.7% strongly agree) reported difficulty detaching from work tasks, indicating a strong psychological connection to their academic duties. While attachment is generally positive in indicating engagement, it can also imply work-life balance challenges or potential over-involvement, leading to stress.

Item 10: I am committed to the goals and values of the organization.
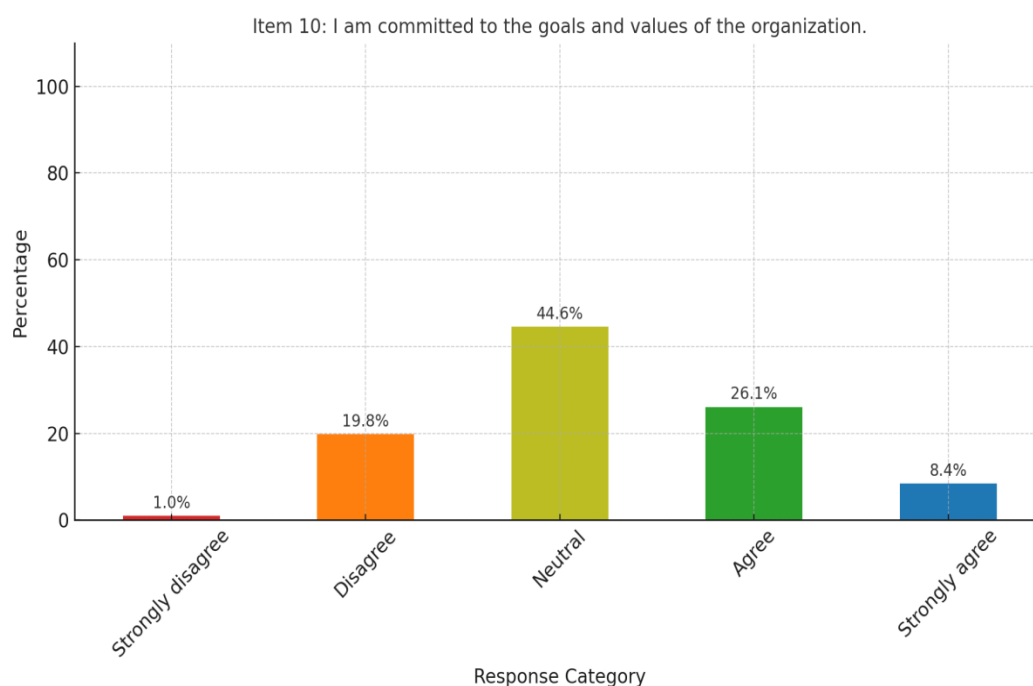
Concerning commitment, responses showed a predominantly neutral stance, with 44.6% neither agreeing nor disagreeing, while 34.5% agreed or strongly agreed, and 20.8% disagreed. This ambivalence towards organizational goals and values reflects a lack of alignment with institutional missions among a significant portion of academic staff.

Item 11: I have a good relationship with my colleagues and supervisors.
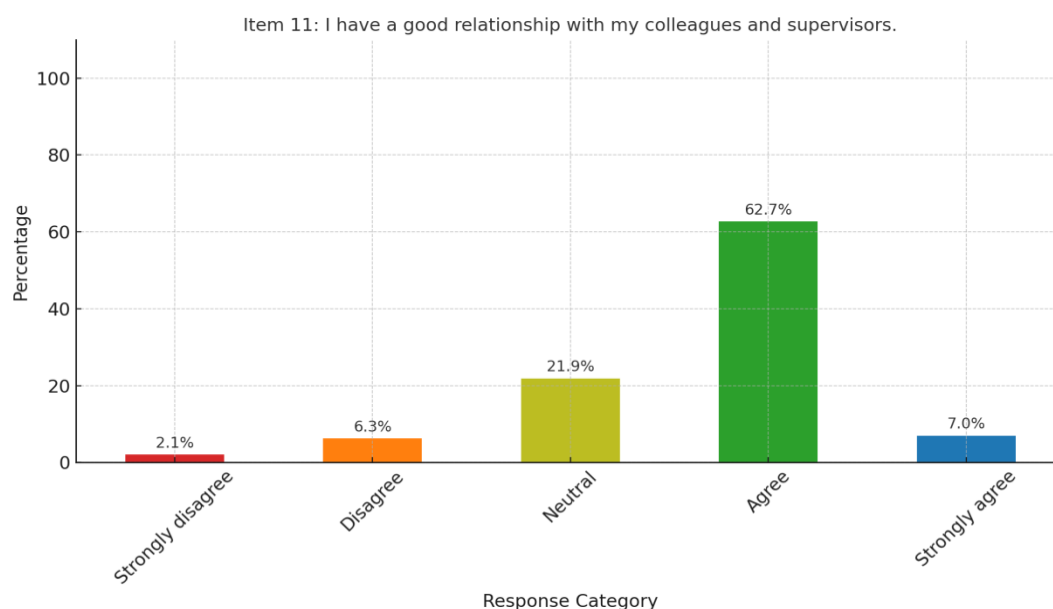
Positive interpersonal relationships are evident, as 69.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed to having good working relationships with colleagues and supervisors. Only 8.4% expressed dissatisfaction. Strong collegial networks foster social support and cooperation, which are known facilitators of employee engagement.

Item 12: I feel a sense of belonging and connection to the University.
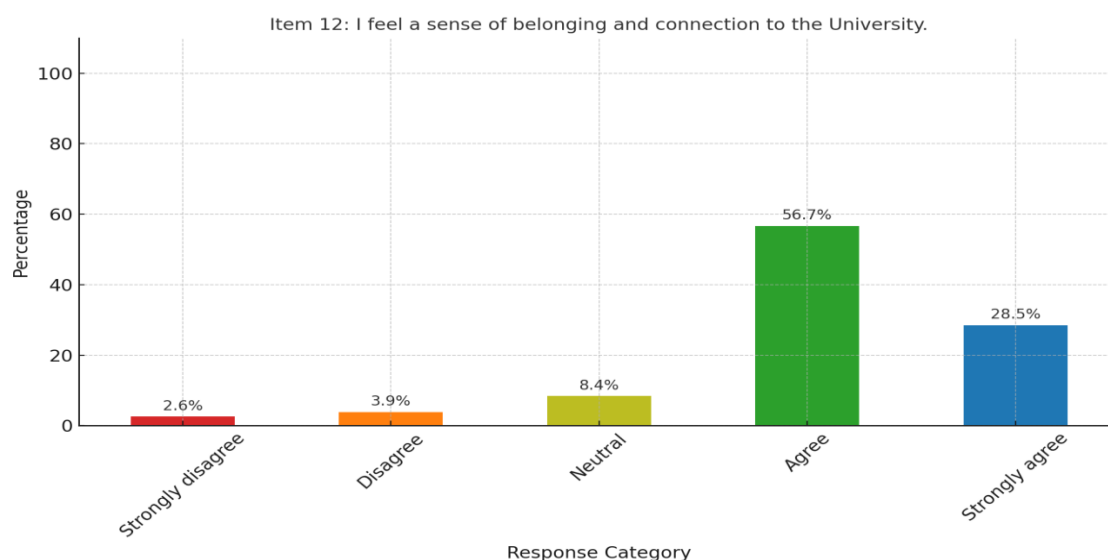
The sense of belonging was similarly high, with 85.2% of academic staff agreeing or strongly agreeing they feel connected to their universities, and only 6.5% dissenting. This strong affiliation is a critical enabler of engagement, reflecting employees' psychological attachment to the institution.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This evaluation of employee engagement among academic staff in Ethiopian universities reveals a complex and nuanced engagement landscape. While indicators related to immersion, psychological attachment, collegial relationships, and belonging were relatively positive, critical aspects such as enthusiasm, pride in work, resilience, concentration, and intrinsic motivation were considerably low. These deficiencies are alarming as they directly affect academic employees' capacity to perform optimally and sustain meaningful contributions to institutional goals. The evidence points to an engagement gap characterized by motivational challenges and potential burnout risks amidst comparatively favorable social work environments.

The suboptimal engagement levels highlighted pose significant threats to organizational effectiveness, including compromised teaching quality, diminished research productivity, and increased risks of academic turnover. Lack of vigor and resilience among staff suggests that mental health and well-being are pressing concerns requiring immediate institutional attention. Furthermore, the ambivalence regarding organizational commitment underscores the need for strategic leadership practices that cultivate shared purpose and value alignment. Despite strong interpersonal ties and a sense of belonging, these positive relational aspects alone cannot compensate for the broader engagement deficiencies.

To address these challenges effectively, Ethiopian universities should pursue multifaceted interventions:
- **Leadership Development:** Implement comprehensive leadership programs emphasizing transformational and supportive leadership styles to enhance staff motivation and institutional alignment. Effective leadership practices have been empirically linked to engagement improvements in academic settings.
- **Work Environment Enhancement:** Develop policies aimed at improving physical and psychological work conditions, including manageable workloads, conducive workspaces, and structures supporting mental resilience. Incorporating flexible work arrangements and wellness initiatives could mitigate fatigue and burnout.

- **Recognition and Career Development:** Establish systematic recognition programs acknowledging academic achievements and contributions. Invest in career development opportunities to foster professional growth and intrinsic motivation, thereby enhancing pride and inspiration to exceed expectations.
- **Strengthening Collegiality:** Leverage existing positive workplace relationships by facilitating teamwork, communication, and collaborative research initiatives. Strengthening social capital can buffer stress and reinforce engagement.
- **Work-Life Balance Initiatives:** Promote programs that encourage healthy detachment from work, prevent overwork, and support mental wellness. Training and managerial support addressing work-life boundaries can enhance concentration and resilience.

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