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The Impact of Span of Control on Employee Engagement during M&A: Insights from Lebanese Insurance Firms

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Abstract: This paper explores the effect of span of control on employee engagement during mergers and acquisitions in the insurance and reinsurance sector in Lebanon, with the purpose of identifying the optimal span that maximizes engagement. Applying quantitative methods, the study uses statistical tests including reliability, correlation, regression, ANOVA and Tukey Post-Hoc tests to analyze data collected from 456 non-managerial employees. The findings revealed a significant negative correlation ($r= -0.45$, $p< 0.01$) between employee engagement and span of control, with regression results indicating that span of control accounts for 20.9% of the variance in employee engagement. ANOVA and Tukey tests revealed significant differences in employee engagement levels across the four SOC groups, identifying a span of 5 to 8 employees per manager as optimal for promoting engagement. Theoretical implications underscore the importance of balancing efficiency with the wellbeing of employee, particularly during periods fraught with uncertainties. Practical implications offer actionable insights to improve engagement during organizational changes. This paper contributes to the management literature by generating empirical evidence on the relationship between employee engagement and span of control and equipping organizations with tools to navigate M&A effectively. Future studies are encouraged to examine how other contextual factors such as managerial personality and experience, leadership and organizational culture shape the span of control-engagement relationship.

Keywords: Mergers and Acquisitions; Insurance and Reinsurance; Span of Control; Employee Engagement.

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1. Introduction

Employee engagement and span of control are essential factors affecting organizational performance, particularly during periods of changes such as mergers and acquisitions (M&A). M&A often lead to cultural and structural changes, increasing uncertainty and disorientation among employees. In these situations, maintaining adequate levels of employee engagement is essential to enabling a smooth transition and promoting M&A success.

M&A usually result in redistribution or consolidation of managerial duties, raising questions about the optimal span of control, or the number of reports a manager can effectively supervise. A narrow span of control may enable managers to provide personalized attention and better communication, which are essential to mitigate M&A uncertainty. However, it also involves the risk of increased costs, inefficiencies, reduced employee autonomy and micromanagement. Conversely, a broader span may improve efficiency by minimizing the number of managers, yet it can also stretch managerial attention, leading to inadequate supervision and reduced employee engagement. Consequently, striking the appropriate balance is critical, particularly in major organizational changes such as M&A.

1.1 Research Problem:

Despite substantial research on employee engagement and span of control, their interplay during M&A events has received little attention, particularly in unstable environments like Lebanon. The insurance and reinsurance sector in Lebanon, characterized by political and economic uncertainties, provides a particular context to study these events. M&A activities are known to entail cultural and structural changes, and fraught with elevated uncertainties, which undermine employee engagement and jeopardize M&A success.

1.2 Research Objective:

This research aims to determine the optimal span of control (SOC) that maximizes employee engagement during M&A in the Lebanese insurance and reinsurance industry. By tackling this gap, this study contributes to the M&A literature and provides practical recommendations for organizations navigating similar situations. The findings of this study provide practical strategies for improving employee engagement and enhancing performance during M&A changes.

1.3 Research Questions

To this end, the research question guiding this research is: What is the optimal span of control that promotes employee engagement during M&A changes in the insurance and reinsurance industry?

1.4 Scope of Study

Concerning the research scope, this study examines Lebanese and foreign insurance and reinsurance firms conducting business in Lebanon that have undertaken M&A during the last 20 years. It examines the role of span of control in determining employee engagement during these changes.

The geographical scope is limited to the Lebanese market, focusing on the insurance and reinsurance industry. By narrowing the scope to this industry, this research aims to generate useful insights that can inform practical recommendations in similar settings.

Concerning the theoretical scope, this research draws on justice theory, with its three constituents-interactional, distributive and procedural justice- to examine the relationship between employee engagement and span of control. By integrating this theory, this research aims to understand how justice and perceptions of fairness affect employee engagement during M&A changes, as employees rely on fairness judgment to overcome situations fraught with uncertainties (Melkonian et al., 2011). This study does not address other organizational variables such as operational efficiency, cultural dynamics or financial performance.

Having introduced the topic, stated the research problem, question, and delineated the research scope, we now proceed to the literature review.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Span of control

A valuable metric that enables valuable insight into how a firm is structured is the span of control. Understanding the organizational structure is crucial to comprehend where decisions may be bottlenecked and how communication is streaming. The term “span of control” refers to the number of employees supervised by a manager (Cathcart et al., 2004), and is also known as the span of supervision, span of management, span of authority, span of responsibility and management ratio (Zoller, & Muldoon, 2020).

According to Fleet and Bedean (1976), the idea of span of control is ancient, dating back thousands of years to ancient Egyptian where the “rule of 10”, was standard for determining the appropriate number of subordinates that a supervisor can effectively manage. The concept started receiving attention in the early 20th century with authors such as Henri Fayol (1841-1942) in his book “General and Industrial Management” in which he discussed the 14 principles of management (Zoller, & Muldoon, 2020) and with Sir Ian Hamilton (1853-1947). It gained popularity in the 1950s with the rise of industrialization and bureaucratic structures, reaching its peak in the 1970s due to the surge in technological development. As corporations flattened their structures to increase their responsiveness to market demands, managers had to supervise a larger number of subordinates, which raised questions about the optimal number of subordinates a manager can handle without compromising performance.

Perspectives on the best span of control have changed over time (Zoller and Muldoon, 2020). For instance, in the 1920s, a narrow span of control, typically 3 to 6 employees per manager was preferred, enabling closer supervision and direct communication. A narrow span of control means that a manager oversees a small number of employees enabling him to provide scrupulous support and guidance. In addition, such an arrangement enables frequent and closer interaction between a manager and his subordinates, reducing misinterpretations and misunderstandings. Finally, in a narrow span of control, managers can act as role model and player coach leading to better mentoring and guidance and helping employees to enhance their skills and performance.

By the 1970s, the trend shifted toward flatter organizational structure, promoting a broader span of control to encourage faster decision-making and decentralization. While a broader span of control reduces overhead costs and promotes employee autonomy, they can also overstretch managerial attention, leading to less adequate communication and weaker relationships, which can be particularly devastating during M&A changes, where employees already experience high levels of anxiety and uncertainty due to structural and cultural changes.

An important contributor to the span of control literature is Joan Woodward (1916-1971), who examined the effect of task complexity and technology on determining the optimal span. Her studies revealed that the optimal SOC for an organization should be around 6. Furthermore, she distinguished between SOC for executives which should range between 4 to 6 due to the complexities of their reports, and that of first line supervisors which should range between 15 to 23 reports, as they supervise routine and simple tasks.

Optimizing the span of control during M&A is crucial for several reasons including: operational efficiency, decision making, communication and coordination:

- ***Operational efficiency***: determining the appropriate span of control ensures that the firm structure is optimized to meet the operational efficiency objective and eliminate potential inefficiencies and bottlenecks (Risely, 2023).
- ***Resource allocation:*** based on the justice theory, social exchange theory and resource-based view theory, appropriate resource allocation is crucial during M&A. Optimal span of control is essential to ensure resources are appropriately allocated, otherwise lacks attention to emergent issues and problems of resources mismanagement might arise (Risely, 2023).
- ***Decision making:*** the efficiency of decision making is affected by the span of control. If the span of control is too broad, managers experience additional demands on their time and

attention, which might bottleneck decisions and compromise their quality. On the other side, when the span of control is too narrow, information needs to pass across several levels of management leading to slow decision-making. Therefore, it is imperative to optimize the span of control so that managers can fulfill their supervision duties without sacrificing the quality of decisions (Cathcart, 2004).

- ***Communication and coordination:*** communication is of high importance during M&A to mitigate uncertainties, avoid misunderstanding and coordinate efforts to carry out the changes. An optimal span of management ensures that supervisors can communicate effectively with their subordinates and coordinate tasks efficiently, which is crucial when departments and functions are being merged (Risely, 2023).

After examining the importance of span of control and its effect on employee performance, particularly during M&A, we proceed to review the literature on employee engagement and elucidate the relationship between the two variables

2.2 Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is an important factor affecting both the financial and non-financial performance of employees, which in turn serves as a direct predictor of organizational performance. Employee engagement denotes the extent to which individuals devote their emotional, cognitive and behavioral energies to the achievement of organizational goals (Glint Inc., 2023), engagement directly predicts employee satisfaction, organizational resilience, and productivity.

The idea of employee engagement was initially introduced by William A. Kahn in the 1990s. He concentrated on the cognitive and emotional investment of employees in their work, highlighting the importance of intrinsic motivation of employees in their jobs. Some outcomes of employee engagement are: improved productivity, enhanced goodwill and loyalty toward the firm, responsiveness to change, improved organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), less absenteeism, turnover and employee attrition, and positive word of mouth, all of which are critical to the organization success (Antony, 2018; Rastogi, 2013).

M&A changes often compromise employee engagement for several reasons including changes in structural and social ties, unclear communication, job insecurities, cultural clash, loss of identity, reduced trust, skill mismatch, inadequate support, uncertainty and others. These outcomes, unless appropriately managed, results in employees' disengagement, manifested as cognitive and emotional separation from the workplace, reduced productivity, lack of enthusiasm, resistance to change and detachment from the firm's values and goals (Pech, & Slade, 2006). Conversely, engaged employees display higher cooperation, commitment and adaptability, which are crucial during M&A transitions.

The dynamics of employee engagement during M&A can be explained from the perspective of the resource-based view (RBV), justice theory and social exchange theory (SE). The RBV underscores the strategic significance of an engaged workforce as a source of sustainable competitive advantage. (Galpin et al., 2012). The justice theory highlights the importance of fairness in procedural, interactive and distributive justice in determining employee engagement. The SE theory suggests that employees are more likely to be engaged when they perceive reciprocity and fairness in their relationships with their superiors and employer (Appelbaum et al., 2017). Together, these theoretical frameworks underscore the complex nature of employee engagement and its importance to achieving fruitful M&A.

2.3 Linking Employee Engagement and Span of Control

The interplay between employee engagement and span of control becomes particularly salient during M&A changes. Managerial decisions regarding SOC directly affect the frequency and quality of interaction between supervisors and subordinates, which in turn affect engagement levels. A broader span of control may limit managerial attention to employees, while a narrower span fosters closer interaction and trust. During M&A in the Lebanese insurance and reinsurance sector, characterized by high volatility and recurrent crises, this relationship is particularly important. Understanding how these two variables affect each other is essential to promote adaptability and resilience, both of which are crucial for successful M&A transitions.

The span of control is an essential element in organizational structure, especially during M&A, as it directly affects employee engagement (Cathcart, 2004; Optimal Quantum Workplace, 2019). An optimal span of control enables supervisors to manage their teams effectively, provide personalized attention and cultivate strong relationships. This is particularly crucial during M&A, when change and job insecurity engender high uncertainty among employees. A narrower span of control allows managers to communicate more frequently with employees and offer the required guidance and support, which can mitigate uncertainty and improve employee satisfaction. On the other hand, a wider span of control may overstretch managerial resources, reducing attention to employees' needs, and lead the to feel disconnected as they receive less information, attention and feedback. This can be particularly detrimental in the tumultuous context of M&A, where strong leadership and frequent communication are of utmost importance (Cathcart, 2004). Consequently, optimizing the span of command during M&A can notably enhance employee engagement level, ultimately promoting the success of the integration phase.

Hypotheses

Based on the literature above, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- ***H1: The span of control has a significant effect on employee engagement during M&A.***
- ***H2: There are significant differences in engagement levels among the four spans of control groups (1-4; 5-8; 9-12; 13-15).***

To test theses hypotheses, a robust research methodology was customized to collect and analyze data. The following section delineates the research approach, including the sampling strategy, measurement instruments, data collection and analysis methods used to test these hypotheses and produce results.

3.Methodology and Procedures

This research is guided by deductive reasoning, deriving hypotheses from the literature and ensuring a structured analysis of the relationship between SOC and employee engagement. A purposive sampling technique is utilized to target employees who experienced M&A in the Lebanese insurance and reinsurance sector. 485 valid responses were collected out of the 591 employees who received the survey, yielding an 81.6% response rate.

The population of the study included non-managerial employees from various departments within the merging firms. Data collection and analysis was guided by a positivism approach, using quantitative methods to produce robust and generalizable findings. A 5 items questionnaire was used, comprising 6 Likert-scale questions derived from the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) to assess engagement dimensions- absorption, dedication and vigor- and one item to measure SOC.

Survey Administration**:** The questionnaire was distributed through several means including email, hard copies, and a customized Google form shared via WhatsApp to reach large respondents across various industries. Participation was voluntary, with employees choosing to fill the questionnaire at their own discretion. Data was collected during the summer of 2024. Following the data collection process, the responses were gathered and all incomplete responses were deleted to preserve the integrity of the data. Then, data was entered into SPSS and analyzed to derive a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the span of control and employee engagement.

Data Analysis: To analyze data and derive meaningful insights, the following tests were applied:

- *Reliability Test*: Applied to evaluate the internal consistency and reliability of the scales using the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient.
- *Correlation analysis:* Computed to explore the relationship between the dependent variable (employee engagement) and the predictor variable (span of control).

- *Regression analysis:* Conducted to determine the predictive power of the independent variable (SOC) on the dependent variable (employee engagement) and to quantify this relationship.
- *ANOVA* test: Used to determine which group of the span of control is most engaged, thus determining the optimal span.

After delineating the methodology and statistical tests used, we can proceed to data analysis.

4.Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Reliability Test

The Cronbach's Alpha is used to assess the internal consistency and reliability of the scale to measure employee engagement. Table 1 presents the reliability test, Cronbach's Alpha's value is 0.86, which is well above the accepted limit of 0.7, signifying high reliability. This indicates that the four items utilized to assess employee engagement produce reliable results.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

The correlation analysis assesses the strength and direction of the relationship between SOC and employee engagement. Table 2 shows the correlation values between the dependent and independent variables. The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = -0.45$, $p< 0.01$) suggests a moderate negative relationship between the two variables, meaning that lower employee engagement is correlated with a wider span of control.

4.3 Regression Analysis

Regression analysis determines the predictive power of the independent variable (SOC) on the dependent variable (employee engagement). Table 3 represents the model summary with R= 0.45, R2= 0.209, indicating that the model explains 20.9% of the variance in employee engagement. The regression coefficient for span of control from table 5 is -0.50; $p< 0.01$, suggesting that for every unit increase in span of control, employee engagement decreases by 0.50 units.

4.4 ANOVA Analysis

After establishing the predictive power of span of control on employee engagement, an ANOVA test (Table 6) was conducted to compare employee engagement across the four groups of span of control (1-4; 5-8; 9-12; 13-15). The findings revealed significant differences in engagement among the four groups: F (3,452) = 1068.811, p<0.01. These results required additional statistical tests to determine where the significant differences in employee engagement lie between the span of control groups.

4.5 Post-Hoc Test: Tukey HSD

This final test is conducted to determine the optimal span of control for maximizing employee engagement during M&A. Based on the Tukey HSD test (Table 7), the engagement levels for each of the four groups are as follow:

- SOC1 (1-4): 11.1
- SOC2 (5-8): 15.7
- SOC3 (9-12): 9.03
- SOC 4 (13-15): 5.60

To determine which SOC group yielded the highest engagement levels, a Post-Hoc analysis is conducted. Tukey's HSD indicated that engagement levels peaked (M = 15.7) in the 5-8 SOC group. Engagement levels decreased slightly in the 1-4 group scoring 11.1. The 9-12 group scored a significant decrease in engagement (M= 9.03). Finally, the 13-15 SOC group scored the lowest engagement levels (M=5.6).

Analysis of the Effect of the Statistical Test results on Hypotheses

H1: The span of control has a significant effect on employee engagement during M&A.
To assess H1, both correlation and regression analyses are conducted.

The correlation analysis demonstrated a moderate negative relationship between employee engagement and SOC (r= -0.45; P< 0.01). This suggests an inverse: as SOC increases, employee engagement decreases.

The regression analyses further confirmed this relationship. According to the model summary, 20,9% of the variance in employee engagement is explained by the model. The regression coefficient for SOC is (B= -0.50; p<0.01), indicating that lower employee engagement is associated with a wider span of control.

Based on the findings from both the regression and correlation analyses, H1 is confirmed. SOC has a significant effect on employee engagement during M&A, with a wider SOC resulting in reduced engagement.

H2: There are significant differences in engagement levels among the four spans of control groups (1-4; 5-8; 9-12; 13;15).

To test H2, ANOVA test was conducted to compare engagement across the four SOC groups.

The findings (table 6) revealed significant differences in engagement among the four SOC groups (F 3, 452= 1068.8; $p< 0.01$). Tukey's HSD Post-Hoc test (Table 7) showed the engagement level peaked (M=15.7) in the 5-8 SOC group. Engagement levels decreased slightly in the 1-4 group scoring 11.1. The 9-12 group scored a significant decrease in engagement (M= 9.03), while the 13-15 SOC group scored the lowest engagement levels (M=5.6).

Based on these results, H2 is accepted. There are significant differences in engagement among the four SOC groups, with 5 to 8 employees per manager yielded the optimal engagement levels.

5. Discussion

The findings of this research reveal that the span of control significantly affects employee engagement during M&A. Correlation analysis demonstrated a moderate negative relationship between span of control and employee engagement, demonstrating that employee engagement decreases as SOC increases. Regression analysis revealed that SOC accounts for 20.9% of the variance in employee engagement, with a significant negative coefficient (B= -0.5), corroborating the predictive effect of SOC on employee engagement.

The ANOVA and Tukey test exposed significant differences in engagement across different SOC groups. Employee engagement scored highest with 5 to 8 employee per manager, indicating that this span is optimal for boosting employee engagement during M&A. Conversely, narrower spans resulted in lower engagement, while wider spans were detrimental to employee engagement.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This research provides supporting evidence for both the span of control theory and justice theory, underscoring their importance in understanding employee engagement during M&A changes. The findings align well with components of the justice theory: procedural justice, (managers can implement fair processes with a manageable number of employees), interactional justice (all employees receive adequate attention); and distributive justice, (employees perceive resources and workload as equitably distributed). The findings also align with the Social Exchange Theory, highlighting the importance of equitable exchange between employees and the firm. Additionally, study resonate well with the Resource Based View Theory, highlighting that employees are strategic resource, that require effective management to stay engaged during organizational change.

5.2 Practical Implications

This paper provides useful insights for organizations undergoing M&A particularly, in the insurance and reinsurance sector. Employee engagement is critical for maintaining productivity during changes and for the success of M&A. This study reveals that SOC accounts for 20.9% of employee engagement. To foster engagement, companies should maintain moderate SOC (5-8 employees per manager) allowing managers to communicate effectively and build supportive relationships during transitions. Conversely, broad or narrow span can compromise engagement by overloading managers, reducing their ability to communicate effectively and provide sufficient attention to employee

Additionally, organizations should provide training to managers so they are equipped to lead their employees effectively within the optimal span, ensuring they communicate effectively and provide adequate support. Insurance companies in particular should integrate these findings into their change management strategies to preserve employee engagement and productivity throughout the M&A process.

5.3 Added Value of the Paper

This research provides valuable insights into the critical role of SOC in affecting employee engagement during M&A, an area often neglected in M&A research. By identifying an optimal SOC range, this research offers actionable recommendations for companies navigating M&A changes.

5.4 Limitation of the Research

While this study offers valuable insights, it also has several limitations, including the following:

1. Reliance on Quantitative research: This study relies solely on quantitative data, limiting the understanding of employee perspective. Incorporating qualitative methods could enable richer comprehension of employee engagement dynamics.

2. Context-specific results: The study focuses exclusively on insurance and reinsurance companies in Lebanon, which encounter particular economic and political challenges. While the findings of this may be valuable for similar contexts, they may not be generalizable to other industries or regions.

3. Narrow scope: While SOC is an important predictor of employee engagement, other factors such as managerial experience and personality, employee-organization fit, organization culture, and leadership style also play critical roles in shaping engagement levels.

Despite all these limitations, findings of this research provide useful insights into the importance of SOC in affecting employee engagement during M&A. The insights set the stage for future studies to address these gaps and enrich our understanding of this important organizational dynamic.

5.5 Future Research

Building on the limitations of this research, the following future research recommendations are proposed:

1. Future studies should integrate qualitative methods such as focus groups or interviews, to gain deeper understanding into employees' and managers' perspectives and better comprehend the dynamics of engagement.

2. Future research should examine other factors such as organizational culture, leadership style, managerial experience and personality, to generate a broader comprehension of the factors affecting employee engagement.

3. Findings of this research are applicable to the insurance and reinsurance industry in the Lebanese context. Future studies should examine the applicability of these results in other sectors or regions to evaluate the generalizability of SOC's effect on employee engagement.

5.6 Conclusion

This research examines the relationship between employee engagement and span of control during M&A, identifying 5 to 8 employees per manager as the optimal span to maximize employee engagement during M&A in the insurance and reinsurance sector. Findings revealed that employee engagement is significantly affected by SOC, with wider and narrower spans associated with reduced engagement levels. These findings generate theoretical and practical implications, highlighting the importance of delineating optimal spans to promote employee engagement during organizational changes.

This research contributes to the management literature by drawing insights from organizational theories to M&A situations and offering practical recommendations for organizations navigating similar challenges. Future studies are encouraged to examine additional variables affecting engagement and test the finding's generalizability across other industries and contexts.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.867	4

Table 2: Correlations

		SOC	Engagement
SOC	Pearson Correlation	1	-.457**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	456	456
Engagement	Pearson Correlation	-.457**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	456	456

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.457[a]	.209	.207	3.19710

a. Predictors: (Constant), SOC

Table 4: ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1227.147	1	1227.147	120.056	.000[b]
	Residual	4640.537	454	10.221		
	Total	5867.684	455			

a. Dependent Variable: SumEngagement
b. Predictors: (Constant), SOC

Table 5: Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	16.328	.382		42.706	.000
	SOC	-.508	.046	-.457	-10.957	.000

a. Dependent Variable: SumEngagement

Table 6: ANOVA

SumEngagement

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	5142.731	3	1714.244	1068.811	.000
Within Groups	724.954	452	1.604		
Total	5867.684	455			

Table 7: Tukey HSD for Employee Engagement Across SOC Groups

SpanOfControl	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05			
		1	2	3	4
4	30	5.6000			
3	108		9.0278		
1	99			11.1818	
2	219				15.6986
Sig.		1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000

Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.
a. Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size = 69.857.
b. The group sizes are unequal. The harmonic mean of the group sizes is used. Type I error levels are not guaranteed.

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