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EFFECTS OF CASUALISATION OF LABOUR ON EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND ORGANISATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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Abstract
The study examines the effects of casualisation of labour on employee engagement and organisational sustainability in the construction industry in Masvingo urban. A purely qualitative approach was employed in the study, with data being collected using focus group discussions and in-depth interviews from 30 purposively selected participants from construction companies in Masvingo urban. The study revealed that casualisation of labour was rife in the construction industry. The study also found that operational and labour flexibility and profit maximisation were the main benefits of casualisation of labour in the construction sector. Furthermore, the study established that despite enhancing short-term operational flexibility and benefits, the long-term impact of casualisation of labour on employee engagement and organisational sustainability was precarious. Casual labour experience emotional strain, poor salaries, exploitation, job insecurity, poor health and safety standards and benefits ineligibility; situations which in turn compromise employee engagement and organisational sustainability. The study recommended that for employers to increase employee engagement and propel organisational sustainability, they need to introduce fairer work conditions for casual workers, develop career pathways for casual workers, and give casual workers competitive wages.

Keywords: Labour casualisation, Employee engagement, Organisational sustainability.
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1. INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of casualisation of labour varies significantly across the world. Different countries use different terms for casualisation of labour, for instance the United Kingdom and the United States of America refer to it as Non-Standard Work Arrangements (NSWAs). In Australia and New Zealand, particularly in the oil and gas industries, casual labour is known as on-call labour, which refers to workers who conduct work to supplement full-time workers for defined periods and during business peak periods (Campbell, 2018). In Africa, casualization of labour is not a new phenomenon, it has existed since time immemorial and is now recognized and regulated by various governments across the continent. For instance, In Zimbabwe, the Labour Act (chapter 28:01) section 12 and Ghana' Labour Act of 2003 addresses casualisation of labour. The employment laws for Zimbabwe and Ghana stipulate that a casual worker employed by the same employer or organisation for a continuous period of six months or more automatically becomes a permanent worker of that employer. Casualisation of labour is propelled by the global market forces that intersect with local employers' interests, facilitating the widespread adoption of various forms of employment contracts. In the global south, Zimbabwe included, the rate of casualisation of labour in the construction sector is unparalleled and is mainly driven by the state of the economy, which is not favourable for the growth, survival and sustainability of companies.

While organisations increasingly recognise casualisation of labour, employee engagement and sustainability as strategically important to lower labour costs and offer employees greater flexibility, achieving them is complex. Casual workers often experience job insecurity and lack the same level of commitment shown by permanent staff. Across the African continent, business sustainability efforts have been enhanced by organisations offering employment to locals, whether casual or permanent, and by building strong connections between organisations and their social environments. Approximately 7 out of 10 workers in the construction sector in Zimbabwe are casual, a situation that makes researchers wonder whether it is healthy or not. There is paucity of literature on the consequences of casualization of labour in the construction industry in the global south. Most studies that were carried out on the subject were done in the global north, and the few that were done in the developing world focused on the casualisation of

labour in other sectors of the economy and left the construction industry in urban areas in the developing world unaddressed.

It is against this backdrop that the study seeks to explore the casualisation of labour, identifying the benefits and challenges of casualisation; exploring how casual workers in Zimbabwe's construction industry perceive reciprocity (or its absence) in their employment relationships and whether they view these relationships as predominantly transactional (economic) or relational (social), how these perceptions shape workers' attitudes and engagement, and ultimately, whether the nature of the casual employment relationship fundamentally influences organisational performance and long-term viability.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical literature review

Scholars across the globe have viewed casualisation of labour as the process where employees are hired on provisional, impermanent, fixed-term, or casual contracts instead of permanent employment. Casualisation of labour is usually without access to employment conditions enjoyed by permanent workers such as sick leave, annual leave, medical aid and others. Casualization of labour has been viewed (Amoah, 2025; Standing, 2008; Uzualu & Chukwu, 2026; Watson, 2013) as a tendency where a huge proportion of the organisation's human capital is employed in impermanent positions rather than permanent full-time, salaried positions**.** This category of employees characteristically does not have benefits which their permanent counterparts have such as paid vacation leave, medical insurance, and job security. It is a shift from permanent full-time workers to temporary workers such as seasoned workers and part-time workers. The most common types of casual work across the globe include seasonal work, fixed-term contract, unprotected regular employment and hourly paid work. Most countries provided legal frameworks that guide the management of casualization of labour. For instance, in Zimbabwe, the Labour Act chapter 28;01 provides that workers on fixed-term employment may not automatically become permanent unless the contract is without a stated termination date. Most construction companies rely on part-time workers because the availability of work is not constant (Gershon et al., 2025).

Employee engagement refers to an employee`s emotional feeling towards his or her employment, workmates, management, organization and the work environment. The emotional feelings influence the employee's attitude, behaviour and level of effort in work-related activities (Mkandatsama, 2024). Nyanga & Kele (2023) viewed employee engagement as the extent to which a worker is devoted to assisting his/her organization to realise its objectives. It is the attitude and feelings and emotional connection employees have towards their employer, work and workmates. Employee engagement is also referred to

as a sense of connection, loyalty and commitment workers who usually feel valued and supported; have towards their employers and the entire organizations they work for (Khupe et al., 2026). In this study employee engagement extends to the cognitive and behavioural connection that a casual worker has towards his/her job assignments and tasks, the employer, workmates and organisational goals. Employee engagement is a human resource management metric that makes workers more persuaded to expend more energy towards their work and in solving work related problems and getting along well with workmates, customers and other key stakeholders. Employees' cognitive and behavioural connection influences their discretionary effort, motivation, sense of belonging and their commitment towards the realization of organizational goals.

Organisational sustainability denotes the fulfilment of current business needs without jeopardising future generations' capacity to meet their requirements. Organisational sustainability refers to a company's ability to endure and thrive for a long time by integrating socio-economic factors, social equity and other macro-environmental factors into its operations, procedures and processes (Rahman et al., 2022). Organisational sustainability is the aptitude and capacity of an organisation or firm to operate, survive, flourish and thrive for a long term by balancing and managing environmental factors such as socio-economic, political and technological. Rahman et al. (2022) further viewed it as everything about mixing the goals of sustainable development such as societal equity, economic efficiency, and ecological experiences, into the operational atmosphere of organisations and industries. In this study, organisational sustainability signals the condition in which a firm can reliably meet its production, quality, and labour requirements over time without experiencing disruptive fluctuations in workforce competence, institutional memory, or operational consistency.

The study is informed by Adams' (1963) Equity theory and the Social Exchange theory. The equity theory posits that employees cognitively compare their inputs, such as knowledge, skills, time taken to do the job and experience with those of comparable others, and perceived imbalances lead to feelings of inequity. Equity theory provides a relevant framework for understanding casualised employees' work behaviours, attitudes and their implications for organisational sustainability in the construction industry. Gallagher & Sverke (2005) state that perceptions of inequity negatively affect employee engagement and organisational commitment of casual employees. These negative behaviours create challenges for organisational sustainability through increased recruitment costs as organisations constantly replace disengaged casual workers. It therefore implies that when casual workers recognise fairness in company procedures and reward systems, the organisation enjoys workforce flexibility and reduced labour costs, thereby enhancing organisational sustainability and employee engagement.

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The Social exchange theory by Thibaut & Kelley (1959) is of the view that social behaviour is a consequence of an exchange exercise where employees weigh the potential benefits, they are likely to get against the potential risks. It is a cost benefit analysis undertaken by employees to determine the social behaviour which gives them more benefits. Workers become motivated and prepared to expend their energy towards meeting organizational goals if the benefits outweigh the risks and costs. Relationships are developed, maintained or dissolved depending on the perceived benefits of exchange. Employees, casual labour included evaluate the benefits and risks using economic principles, hence their behaviour is well calculated and shaped by the outcomes of the cost benefit analysis. The application of the two theories in this study offer a balanced understanding of the benefits and challenges associated with labour casualisation, employee engagement and organisational sustainability in the construction sector in Masvingo urban, Zimbabwe.

2.2 Empirical literature review

Casualisation of labour has arisen from employers' need to curtail labour costs and increase labour flexibility, often at the expense of employee rights and benefits. Casualisation of labour has been viewed as exposing workers to exploitative conditions such as job instability, lower wages, which consequently lead to decreased motivation and commitment. The casualisation of labour is characterised by non-permanent employment arrangements that significantly affect employee engagement and organisational sustainability. In Africa, casualisation of labour is common in the food and oil manufacturing industries. In countries where casualization of labour is not properly regulated, casual workers may have contracts of employment spanning 5 years or more. Such forms impermanent employment arrangements may be described as permanently temporary employment, which is however marked by dignity erosion and social exclusion. Casual employees and domestic workers repeatedly face harsh working conditions, low wages, restricted career development prospects, low motivation, dearth of a sense of belonging, and violations of fundamental employee rights, leading to feelings of insecurity and undervaluation (Nyanga & Kele, 2023).

A study conducted by Nyanga (2019) established that casual labour in the Zimbabwean construction industry is pervasive; the relations between employers and employees are strained, thereby compromising the sustainability and growth of organisations. Nyanga (2025) further observed that the casualisation of work in backyard organisations breeds organisational conflict, propelled by perceived social injustice, a lack of supportive workplaces, and the lack of recognition they receive at work, irrespective of their employment status. Studies have consistently revealed that casual workers often experience job insecurity and lack the same level of organisational commitment as permanent employees, thereby rendering the employment relationship predominantly transactional rather than relational. Furthermore, a study conducted by Nyanga & Kele (2023) established that the way employees are treated within informal

employment arrangements influences their attitudes towards their organisations and work. This implies that labour casualisation negatively affects employee engagement and productivity as employees feel worthless and unappreciated. Work arrangements for casual workers often ignore the inherent power imbalances in employer-employee relationships. Employers hold economic supremacy and the ability to assess the quality or satisfaction level of the work done and also decide whether to pay or not thereby distorting the give-and-take exchange process between labour and employers. The economic power held by employers leave casual workers at the mercy of their employers.

Reviewed literature indicates that most studies on labour casualisation were conducted in developed economies such as Europe, United States, Australia, New Zealand and a few developed countries in Africa such as Kenya, Mozambique, and South Africa. Additionally, the countries in which related studies were conducted have different economic contexts with Zimbabwe. Furthermore, there is dearth of related studies on the relationships between casualisation of labour, employee engagement and organisational sustainability. Thus, it is prudent to conduct a study which addresses labour casualisation, employee engagement and organisational sustainability issues in the construction industry Zimbabwe.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. The approach was chosen because it helps researchers to fully understand a range of social issues, such as the behaviour or work attitudes displayed by casual workers. It also provides in-depth insights into how people make sense of casualisation of labour and interconnections between employee engagement and organisational sustainability. A multiple case research design was also adopted in the study. The multiple case research design enabled the researchers to collect data from multiple selected construction firms in Masvingo city. Barroga & Matanguihan (2022), argue that a single case research design is appropriate when exploring a specific phenomenon arising from a particular entity; hence a single case design was not appropriate for this study. Purposive sampling was utilised to select the construction companies and individual participants who participated in the study.

Purposive sampling approach was utilized to select both the companies and individuals who participated in the study. Purposive sampling approach is appropriate for this study because it enabled the researchers to select participants with relevant knowledge and experience related to the study's phenomena. The study sample comprised 30 participants. Of the 30 participants; 24 were employees; comprising 17 casual workers and 7 contract workers drawn from different construction firms and 6 key informants (management officials, human resource management officers, or project managers). The key informants comprised

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people who had responsibilities of managing and deciding employment contracts for workers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 participants and 6 key informants from purposively selected construction companies. The interview guide covered all the facets related to labour casualisation, work engagement and organisational sustainability such as the effects of casualisation on engagement, perceptions of fairness and inclusion, and sustainability, particularly in roles with irregular schedules. Interviews were held at the participants' work stations and appointments to schedule the interviews were done by the researchers in consultation with management of participating construction companies. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and one hour. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were also conducted to compliment the semi-structured interviews. The researchers came up with 5 Focus Group Discussions (FDGs), each comprising 6 participants. The FGDs involved the same 30 participants who participated in the semi-structured interviews. FGDs provided a platform for interactive discussions where participants could share and compare experiences.

Thematic analysis approach was employed to analyse data. Themes and sub-themes were identified, described and developed during the data collection and analysis stages. Participants' verbatim quotations were recorded and coded. To develop the themes the researchers started by familiarization with data for purposes of getting the general sense of the data. After familiarization, codes were assigned to specific data segments, which then led to the development, reviewing, defining and naming of themes and sub-themes. The use of the thematic data analysis techniques is consistent with previous studies (Nyanga & Zirima, 2020) that successfully applied the approach in related studies. Research ethical principles were observed in the study; informed consent was sought from the participants and all research participants were treated with care and respect. Furthermore, consistent with Dawadi et al. (2021) participants' names remained anonymous to minimise harm in the event of privacy or confidentiality breaches.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Demographic characteristics of respondents

The study comprised 21 males and 9 female participants, reflecting male dominance in the construction industry. Participants were distributed across 4 age groups namely 23-30 years age group, N =9; 31-40 age group, N=9, 41-50 age group, N= 8 and 51 years and above, N= 4. Participants` educational levels were moderate; 12 participants were holders of ordinary level certificates; 10 participants were holders of technical diplomas and 8 participants held tertiary (degree) qualifications. A sizable proportion of participants were casual employees, N=17; 7 participants were contract employees and 6 key informant participants were members of management highlighting the prevalence of non-permanent and project-

based work arrangements in the construction sector. The study included a range of positions from general staff, skilled, semi-skilled, supervisors and project managers thereby making it possible to capture the participants` diverse views on labour casualisation benefits, challenges and implications on employee engagement and organisational sustainability.

4.2 Nature of the employment relationship of casual workers

Casual workers in the construction industry were asked questions to find out the nature of their employment relationship, whether it is predominantly transactional (economic) or relational (social), and to understand how this perception shapes their engagement at work and had this to say;

Participant 15 stated:

> *"Most workers in construction companies are casual workers. As a casual employee, I work for money and nothing else, but when I do my work, I do it wholeheartedly and take pride in it".*

Participant 6 highlighted:

> *"At my workstation out of an average of 50 workers per project only 6 are permanent and the rest are casual. There is no room for attachment; it is just pay for services rendered. Once the job is done, the chapter closes, although sometimes, as a human being, we would wish for more".*

Focus group participants remarked:

> *"We are called to work upon request, and once the job is done, that is the end of the story. We go home and wait for the next call of duty, but during my stay, I do my work professionally to secure more jobs in the future".*

Key informant 1 stated:

> *"To be honest with you, my friend, and our relationship with casual employees is purely transactional, based on agreed and signed short-term contracts".*

The findings demonstrate that the nature of employment for casual employees in the construction sector was predominantly transactional (economic), temporal impermanence, and instrumental professionalism rather than relational commitment.

4.3 Effects of casualisation of labour on employee engagement

Results show that casualisation of labour has complex, multifaceted effects on employee engagement in the construction industry in Masvingo. Below are some of the remarks which participants made:

Participant 5 stated:

> *"I am a casual worker because I want to be in charge of what I do, when and how. I know my worth, and I am self-motivated to work because if I do not look for work or clients to offer service, I have*

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nothing to take home, no food, no medical cover. Employee engagement is however low because I do not have any emotional attachment to the organisation".

Participant 17 remarked:

"As a casual employee, I am always on a learning curve. I learn new things at each construction site, can do multiple jobs, but once the job is finished, you are gone, no medical and pension cover, it is like work and eat. The work and eat approach impedes employee engagement among construction workers".

Focus Group Discussion 2, participant 5 remarked:

"One participant had this to say: 'Casual employment offers autonomy that boosts task engagement but lacks security and benefits, which weakens long-term organisational commitment and creates uncertainty'".

Key informant 3 highlighted:

"In my view, casual employment is on the rise because it offers flexibility in deciding when to work and when to rest. One can do moonlighting, do anything, but on the other hand, there is no job security, always job hunting, as the future is uncertain in most cases".

The reports indicate that casualisation of labour has complex, multifaceted effects on employee engagement in the construction industry in Masvingo. On the positive side, casual employees enjoy being in charge of what they do, when and how, which helps them stay self-motivated and fully engaged at work. Negatively, casual workers do not have benefits which permanent workers have such as leave, job security, health and safety benefits and pension schemes. The absence of such benefits make workers become disengaged.

4.4 Perceived impact of casualisation on organisational sustainability

Participants mentioned poor quality of work which damages organisational reputation and reduce the chances of winning project contracts, institutional knowledge loss as effects of labour casualisation on organisational sustainability.

Participant 22 remarked:

"I provide the much-needed labour during production cycles when there is a shortage, especially during peak seasons for my personal survival. This sounds good to the employer in the short term but it seriously affects key production principles such as continuity. This therefore affects the sustainability of the organisation".

Participant 27 explained:

"As a casual, I bring my own individual expertise, innovative ideas and energy to the project, helping the organisation run the project viable and sustainably. However, the quality may be affected due to

the changes of workforce upon expiration of workers' contracts. When my contract expires, I leave the organisation with my expertise and experience, thus knowledge loss".

Focus Group Discussion number 5, participant 6 stated:

"Casual workers bring new ideas on project works. They help us to meet labour demands on peak periods and short- time work, despite the need to constantly train and supervise them".

Key informant 6:

"Labour casualisation sustains construction companies though access to short-supply skills. It is also an entry level to permanent employment. However, sometimes we suffer inconsistent quality of work as some of the casuals lack the proper work skills".

The findings show that casualisation helps to acquire flexible labour who possess new ideas and specialised skills.

5. DISCUSSIONS

5.1 Nature of employment relationship

The study revealed that casual labour held a temporary employment relationship based on monetary benefits rather than relational benefits. The study showed that casual labour was rife in the construction industry and most construction companies rely on casual labour and have very few, insignificant proportion of permanent workforce. Human beings act logically towards things that are rewarding or beneficial to them and develop a negative attitude towards things that are not appealing. Equity Theory also suggests that if casual workers perceive fair procedures (Moorman, 1991) or receive equitable rewards relative to their inputs, casualisation may offer benefits such as workforce flexibility and lower labour costs, thereby enhancing short-term organisational performance.

5.2 Effects of casualisation of labour on employee engagement

The study established that the effects of casualisation of Labour in the construction industry on employee engagement were complex and multifaceted. On the positive side, the study revealed that casual employees enjoy overseeing what they do, when and how, above all, the ability to charge for their services in relation to their work, which helps them stay self-motivated and fully engaged. The results are consistent with numerous scholars who have highlighted a variety of voluntary reasons, such as the need for work-life balance, as reasons for embracing unconventional or temporary work arrangements (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021).

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On the flip side, the study established that one of the effects of the casualisation of labour on employee engagement is job insecurity and emotional strain, which erodes a sense of belonging. The absence of stable employment transforms the work relationship into a transactional one, where workers focus primarily on immediate survival rather than organisational goals. The study also showed that casualisation of labour significantly affect employees' mental and physical health, which directly and indirectly erodes employee engagement. The results converge with a study by Nyanga & Kele (2023) findings that temporary employment promote work intensification and job insecurity and low employee engagement which negatively affects employee and organisational performance.

The study also found that casual labour feel that they are easily replaceable and disposable; leading to a shift toward self-preservation, lower engagement, and reduced productivity. Casual staff salaries are far lower and not comparable to those of permanent workers. Additionally, they are denied the right to regroup, organise and benefit from collective agreements and are mostly not protected from exploitation by the employer. It implies that although temporary workers work for the same employer and hold the same responsibilities as permanent workers, casuals are denied the same privileges and treated worse.

5.3 Perceived impact of casualisation on organisational sustainability

The study also established that the casualisation of labour perfectly respond to labour demand changes whilst bringing new ideas without increasing hiring and termination of employment costs that are associated with permanent employment. Casualisation of labour in the construction sector provides organisation with the advantage of labour flexibility, which in turn reduces operation costs for construction companies and enhance organisational sustainability. The findings are consistent with Kroon & Paauwe (2022) view that casualisation of labour offers labour flexibility by scaling workforce size up or down in response to changes in labour demand with no financial or administrative burdens that are related to work redundancies or permanent employment terminations. Casual workers bring new work ideas that they obtain from their external network connections across various organisational settings.

The study identifies poor quality of work, high costs of training, institutional knowledge loss and increased supervision demands as effects of casualisation of labour on organisational sustainability. Casualisation of labour poses significant risks to organisational sustainability through knowledge loss, inconsistent quality, and increased training and supervision demands. The findings confirm preceding studies' findings that casualisation of labour is associated with hidden costs as employers need to constantly hire, induct and train new staff. The hidden costs cumulatively lead to knowledge loss, quality variability that undermine organisational sustainability.

6. LIMITATIONS

The study had a few limitations. The limitations included the sample size and composition, the geographical scope and generalisability of the findings. The study was conducted and delimited to Masvingo city, which is a limitation to the generalizability of findings. If the study had covered a larger geographical area such as all major cities in Zimbabwe, the generalizability of results to all construction companies in Zimbabwe and beyond was going to be possible. Furthermore, the other limitation was that the use of non-random sampling approach to select participants made the selection process prone to bias. While the limitations threatened to affect the accuracy and reliability of collected data, the researchers employed various approaches to subdue their impact.

7. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge by adding another layer of information and knowledge regarding casualisation of labour in the construction industry in the global south. The findings inform various stakeholders such as legislators, owners of businesses and human resource practitioners in making legislative and human resource management decisions. Human resource managers and owners of construction entities are better equipped to handle labour casualisation issues; an area which is traditionally characterised by labour disputes between employers and casual labour. The study helps organisations to significantly reduce legal battles related to casualisation of labour.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that casualisation of labour is prevalent in the construction industry. Most organisations in the construction industry rely on casual labour and employ very few permanent full-time workers. The main causes of labour casualisation in the industry include high unemployment rates, reducing operation costs, promoting organisational sustainability and promoting flexibility. The study concluded that casual labour in the construction industry is disengaged due to exposure to poor health and safety standards, exploitation, poor salaries and job insecurity. Casualisation of labour propels low employee engagement in the construction industry in Masvingo urban. With regards to the effects of casualisation of labour on organisational sustainability, the study concluded that to a larger extent casualisation of labour poses challenges to organisational sustainability as casual workers port their skills upon contract expiration. The study also concludes that casualisation of labour is associated with escalated training and supervision demands to new casuals and inconsistent quality work. The study

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recommends fair and merit-based rewards for high performing casual workers so that they will execute their work effectively and efficiently. Organisations in the construction industry also need to invest in training for short-term employees to ensure quality work and provide good health and safety standards to enhance the engagement of casual labour.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

The authors declare that they have not used any Generative AI and/or AI-Assisted technologies during the preparation of this work.

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