

Strategic Talent Acquisition and Employee Engagement in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Aligned Firms in Abuja, Nigeria

Olufemi Epebinu¹, & Paul Obinna Omeni²

¹⁻²Department of Business Administration. National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja.
¹fepebinu@noun.edu.ng ||femiepebinu@gmail.com || ²paulobinna.omeni@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between Strategic Talent Acquisition (STA) and Employee Engagement (EE) among selected firms operating within the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) framework in Nigeria. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory and the Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) perspective, the study positions STA as a deliberate and competency driven mechanism through which organisations signal support, fairness, and long-term investment conditions theorised to elicit reciprocal engagement responses from employees. Motivated by the AfCFTA's emerging demands for cross-border capabilities, intensified market competition, and workforce adaptability, the research examines whether strategically aligned talent acquisition practices significantly predict higher levels of employee engagement. Using a cross-sectional quantitative survey design, data were collected from 169 purposively selected employees and HR practitioners from AfCFTA active firms and analysed using linear regression. The results demonstrate a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between STA and EE ($\beta = .595$; $R^2 = .353$; $t = 9.440$; $p < .001$), indicating that competency-based selection, cultural fit assessments, and empowerment-oriented onboarding processes meaningfully explain variations in engagement levels. These findings provide empirical support for the theoretical proposition that strategically designed acquisition practices can shape attitudinal outcomes even within a cross-sectional context, reinforcing the value of STA as a strategic lever for cultivating an engaged workforce capable of supporting AfCFTA's regional integration goals. The study offers practical implications for HR policy and practice, recommending the adoption of structured competency frameworks, development of regional talent pipelines, and integration of empowerment and development mechanisms post-hire. Limitations of the cross-sectional design are acknowledged, and directions for future research, particularly longitudinal, qualitative and comparative studies across industries and subregions are proposed to deepen understanding of how STA can sustain engagement in Africa's evolving integrated market.

Keywords: Absorption, Dedication, Employees' engagement, Talent acquisition, Vigor

INTRODUCTION

Strategic Talent Acquisition (STA) is a key part of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM). It's all about taking a proactive, long-term approach to find, attract, and keep the right people with the skills, competencies, and cultural fit that align with the organization's goals (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Strategic talent acquisition goes beyond filling immediate vacancies; it emphasizes aligning human-capital decisions with long-term organisational objectives such as innovation, competitiveness, and sustained growth. As noted by Kumar (2019), effective talent acquisition requires integrating recruitment practices with broader business strategy to ensure that organisations build a workforce capable of meeting future demands.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represents one of the most ambitious economic integration initiatives on the continent, aiming to establish a unified market for goods and services across 54 African nations. With an estimated combined GDP of approximately \$3.4 trillion and a population exceeding 1.3 billion people, the AfCFTA holds the potential to significantly reshape Africa's economic landscape by enhancing intra African trade, promoting industrialization, and supporting sustainable development (World Bank, 2020). According to the African Union (2018), the agreement seeks to eliminate tariffs on 90 percent of goods, reduce non-tariff barriers, and progressively liberalize trade in services. However, realizing these transformative goals will require more than policy alignment and market access; it will also demand strategic management of human capital. In particular, effective talent acquisition and sustained employee engagement will be critical in ensuring that institutions and industries across Africa are equipped to capitalize on the opportunities created by deeper continental integration. This opens up amazing opportunities for African businesses to tap into bigger markets, enjoy economies of scale, and engage in regional value chains (World Bank, 2020). However, with these opportunities come some serious challenges, especially when it comes to having the right human resources. A lot of African organizations are currently struggling to find the skilled workforce needed to handle complex cross-border operations, manage supply chain hiccups, or innovate in the face of increased competition (ILO, 2021). As Schuler, Jackson, and Tarique (2011) pointed out, "global talent management is increasingly recognized as a key driver of competitive advantage in multinational enterprises," and this idea is just as relevant for companies working within the AfCFTA framework.

Additionally, employee engagement essentially the emotional connection an employee feels towards their organization and its goals (Kahn, 1990) is crucial for maintaining productivity, sparking innovation, and keeping turnover low in a fast-changing trade landscape. Engaged employees are more inclined to put in extra effort, adapt to changes, and align with the company's values, all of which are essential for thriving in the AfCFTA-driven transformation (Albrecht et al., 2015). Studies show that organizations with high employee engagement levels tend to outperform their competitors in profitability, customer satisfaction, and operational efficiency (Harter et al., 2002). Even though strategic talent acquisition and employee engagement are crucial, there's still a lack of empirical research on these topics in the context of the AfCFTA. Most of the existing studies tend to focus on the broader trade implications, often overlooking the essential human resource dynamics that are key to successful integration

(Oyelaran-Oyeyinka & Barclay, 2022). This study aims to fill that gap by looking at how African organizations can effectively use strategic talent acquisition and enhance employee engagement to succeed in the AfCFTA landscape.

The successful economic integration of Nigeria into the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) hinges on how well we manage our human capital, especially when it comes to smart talent acquisition and keeping employees engaged. While AfCFTA opens up amazing opportunities for cross-border trade and expanding regional markets, Nigerian companies are grappling with some serious challenges in attracting and retaining a skilled, motivated, and engaged workforce that can hold its own on a continental level (Accurex, 2025). Although talent acquisition is a key part of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM), Nigerian businesses are facing obstacles like low employee engagement, a well-documented crisis of disengagement, and the widespread "japa" syndrome, where talented individuals leave for better prospects abroad, leading to a troubling brain drain (Gallup, 2023; Oni, 2023). This situation results in high turnover rates, skill shortages, and ultimately weakens the organization's ability to innovate and grow within the competitive landscape of AfCFTA.

There's a noticeable gap in empirical research that looks at the direct connection between strategic talent acquisition practices and employee engagement. Most existing studies tend to focus on operational issues like administrative inefficiencies and corruption, but they miss the opportunity to explore how strategic HRM practices can be leveraged to create a workforce that is agile, empowered, and committed to meeting the ever-changing demands of regional economic integration (Adeleye & Osabutey, 2020).

With this in mind, the goal of this study is to tackle this pressing issue by examining how strategic talent acquisition can boost employee engagement. Ultimately, this could enhance organizational competitiveness and sustainability as Nigeria navigates its evolving role in the AfCFTA. While there's been a lot of research on Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) and employee engagement in Western contexts, there's a notable gap in understanding how these elements play out in African cultural and organizational environments, especially in the context of a newly integrated and competitive continental economy (Kamau & Nyamori, 2015). Therefore, the main objective of this study is to examine the significant relationship between strategic talent acquisition and employee engagement in AfCFTA-aligned firms in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Review

Strategic Talent Acquisition : Strategic Talent Acquisition is all about the thoughtful process of attracting, identifying, and choosing candidates whose skills, values, and behaviors fit well with the organization's long-term goals and competitive strategy (Boxall & Purcell, 2016). It requires proactive planning to make sure that talent acquisition aligns with organizational objectives and helps maintain a competitive edge. This process involves anticipating future talent needs based on strategic objectives and systematically attracting, identifying, and

selecting individuals who not only have the necessary skills but also fit well and show potential for long-term development.

Strategic talent acquisition is defined as a long-term, proactive approach to attracting, selecting, and integrating individuals whose competencies and values align with an organisation's strategic direction (Phillips & Gully, 2015). Unlike traditional recruitment, which is typically reactive and vacancy driven, strategic talent acquisition incorporates workforce planning, employer branding, talent pipelines, and predictive selection methods designed to meet both current and future human capital needs (Cappelli & Keller, 2017). Strategic talent acquisition includes components like workforce planning, forecasting future skills and labour needs (Phillips & Gully, 2015), data-driven selection using competency-based assessments and analytics to predict job performance and organisational fit (Highhouse, 2015) and Structured onboarding by integrating new hires in ways that reinforce culture, expectations, and engagement (Bauer, 2010).

Employee Engagement

The academic perspective on employee engagement is grounded in several key frameworks. One of the earliest and most impactful definitions is according to Kahn (1990). He described personal engagement as the "harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances". Kahn suggested that engagement occurs when individuals bring their "full self" to work, which depends on psychological conditions.

Building on Kahn's work, Schaufeli et al., (2002) provided a more commonly referenced academic definition, describing employee engagement as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" This framework, assessed using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), breaks engagement down into three key dimensions: Vigor: Marked by high energy levels, mental resilience, and a readiness to put effort at work. Dedication: Involves a sense of significance, enthusiasm, pride, and challenge, leading to strong involvement in one's tasks. Absorption captures that wonderful feeling of being completely immersed and joyfully focused on your work, where time just seems to fly by. Engaged employees exhibit strong commitment, discretionary effort, and emotional investment in their roles (Kahn, 1990).

Theoretical Underpinning: The theory underpinning this study is Social Exchange Theory (SET) as proposed by George Homans in 1958, suggesting that social behaviour results from an exchange process in which individuals evaluate benefits and costs in their relationships. As expanded by Blau (1964), SET assumes that reciprocity, trust, and mutual obligation form the foundation of stable social and work relationships. When employees perceive that the organisation has invested in them through supportive practices, fair treatment, and transparent recruitment processes, they are more likely to reciprocate with positive attitudes and behaviours, including commitment and engagement. However, the theory has drawn criticisms for its assumption of rational cost benefit calculations, its sometimes vague conceptualisation of exchange constructs, and its limited attention to cultural norms and power imbalances that may shape workplace interactions.

In the context of Strategic Talent Acquisition and Employee Engagement, SET offers a compelling lens for understanding how organisations can influence employee attitudes from the earliest stage of the employment relationship. Strategic talent acquisition practices signal organisational support, fairness, and value, thereby strengthening employees' perceptions of a positive social exchange. These favourable perceptions encourage employees to respond with higher levels of engagement, including vigour, dedication, and absorption, making SET a relevant and theoretically robust foundation for studies examining how recruitment strategies influence long-term employee outcomes.

Empirical Review: Empirical evidences linking strategic talent acquisition with employee engagement underscores the critical role of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) practices in fostering employee engagement and driving sustainable organizational performance. Cahyono (2024) found that integrating key SHRM components such as talent management, learning, performance evaluation, and development initiatives creates a supportive workplace culture that motivates employees and promotes loyalty and creativity, which ultimately enhances organizational outcomes. This qualitative research, using case studies and interviews, revealed that firms with aligned SHRM frameworks adapt better to market changes and sustain a competitive advantage.

Osabutey et al., (2015) emphasized the necessity of tailoring strategic international human resource capabilities to Sub-Saharan Africa's complex cultural and institutional landscape. In light of AfCFTA, their work highlights the dual challenge and opportunity organizations face in blending global HR standards with local realities to boost engagement, productivity, and retention while developing globally competitive leadership.

Strategic talent acquisition enhances employee engagement through multiple pathways. Data driven recruitment and competency-based selection improve person-organisation and person-job fit, which are strong predictors of engagement (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). When employees feel aligned with organisational culture and values, they are more likely to experience vigor, dedication, and long-term commitment. Moreover, strong employer branding attracts candidates who are intrinsically motivated by the organisation's mission, increasing early-stage engagement (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). As effective onboarding practices influence how employees interpret organisational support, shaping psychological contracts that directly affect engagement. This confirms that strategic talent acquisition not only improves the quality of hires but also strengthens the conditions that promote engagement, satisfaction, and retention. (Bauer, 2010).

Chukwuigwe and Biriowu (2018) examined the impact of talent acquisition on employee engagement in multinational oil and gas companies in Nigeria. Their findings show that merit-based and strategically aligned talent acquisition practices significantly enhanced identification, attachment, and commitment among employees. They argued that when employees perceive recruitment processes as fair, transparent, and predictive of long-term career development, they respond with higher engagement. Similarly, Ogbu and Ode (2020) found that ineffective recruitment practices in Nigerian public development projects such as unclear criteria and

political interference led to lower engagement, reduced motivation, and weakened organisational performance. These findings reinforce the role of strategic acquisition practices in fostering engagement.

Appiah and Boateng (2019) investigated talent management practices and employee engagement at Ghana's Lands Commission. Although their study focused on talent management more broadly, talent acquisition emerged as a significant antecedent of engagement and retention. Engagement moderated the relationship between talent practices and turnover intentions, suggesting that strategically aligned acquisition enhances employee stability. A key limitation is that the study assessed talent acquisition as part of a broader construct, making it difficult to isolate specific effects. Moreover, Ruto and Njoroge (2019) on Deloitte East Africa found that talent acquisition significantly predicted organisational performance, with engagement identified as an intermediate mechanism. Employees hired through structured, competency-based processes reported higher motivation, stronger alignment with organisational goals, and more positive perceptions of career prospects. The study contributed valuable regional evidence but treated engagement as a secondary construct, not a primary outcome variable.

Naidu (2019), studying insurance companies in South Africa, found that delays in filling critical roles, poor job specification, and lack of strategic planning in talent acquisition created workload pressure for existing employees, which in turn lowered engagement. The study highlights that ineffective acquisition has a negative effect on engagement through stress and role overload. Furthermore, a study by Nienaber and Bussin (2020) established that employer branding and strategic recruitment practices significantly influence engagement levels among South African employees, reinforcing the conceptual link between talent acquisition and engagement.

Across African contexts, several patterns emerge, showing Strategic talent acquisition enhances employee engagement by improving fairness perceptions, fit, early career experiences, and psychological contract formation (Chukwuigwe & Biriowu, 2018; Naidu, 2019). Engagement often mediates the relationship between broader talent practices and organisational outcomes, including performance and retention (Appiah & Boateng, 2019) but weak and non-strategic recruitment practices reduce engagement, particularly in public-sector and high-pressure industries (Naidu, 2019). Therefore, this study empirically formulates a null hypothesis H_0 :

There is no significant relationship between strategic talent acquisition and employee engagement in firms operating under the AfCFTA framework in Nigeria.

Figure 2.1: Conceptual Model

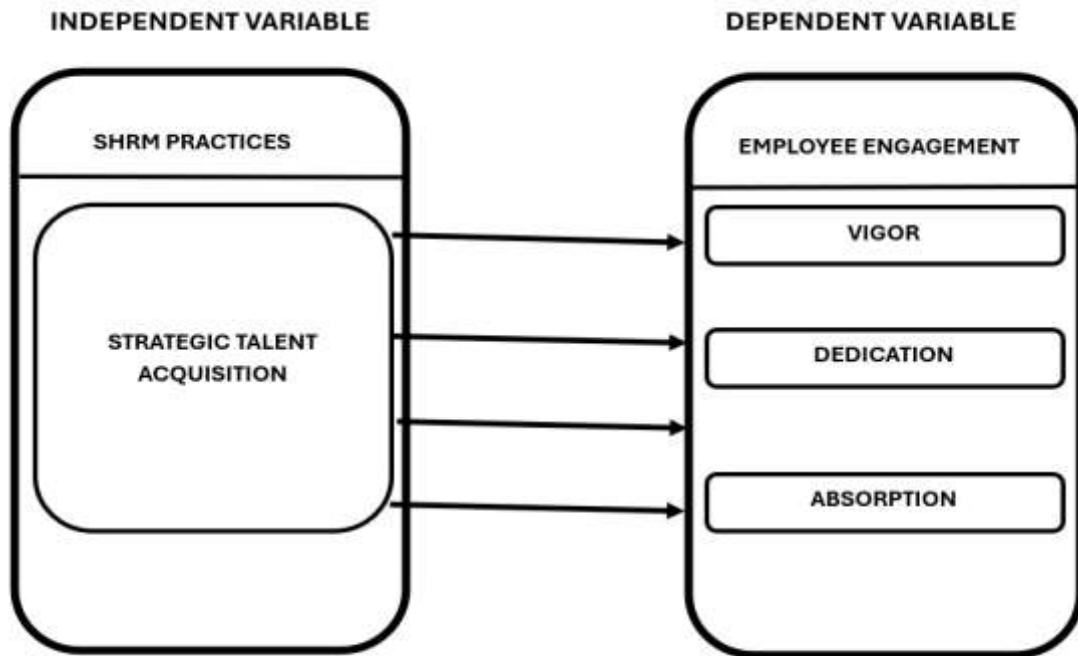


Figure 2.1

Source: Adapted from (Huselid, 1995; Boxall & Purcell, 2003; Schaufeli et al., 2002).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: This study employed a cross-sectional quantitative survey design to assess the relationship between strategic talent acquisition and employee engagement. The cross-sectional approach enabled the collection of data from participants at a single point in time, making it appropriate for evaluating current perceptions and organisational practices without manipulating variables.

Study Area: The study area is defined not merely by geographical boundaries but by the strategic and economic environment shaped by Nigeria’s participation in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Accordingly, the research focused on selected accredited AfCFTA-aligned firms operating within Nigeria. These firms cut across key sectors including logistics, freight forwarding, and warehousing that have completed multiple export cycles under the AfCFTA framework.

Population of the Study: The target population for this study comprised employees and HR practitioners working in AfCFTA-aligned firms in Nigeria. Although the total number of

employees could not be determined due to the absence of a centralised workforce registry and the confidentiality policies of individual organisations, the study focused on 51 accredited AfCFTA-aligned firms, sourced from Nigeria AfCFTA coordination office. These firms operate across the logistics, freight forwarding, and warehousing sectors. Reporting the number of participating firms provides structural context for the sampling frame, even though employee-level population figures remain operationally unknown. The firms represent key actors in Nigeria's AfCFTA export ecosystem and offered appropriate access to respondents with direct exposure to strategic talent acquisition practices and employee engagement dynamics..

Sampling technique and Sample Size: Given the lack of a complete sampling frame and the specialised nature of the population, the study adopted a purposive sampling technique. This non-probability approach enabled the intentional selection of respondents with relevant knowledge and experience related to Strategic Talent Acquisition (STA) and employee engagement practices within AfCFTA-operating firms. Since purposive sampling is not governed by statistical formulae designed for probability sampling, the sample size was not determined using Cochran's or any other probabilistic model. Instead, sample adequacy was guided by methodological recommendations for regression analysis in behavioural and organisational research. Tabachnick and Fidell (2007) suggest that a sample of approximately 100-200 respondents is sufficient for regression models involving a single predictor variable. This benchmark, combined with the need to secure responses from participants with direct exposure to STA practices, informed the decision to target a sample within this range while accounting for anticipated non-response.

Source of Data Collection and Instrument:

The study used primary source of data with structured questionnaire as instrument to gather standardized data. The questionnaire was logically structured into three distinct sections of demographic information of respondents, strategic talent acquisition practices and employee engagement. The questionnaire was administered to employees within the selected 51 aligned-firms. A total of 224 questionnaires were distributed across AfCFTA-aligned firms. This distribution size was intentionally higher than the desired minimum sample to accommodate the practical realities of conducting research in operationally intensive sectors. Heavy workloads, shift patterns, and strict internal participation policies commonly result in lower response rates in logistics, freight forwarding, and warehousing environments. Therefore, oversampling was adopted as a strategic measure to maximise the likelihood of obtaining a sufficient number of usable responses from eligible participants. This approach ensured broad coverage across accessible firms and increased the probability of reaching respondents with relevant insights into STA and employee engagement. From the 224 questionnaires distributed, 165 completed questionnaires were returned and deemed valid for analysis, yielding a response rate of 73.66%. This response rate is considered acceptable for organisational research, particularly within sectors characterised by demanding operational schedules and limited employee availability. The final sample of 165 respondents meets established adequacy standards for cross-sectional regression analysis and provides a robust basis for deriving meaningful interpretations within the study context

Measurement of variables : To ensure high levels of construct validity and reliability, the items in the questionnaire were not created from scratch. Instead, they were carefully adapted from well-established scales that have been widely used and validated in literature. Strategic Talent Acquisition, was measured by items adapted from the influential work of Huselid (1995). Employee Engagement, was measured using the short version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) developed by Schaufeli et al., (2006). These items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree"). The reliability of the study constructs was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha. The Strategic Talent Acquisition scale, consisting of 3 items, recorded a Cronbach’s alpha value of 0.884, while the Employee Engagement scale, comprising 9 items, recorded a Cronbach’s alpha value of 0.879. Both values exceed the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating high internal consistency. This means the items within each construct are strongly correlated and reliably measure their intended concepts.

Method of Data Analysis: This study deplored both descriptive and inferential statistical tools to analyze the data and test the formulated hypothesis. The descriptive statistics were used in analyzing demographic data (gender, age bracket, educational qualification, job tenure, job level and industry sector). While the inferential used regression analytical tool in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 23, to test the study's main hypothesis. Regression analysis served as the main analytical tool, allowing the study to determine the predictive influence of strategic talent acquisition on employee engagement. While this design does not establish causality, it provides robust evidence of association consistent with the study’s objectives. Overall, this methodological approach offered a rigorous and practical framework for examining the relationship between the two

4. Results and Discussions of Findings

Table 4.1. Demographic Details of Respondents

Variable	Item	No. of Response	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	91	55.2
	Females	71	43
	Preferred not to Say	3	1.8
	Total	165	100
Age Bracket	Below 25 years	10	6.1
	25 - 34	37	22.4
	35 - 44 years	56	33.9
	45 - 54 years	45	27.3
	55 years and above	17	10.3
	Total	165	100

Variable	Item	No. of Response	Frequency (%)
Highest Educational Qualification	O - Level /SSCE	2	1.2
	Diploma /NCE	9	5.5
	Bachelor's Degree / HND	73	44.2
	Master's Degree (e.g. M.Sc, MA. MBA)	60	36.4
	Doctorate (PHD)	17	10.3
	Other Professional Qualification	4	2.4
	Total	165	100
Job Tenure	Less than 1 year	8	4.8
	1 - 3 years	37	22.4
	4 - 6 years	48	29.1
	7 -10 years	28	17
	More than 10 years	44	26.7
	Total	165	100
Job Level	Non - Managerial Staff	33	20
	Junior Management / Team Lead	34	20.6
	Middle Management	51	30.9
	Senior Management / Executive	47	28.5
	Total	165	100
Industry Sector	Financial Services / Banking	41	24.8
	Logistics / Transport / Supply Chain	48	29.1
	Manufacturing	22	13.3
	Government	4	2.5
	Others	50	30.3
	Total	165	100

Source: Field survey (2025)

Gender Distribution: Out of the 165 respondents, male participants constituted the majority (55.2%, n = 91), while females accounted for 43.0% (n = 71). A very small proportion of respondents (1.8%, n = 3) preferred not to disclose their gender. This indicates a male-dominated sample, though female representation remains substantial, providing reasonable gender balance for analysis.

Age Bracket: The respondents were predominantly within their economically active mid-career age groups: Overall, more than 80% of respondents fall between 25 and 54 years, showing that the sample mainly consists of experienced working adults rather than early-career or near-retirement populations.

Educational Qualification: Approximately 91% of respondents possess a Bachelor’s degree or higher, indicating that the study population is highly educated and professionally skilled. This enhances confidence in the respondents’ ability to provide informed and reliable responses.

Job Tenure: Respondents demonstrate varying levels of professional experience: Over 70% of participants have more than four years of work experience, suggesting a mature workforce with substantial practical exposure, increasing the credibility of workplace-related opinions captured in the study

Job Level: The respondents occupy diverse organizational positions:

More than 59% hold middle or senior management roles, indicating that most participants are decision-makers or supervisory staff, whose perceptions may strongly reflect organizational policies, leadership practices, and strategic viewpoints.

Industry Sector: Participants came from a broad range of industries: The largest sectoral representation comes from logistics and diversified “other” industries, followed by banking/financial services. This demonstrates a multi-sectoral sample with a stronger lean toward private-sector industries than public service.

The overall demographic data indicate that the study sampled a primarily male, highly educated, mid-career professional population, most of whom possess several years of work experience and hold managerial positions. Respondents are spread across multiple industry sectors, with notable representation in logistics and financial services. Collectively, these characteristics support the suitability of the sample for organizational or workplace-based research, as participants are experienced, knowledgeable, and positioned to provide informed insights.

Table 4.2: Model Summary showing the effect of Strategic Talent Acquisition (STA) on Employee Engagement (EE)

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.595 ^a	.353	.349	.61985	.353	89.106	1	163	.000

- a. Predictors: (Constant), STA
- b. Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 4.3: ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	34.236	1	34.236	89.106	.000 ^b
	Residual	62.628	163	.384		
	Total	96.864	164			

- a. **Dependent Variable: EE**
- b. **Predictors: (Constant), STA**
- c. **Source: Field Survey 2025**

Table 4.4: Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	2.071	.229		9.037	.000	1.619	2.524
	STA	.519	.055	.595	9.440	.000	.410	.627

- a. **Dependent Variable: EE**
- b. **Source: Field Survey 2025**

The results of the regression analysis shows a statistically significant relationship between Strategic Talent Acquisition and Employee Engagement. As presented in the Model Summary (Table 4.2), STA recorded an R value of .595, indicating a moderate to strong positive correlation between the two variables. The R² value of .353 shows that strategic talent acquisition explains approximately 35.3% of the variance in employee engagement among the respondents, which is substantial for behavioural research using a cross-sectional design. The ANOVA results (Table 4.3) further confirm the model’s significance, with F(1,163)= 89.106, p < .001, demonstrating that the regression model is statistically meaningful and that STA contributes significantly to predicting employee engagement. The coefficients (Table 4.4) reveals that strategic talent acquisition has a positive and statistically significant relationship on employee engagement ($\beta = .595$; $t = 9.440$; $p < .001$). The unstandardized coefficient (B = .519) indicates that for every one unit increase in strategic talent acquisition, employee engagement increases by 0.519 units, holding other factors constant. The 95% confidence interval (.410 to .627) confirms the precision and reliability of this estimate.

Hypothesis Testing: *Strategic talent acquisition has no significant relationship on employee engagement*, is therefore rejected

Given the cross-sectional nature of the study, the findings demonstrate a significant association and predictive relationship to mean that STA is a strong predictor of engagement at the time of data collection. These results provide robust evidence that organisations with stronger, more

strategic talent acquisition practices tend to report higher levels of employee engagement. Strategic talent acquisition significantly predicts employee engagement, accounting for 35.3% of its variance. The regression coefficient indicates a positive and meaningful relationship between strategic talent acquisition and employee engagement, and all statistical indicators support a strong and reliable association between the two constructs within the sampled organisations. These findings are consistent with existing strategic HRM empirical literature (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Chukwuigwe & Biriowu, 2018), which demonstrates that strategically aligned talent practices are significant predictors of engagement. However, the results diverge from Boateng (2019), who found employee engagement to function primarily as a moderating variable rather than as a direct outcome variable.

While the statistical evidence is quite strong, there are some important methodological points to consider. Even though STA accounts for a significant portion of the engagement variance around 35% there's still nearly 65% that this single-predictor model doesn't explain. This suggests that other strategic HRM practices, like training and development, performance management, rewards and recognition, and talent management, along with contextual factors such as leadership, organizational support, and cross-border pressures under AfCFTA, likely play a role in engagement outcomes (Cahyono, 2024; Chatterjee, 2025).

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal a clear and significant relationship between Strategic Talent Acquisition (STA) and employee engagement within Nigerian organisations operating in or aligning with the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The positive association indicates that competency-based recruitment practices, such as structured interviews, validated assessment tools, and clearly defined competency frameworks contribute meaningfully to fostering engagement among employees. This aligns with the assumptions of Social Exchange Theory, which posits that employees reciprocate favourable organisational practices with positive attitudes and behaviours. When employees perceive the selection process as fair, transparent, and aligned with their competencies, they are more likely to respond with higher levels of vigor, dedication, and organisational commitment. The study provides stronger evidence that engagement can also function as a direct attitudinal outcome of strategically implemented talent acquisition systems, particularly within emerging market environments.

From a policy and managerial perspective, the results carry important implications for AfCFTA-aligned firms in Nigeria. As AfCFTA promotes deeper regional integration, increased labour mobility, and cross-border business operations, organisations must strengthen their human capital strategies to remain competitive. Competency-based STA becomes especially critical in this context because firms require employees with cross-border capabilities, including cultural intelligence, regulatory awareness, multilingual abilities, and adaptability. Establishing robust competency models that reflect these regional requirements can help organisations attract and select talent with the potential to thrive within the expanded AfCFTA market.

The findings also underscore the need for HR professionals and hiring managers to be adequately trained in the effective use of competency frameworks and assessment tools. Reinforcing linkages between selection outcomes and early development plans can enhance newcomer adjustment and foster early-stage engagement, which is particularly valuable in competitive and dynamic environments introduced by AfCFTA. Moreover, strategically selected employees are more likely to perceive organisational support during onboarding and role transitions, further reinforcing engagement through reciprocal social exchange mechanisms.

At a broader policy level, Nigerian organisations participating in AfCFTA may benefit from national or regional guidelines encouraging evidence-based recruitment, harmonised competency standards, and capacity-building initiatives for HR practitioners. These actions can strengthen workforce quality, reduce hiring mismatches, and improve overall organisational readiness for regional expansion.

Nonetheless, the study's regression model explains only part of the variance in employee engagement, suggesting that engagement is also shaped by other HR and organisational factors such as leadership, job design, organisational support, and career development opportunities. This reinforces the need for a more integrated Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) approach in which talent acquisition is complemented by holistic talent development, retention strategies, and performance management systems.

In summary, the findings provide a practical and theoretically grounded roadmap for AfCFTA-aligned organisations in Nigeria. Firms should invest in competency-based acquisition systems, develop specialised selection pathways for regional roles, build strategic talent pipelines to support cross-border growth, and intentionally design HR practices that strengthen reciprocal employee organisation relationships. By doing so, they can enhance employee engagement, organisational adaptability, and long-term competitiveness within the evolving AfCFTA landscape.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this study offer strong evidence about how Strategic Talent Acquisition significantly impacts Employee Engagement in organizations working within the AfCFTA framework. The initial null hypothesis, which suggested that there was "no significant relationship between strategic talent acquisition and employee engagement in organizations operating under the AfCFTA framework," was clearly rejected. The regression analysis showed a statistically significant and practically meaningful relationship, indicating that Strategic Talent Acquisition is a key predictor of Employee Engagement. This strong statistical evidence supports the idea that effective Strategic Talent Acquisition is not just about recruitment; it's a vital strategic necessity that directly enhances employee engagement within the unique context of AfCFTA. The study highlights that by strategically acquiring talent, companies can build a more engaged workforce, which is crucial for tackling the opportunities and challenges of the integrated African market.

Based on the key findings from this study, we have a few recommendations for organizations working within the African Continental Free Trade Area, as well as for policymakers and future researchers. These organizations should focus on creating and implementing strong, competency-based talent acquisition systems. Since Strategic Talent Acquisition has a direct and significant relationship with Employee Engagement, it's crucial for companies to step away from traditional recruitment methods. Instead, they should adopt systems that specifically seek out and attract individuals whose skills, values, and potential align with the strategic goals of the AfCFTA. Moreover, this study presents compelling evidence for the STA-EE pathway, future research should explore the role of a mediating or moderating variable to expand the model to incorporate additional strategic HRM practices. Moreover, we need culturally sensitive and longitudinal studies to develop adaptable and effective SHRM models that can maintain a competitive edge and foster employee commitment in Africa's interconnected economic landscape.

References

- Accurex. (2025). *Talent acquisition trends in Kenya and beyond*. <https://www.accurex.co.ke/blogs/talent-acquisition-trends-in-kenya-and-beyond>
- Adeleye, I., & Osabutey, E. L. C. (2020). Strategic human resource management in African firms: Emerging trends and empirical insights. *Journal of African Business*, 21(3), 345– 361.
- African Union. (2018). *Agreement establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area*. https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/39288-file-afcfta_0.pdf
- Albrecht, S. L., Bakker, A. B., Gruman, J. A., Macey, W. H., & Saks, A. M. (2015). Employee engagement, human resource management practices, and competitive advantage: An integrated approach. *Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance*, 2(1), 7–35. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOEPP-04-2014-0026>
- Appiah, K., & Boateng, S. (2019). Talent management and employee engagement: Evidence from the Lands Commission of Ghana. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 14(5), 45–58.
- Bauer, T. N. (2010). Onboarding new employees: Maximizing success. SHRM Foundation.
- Blau, P. M. (1964). *Exchange and power in social life*. New York, NY: Wiley
- Boxall, P., & Purcell, J. (2016). *Strategy and human resource management* (4th ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cappelli, P., & Keller, J. (2017). The historical context of talent management. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 4, 1–21.
- Chukwuigwe, N., & Biriowu, J. C. (2018). Talent acquisition and employee engagement in multinational oil and gas companies in Nigeria. *International Journal of Human Resource Studies*, 8(3), 256– 270.

Epebinu & Omeni. Strategic talent acquisition and employee engagement

- Collings, D. G., & Mellahi, K. (2009). Strategic talent management: A review and research agenda. *Human Resource Management Review*, 19(4), 304–313. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2009.04.001>
- Gallup. (2023). *Employee engagement global report*. Gallup Press.
- Harter, J. K., Schmidt, F. L., & Hayes, T. L. (2002). Business-unit-level relationship between employee satisfaction, employee engagement, and business outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87(2), 268–279. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.87.2.268>
- Highhouse, S. (2015). Stubborn reliance on intuition and subjectivity in employee selection. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 8(2), 103–123.
- Homans, G. C. (1958). Social behavior as exchange. *American Journal of Sociology*, 63(6), 597–606.
- Huselid, M. A. (1995). The impact of human resource management practices on turnover, productivity, and corporate financial performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 38(3), 635–672. <https://doi.org/10.5465/256741>
- International Labour Organization. (2021). *Skills for a digital economy: Insights from the African Continental Free Trade Area*. https://www.ilo.org/wcms_812519.pdf
- Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), 692–724. <https://doi.org/10.5465/256287>
- Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), 692–724.
- Kamau, T., & Nyamori, R. (2015). Strategic human resource management in African organizations: Contextual challenges and theoretical perspectives. *International Journal of Human Resource Studies*, 5(3), 1–15.
- Kristof-Brown, A. L., Zimmerman, R., & Johnson, E. (2005). Consequences of individuals' fit at work. *Personnel Psychology*, 58(2), 281–342.
- Kumar, S. (2019). *Aligning talent acquisition practices to strategic business objectives*. NHRD Network Journal.
- Naidu, N. (2019). Talent acquisition tools and techniques in insurance companies in South Africa. *African Journal of Human Resource Management*, 7(1), 1–10.
- Nienaber, R., & Bussin, M. (2020). Employer branding and employee engagement in South Africa. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 18(1), 1–11.
- Ogbu, C. P., & Ode, E. (2020). Recruitment practices and employee engagement in Nigerian development projects. *Journal of Public Administration and Governance*, 10(3), 85–99.

- Oni, S. (2023). The “japa” syndrome: Brain drain crisis and implications for Nigeria’s workforce. *Nigerian Journal of Labor Studies*, 15(1), 22–38.
- Osabutey, E. L. C., Nyuur, R. B., & Debrah, Y. A. (2015). Developing strategic international human resource capabilities in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Journal of African Business*, 16(3), 320–338.
- Oyelaran-Oyeyinka, B., & Barclay, L. A. (2022). Human capital development and the AfCFTA: Challenges and prospects. *African Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and Development*, 14(3), 389–401. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20421338.2021.1993521>
- Phillips, J. M., & Gully, S. M. (2015). *Strategic staffing* (3rd ed.). Pearson.
- Ruto, L., & Njoroge, S. (2019). Talent management and organisational performance in Deloitte East Africa. *East African Journal of Management*, 3(2), 112–125.
- Schaufeli, W. B., Bakker, A. B., & Salanova, M. (2006). The measurement of work engagement with a short questionnaire: A cross-national study. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 66(4), 701–716.
- Schaufeli, W. B., Salanova, M., González-Romá, V., & Bakker, A. (2002). The measurement of engagement. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 3(1), 71–92.
- Schuler, R. S., Jackson, S. E., & Tarique, I. (2011). Global talent management and global talent challenges: Strategic opportunities for IHRM. *Journal of World Business*, 46(4), 506–516. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2011.06.002>
- Tabachnick, B. G., & Fidell, L. S. (2007). *Using multivariate statistics* (5th ed.). Pearson Education.
- World Bank. (2020). *The African Continental Free Trade Area: Economic and distributional effects*. World Bank.
- Wu, B. P. F., & Bevan, A. (2025). *Strategic human resource management and organizational behavior: A collaborative framework for long-term organizational growth*.
- .
- .