

Exploring the Moderating Effect of Employee Engagement on the Relationship Between Talent Management Practices and Employee Performance in the UAE

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Abstract

Employee performance is essential to public sector effectiveness, yet limited research has examined how employee engagement shapes the relationship between talent management practices and performance in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This study investigates the moderating role of employee engagement in the relationships between talent acquisition, talent retention, talent development, and employee performance within the UAE Federal Authority for Identity, Citizenship, Customs and Port Security (ICP). The study employed a quantitative research design based on 318 valid responses from ICP employees. Data were analysed using SPSS and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings indicate that talent retention ($\beta = 0.674$) and talent development ($\beta = 0.317$)

positively influence employee performance, whereas talent acquisition ($\beta = -0.103$) and employee engagement ($\beta = -0.098$) have significant negative direct effects. Employee engagement strengthens the effects of talent acquisition ($\beta = 0.060$) and talent retention ($\beta = 0.283$) on employee performance but weakens the effect of talent development ($\beta = -0.194$). These findings demonstrate that the effectiveness of talent management practices is contingent on employee engagement and that different talent management practices may produce varying performance outcomes. The study contributes to public sector talent management literature and provides practical insights for aligning talent management and employee engagement strategies to enhance workforce performance in the UAE.

Keywords: talent management practices, employee engagement, employee performance, UAE public sector

1. Introduction

Employee performance is a critical determinant of organizational success, particularly in today's dynamic and competitive environment, where public sector organizations face increasing pressure to deliver efficient, innovative, and high-quality services (Hakro, 2022). Employee performance refers broadly to the actions and behaviours that contribute to organizational goals and may encompass both productive and counterproductive activities (Edmondson & Besieux, 2021). It is a multidimensional construct that varies across job roles and includes aspects such as the quality and quantity of work, accuracy, efficiency, and effectiveness in task completion (Swanson et al., 2020; Abdelwahed et al., 2023). Thus, employee performance reflects the extent to which individuals effectively fulfil their job responsibilities and contribute to organizational outcomes (Al Dhanhani & Abdullah, 2020; Abun, 2021).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has achieved substantial progress across economic, social, and technological domains, positioning itself as a leading country in the Arab region (AlNuaimi & Khan, 2019). This progress is reflected in its consistently strong global competitiveness rankings and its position as a high-performing Arab country (Dulaimi, 2022). Consistent with its national development agenda, the UAE government continues to prioritize the attraction, development, and retention of talented individuals to support innovation, digital transformation, and the transition towards a knowledge-based economy (Alhammadi & Romle, 2023). Consequently, effective talent management has become increasingly important for public sector organizations seeking to develop a capable workforce and achieve strategic objectives.

Despite these achievements, UAE public sector organizations continue to face challenges in managing talent effectively and sustaining high levels of employee performance (Al Jawali et al., 2022; Bedwawi et al., 2023; Al-Awadhi, 2024; Alhantoobi & Alghizzawi, 2024). Previous research has identified several challenges, including inadequate training and development opportunities, limited technological and human resource support systems, and insufficient managerial involvement in talent management practices (Abouabidalla, 2022; Almesafri, 2022; Al Jawali et al., 2022). Such challenges may constrain employees' ability to perform effectively and, consequently, limit organizations' capacity to achieve their strategic objectives. Moreover, evidence suggests that some UAE public sector organizations face talent-related constraints that extend beyond financial considerations, highlighting the need for more effective and strategically aligned talent management systems (Al Jawali et al., 2022).

The effectiveness of talent management may also depend on employees' level of engagement with their work and organization. Ineffective talent management practices can be accompanied by low employee engagement, particularly when employees experience limited involvement, weak communication, and insufficient recognition (Mansor, 2021; AlAwadhi et al., 2023; Alhantoobi & Alghizzawi, 2024). Low engagement may subsequently undermine employee motivation, productivity, and performance. This suggests that employee engagement may not merely be an outcome of human resource practices but may also influence the extent to which talent management practices translate into improved employee performance. Examining

employee engagement as a moderating variable therefore provides an opportunity to better understand the conditions under which talent management practices are more or less effective.

Although previous studies have established a relationship between talent management practices and performance outcomes (Abdullahi et al., 2022), much of the existing literature has examined employee engagement as a mediating mechanism rather than as a moderating condition (Humaid, 2018; Yuniati et al., 2021; Dawwas, 2022). Within the UAE, Al Jawali et al. (2022) examined talent management practices in public sector organizations and demonstrated their influence on organizational outcomes, primarily through internal human resource mechanisms rather than direct employee performance effects. Similarly, Bedwawi et al. (2023) investigated the role of human resource practices in enhancing organizational effectiveness, emphasizing the importance of supportive systems without explicitly examining employee performance as a direct outcome. Al-Awadhi (2024) examined talent management challenges in UAE public institutions, focusing on structural and managerial limitations affecting workforce outcomes, while giving limited attention to the relationship between talent management and employee performance. Likewise, Alhantoobi (2024) examined employee engagement and human resource practices and demonstrated their influence on organizational effectiveness, but did not explicitly investigate employee engagement as a moderator of the relationship between talent management and employee performance.

Thus, despite growing interest in talent management, limited empirical evidence exists on whether and how employee engagement moderates the relationships between specific talent management practices namely, talent acquisition, talent retention, and talent development and employee performance. This gap is particularly evident in the UAE public sector, where empirical research examining these relationships simultaneously remains limited (Al Amiri & Shawali, 2021; Fan et al., 2022; Latan et al., 2022; Huntsman et al., 2023; Rashid et al., 2024). Accordingly, this study investigates the effects of talent acquisition, talent retention, and talent development on employee performance and examines the moderating role of employee engagement within the UAE public sector, with particular focus on the Federal Authority for Identity, Citizenship, Customs and Port Security (ICP). By addressing this gap, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of how talent management practices contribute to employee performance and the conditions under which these practices are more or less effective. The findings provide practical implications for human resource practitioners and policymakers in the UAE by supporting the alignment of talent management and employee engagement strategies. More broadly, the study contributes to the growing literature on talent management and employee performance in public sector organizations across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Middle East, and other developing-country contexts with similar institutional and organizational environments.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1 *The Relationship Between Talent Management Practices and Employee Performance*

Talent management practices are widely recognized as an important determinant of employee performance, as they enable organizations to attract capable employees, retain valuable human capital, and develop employees' knowledge and competencies. However, the effects of talent management may vary across its individual practices. Talent acquisition can contribute to employee performance by ensuring that individuals with appropriate skills and competencies are recruited and placed in suitable positions (Al-Hussaini, 2019; Ahmed et al., 2020). Talent retention can support sustained performance by maintaining valuable human capital and providing employees with career advancement, organizational support, and opportunities that encourage continued contribution (Al-Hussaini, 2019; Al Jawali et al., 2022). Similarly, talent development can enhance employee performance by strengthening employees' skills, capabilities, and motivation through training and career development opportunities (Syed et al., 2022; Ningrum et al., 2023; Ayaghena & Gambo, 2024). Thus, empirical evidence indicates that organizations that effectively attract, retain, and develop talented employees are more likely to achieve improved employee performance (Allam & Shaik, 2020; Hakro, 2022). Nevertheless, limited empirical evidence has examined these three talent management practices separately in the UAE public sector. Therefore, this study proposes that talent acquisition, talent retention, and talent development have significant positive effects on employee performance, leading to the following hypotheses:

H1: Talent acquisition has a significant positive effect on employee performance.

H2: Talent retention has a significant positive effect on employee performance.

H3: Talent development has a significant positive effect on employee performance.

2.2 *Relationship Between Employee Engagement and Employee Performance*

Employee engagement is widely recognized as an important determinant of employee performance, as engaged employees are more likely to demonstrate commitment, motivation, discretionary effort, and alignment with organizational goals (Cesário & Chambel, 2017; Sendawula et al., 2018). These characteristics can contribute to greater productivity, work quality, and overall effectiveness. Empirical evidence supports this relationship across different organizational contexts. Sendawula et al. (2018), for example, found that employee engagement significantly predicts employee performance in Uganda's health sector, while Sungmala and Verawat (2021) reported a significant positive relationship between employee engagement and individual performance outcomes. Similarly, Abdullahi et al. (2022) demonstrated that employees with stronger emotional attachment and enthusiasm towards their work are more likely to achieve higher performance, and Jacelyn and Nelson (2023) confirmed a significant positive effect of employee engagement on employee performance. Thus, these findings indicate that higher employee engagement is generally associated with improved employee performance. However, limited empirical evidence has examined this relationship within the UAE public sector, particularly alongside talent management practices. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H4: Employee engagement has a significant positive effect on employee performance.

2.3 Moderating Effect of Employee Engagement on the Relationship Between Talent Management Practices and Employee Performance

Previous studies have predominantly examined employee engagement as a mediating mechanism between talent management and employee performance (Sopiah et al., 2020; Yuniati et al., 2021; Abdullahi et al., 2022; Ateeq, 2023). In contrast, limited research has considered employee engagement as a moderator that may influence the strength of the relationship between talent management practices and employee performance (Salsabil et al., 2022; Prentice et al., 2023; Thi & Ha, 2025). Evidence from related organizational contexts suggests that employee engagement can act as a boundary condition influencing performance outcomes (Supriadi et al., 2022; Yew et al., 2025). However, empirical evidence remains limited regarding the moderating role of employee engagement in the relationships between the specific practices of talent acquisition, talent retention, talent development and employee performance, particularly in the UAE public sector. Therefore, this study proposes that employee engagement positively moderates the relationships between talent acquisition, talent retention, and talent development and employee performance, leading to the following hypotheses:

H5: Employee engagement positively moderates the relationship between talent acquisition and employee performance.

H6: Employee engagement positively moderates the relationship between talent retention and employee performance.

H7: Employee engagement positively moderates the relationship between talent development and employee performance.

3. Research Framework

The research framework illustrates the proposed relationships among talent management practices, employee engagement, and employee performance. Talent management practices constitute the independent variable and are operationalized through three dimensions: talent acquisition, talent retention, and talent development. Employee performance is the dependent variable, while employee engagement is positioned as a moderator of the relationships between the three talent management practices and employee performance, as illustrated in Figure 1.

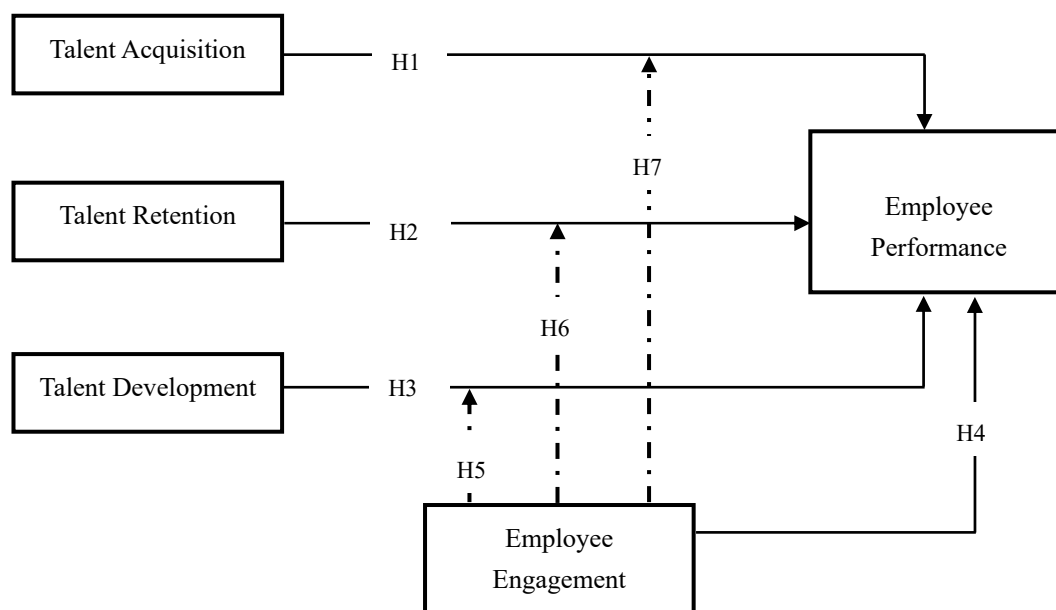


Figure 1. Proposed research framework

The framework is grounded in the Resource-Based View (RBV), which emphasizes the strategic value of organizational resources in achieving sustained competitive advantage (Joel, 2016; Keya, 2019; Ćizmić & Ahmić, 2021). In this study, talented employees are viewed as valuable human resources, while talent management practices represent mechanisms for acquiring, retaining, and developing these resources to enhance employee performance. The framework further extends this perspective by examining employee engagement as a moderating factor, providing insight into whether engagement strengthens or weakens the effects of talent management practices on employee performance, particularly in the UAE public sector.

4. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, non-experimental research design to examine the effects of talent acquisition, talent retention, and talent development on employee performance and the moderating role of employee engagement within the UAE Federal Authority for Identity, Citizenship, Customs and Port Security (ICP). A quantitative approach was appropriate for testing the hypothesized relationships using numerical data collected from respondents in their natural organizational setting (Creswell, 2014). The target population comprised 7,111 employees across three ICP branches in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah (Alshehhi et al., 2021). Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure adequate representation across the branches (Fidyah & Setiawati, 2020). Based on the Krejcie and Morgan sampling approach, a sample of 367 respondents was determined to be appropriate for the study (Megahed & Srikantaswamy, 2020).

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising 52 items. Talent acquisition and talent retention were each measured using 10 items adapted from Kaleem (2019) and

Angelica et al. (2022), while talent development was measured using 10 items adapted from Kaleem (2019) and Alhammadi & Romle (2023). Employee engagement was measured using 12 items adapted from Sungmala and Verawat, (2021) and Durai and Viji (2022), with minor modifications to reflect the UAE public sector context. Employee performance was measured using 10 items adapted from Tabouli et al. (2016) and Pradhan (2018). The collected data were analysed using SPSS and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

5. Result

5.1 Measurement Model Assessment

Convergent validity and internal consistency reliability were assessed using indicator loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE), following the recommended criteria of Hair et al. (2019). As shown in Table 1, all constructs achieved satisfactory reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.901 to 0.958 and composite reliability values ranging from 0.919 to 0.964, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. The AVE values ranged from 0.513 to 0.728, exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.50 and confirming convergent validity. Thus, the results demonstrate that all constructs exhibit satisfactory internal consistency, reliability and convergent validity, supporting their use in the subsequent structural model assessment.

Table 1. Constructs reliability and validity assessment

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Employee Performance	0.958	0.964	0.728
Talent Acquisition	0.945	0.953	0.674
Talent Retention	0.946	0.954	0.679
Talent Development	0.901	0.922	0.601
Employee Engagement	0.910	0.919	0.513

As shown in Table 1, all constructs demonstrate satisfactory internal consistency reliability and convergent validity. Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.901 to 0.958, composite reliability values range from 0.919 to 0.964, and AVE values range from 0.513 to 0.728. All values exceed the recommended thresholds of 0.70 for reliability and 0.50 for AVE, confirming the adequacy of the measurement model (Hair et al., 2019).

5.2 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT) and the Fornell–Larcker criterion. As shown in Table 2, all HTMT values range from 0.131 to 0.816, which are below the recommended threshold of 0.90, confirming adequate discriminant validity among the constructs (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 2. Discriminant validity based on the HTMT ratio

	Employee Engagement	Employee Performance	Talent Acquisition	Talent Development	Talent Retention
Employee Engagement					
Employee Performance	0.459				
Talent Acquisition	0.131	0.198			
Talent Development	0.680	0.816	0.192		
Talent Retention	0.514	0.810	0.185	0.814	

In addition, the square roots of the AVE values shown on the diagonal of Table 3 exceed the corresponding inter-construct correlations, further supporting discriminant validity based on the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Thus, the results confirm that the constructs are empirically distinct and that the measurement model satisfies the required discriminant validity criteria.

Table 3. Discriminant validity based on Fornell-Lacker criterion

	Employee Engagement	Employee Performance	Talent Acquisition	Talent Development	Talent Retention
Employee Engagement	0.716				
Employee Performance	0.506	0.853			
Talent Acquisition	0.417	0.504	0.821		
Talent Development	0.721	0.774	0.551	0.775	
Talent Retention	0.535	0.878	0.682	0.747	0.824

As shown in Table 3, the square roots of the AVE values on the diagonal exceed the corresponding inter-construct correlations, confirming discriminant validity according to the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Hair et al., 2019).

During the measurement model assessment, three items were removed: TMD9 and TMD10 from Talent Development due to factor loadings below the recommended threshold of 0.50, and EE9 from Employee Engagement. Although EE9 had a loading of 0.555, its retention reduced the AVE of Employee Engagement below the recommended threshold of 0.50. Following Ramayah (2016), indicators with low or moderate loadings may adversely affect construct reliability and validity. The removal of these items therefore improved the convergent validity and overall quality of the measurement model. The resulting refined measurement model is presented in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Final measurement model of the study

The refined measurement model demonstrates satisfactory reliability and validity, providing an adequate basis for evaluating the hypothesized relationships. The structural model assessment is presented in the following section.

5.3 Structural Model Assessment

Following the validation of the measurement model, the structural model was assessed using path coefficients, bootstrapped t-values, and p-values to test the hypothesized relationships (Hair et al., 2019; Sarstedt et al., 2021). As presented in Table 3, talent acquisition has a significant negative effect on employee performance ($\beta = -0.103$, $t = 5.099$, $p < 0.001$); therefore, H1 is not supported. In contrast, talent retention ($\beta = 0.674$, $t = 16.723$, $p < 0.001$) and talent development ($\beta = 0.317$, $t = 7.831$, $p < 0.001$) have significant positive effects on employee performance, supporting H2 and H3, respectively. Employee engagement also has a significant negative effect on employee performance ($\beta = -0.098$, $t = 2.977$, $p = 0.003$); therefore, H4 is not supported. The results of the structural model assessment are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Structural model results and hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Path	Beta (β)	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	Talent Acquisition → Employee Performance	-0.103	5.099	0.000	Not supported
H2	Talent Retention → Employee Performance	0.674	16.723	0.000	Supported
H3	Talent Development → Employee Performance	0.317	7.831	0.000	Supported
H4	Employee Engagement → Employee Performance	-0.098	2.977	0.003	Not supported

5.4 Moderation Analysis

The moderating effects of employee engagement were assessed using interaction terms and bootstrapping procedures in PLS-SEM (Purwanto & Sudargini, 2021). As shown in Table 5, employee engagement significantly and positively moderates the relationships between talent acquisition and employee performance ($\beta = 0.060$, $t = 3.083$, $p = 0.002$) and between talent retention and employee performance ($\beta = 0.283$, $t = 8.449$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H5 and H6. In contrast, employee engagement significantly and negatively moderates the relationship between talent development and employee performance ($\beta = -0.194$, $t = 5.205$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher employee engagement weakens this relationship. Thus, H7 is supported in terms of a significant moderating effect, but the direction is negative rather than positive. The results of the moderation analysis are presented in Table 4.

Table 5. Moderating results

Hypothesis	Path	Beta (β)	t-value	p-value	Result
H5	Employee Engagement x Talent Acquisition → Employee Performance	0.060	3.083	0.002	Moderated
H6	Employee Engagement x Talent Retention → Employee Performance	0.283	8.449	0.000	Moderated
H7	Employee Engagement x Talent Development → Employee Performance	-0.194	5.205	0.000	Moderated (Negative)

Figure 3 illustrates the structural model and the moderating effects of employee engagement on the relationships between talent management practices and employee performance.

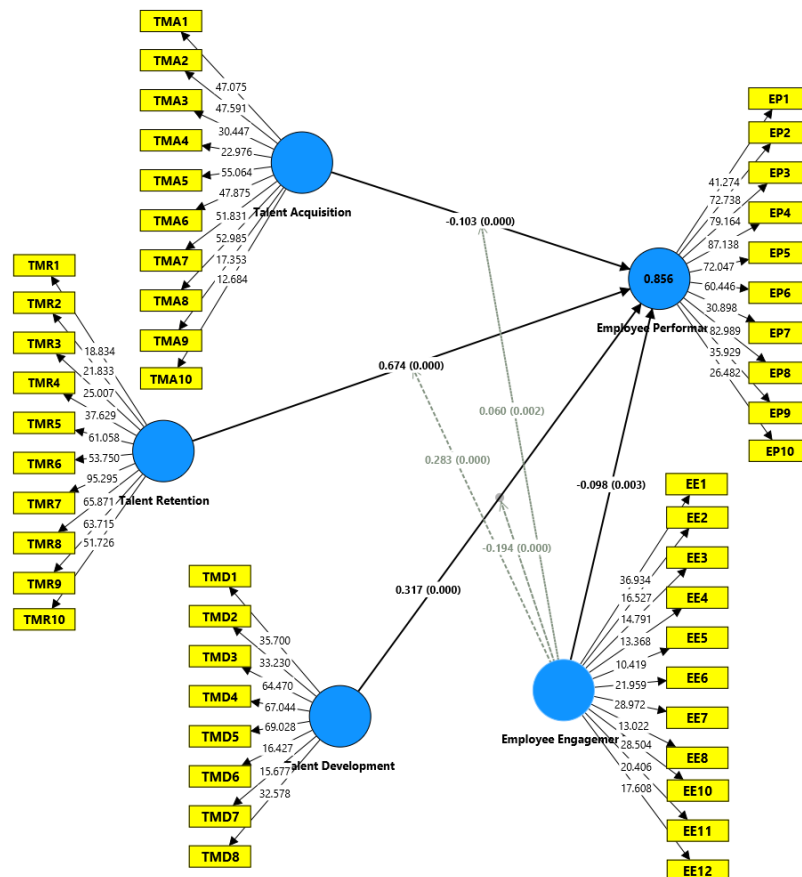


Figure 3. Structural model

The study tested seven hypotheses examining the relationships among talent acquisition, talent retention, talent development, employee engagement, and employee performance within the UAE Federal Authority for Identity, Citizenship, Customs and Port Security (ICP). The hypotheses were evaluated using path coefficients, t-values, and p-values. Figure 3 presents the final structural model, illustrating the hypothesized direct and moderating relationships among the constructs.

6. Discussion and Implications

6.1 Discussion of Findings

The findings demonstrate that talent management practices have differential effects on employee performance. Talent retention and talent development have significant positive effects, supporting H2 and H3, respectively, whereas talent acquisition has a significant negative effect, resulting in the rejection of H1. The positive effects of talent retention and development are consistent with previous research showing that effective talent management enhances employee performance through improved employee capabilities, motivation, and organizational support (Al-Hussaini, 2019; Nagi, 2020; Syed & Ihsan, 2022; Khairina et al., 2022; Ningrum et al., 2023; Ayaghena & Gambo, 2024). In contrast, the negative effect of talent acquisition differs from the predominantly positive relationships reported in previous

studies. This finding suggests that recruitment and selection practices alone may not ensure improved performance and that their effectiveness may depend on implementation quality and alignment between employee competencies and organizational requirements.

Employee engagement also has a significant negative effect on employee performance, contrary to the hypothesized positive relationship; therefore, H4 is not supported. This finding differs from previous studies that generally report a positive relationship between employee engagement and employee performance (Sendawula et al., 2018; Sungmala & Verawat, 2021; Abdullahi et al., 2022; Jacelyn & Nelson, 2023). The result suggests that the engagement and performance relationship may be context-dependent and that high engagement does not necessarily translate into higher performance in every organizational setting.

The moderation results further demonstrate the conditional role of employee engagement. Employee engagement positively moderates the relationships between talent acquisition and employee performance and between talent retention and employee performance, supporting H5 and H6. However, employee engagement negatively moderates the relationship between talent development and employee performance, resulting in the rejection of H7 because the observed direction was contrary to the hypothesized positive effect. This finding indicates that employee engagement does not uniformly strengthen the effects of talent management practices. Rather, its moderating influence varies according to the specific talent management practice, highlighting the complexity of the talent management–performance relationship within the UAE public sector.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the Resource-Based View (RBV) by demonstrating that different talent management practices do not necessarily produce uniform employee performance outcomes. The positive effects of talent retention and development support the RBV proposition that organizations can strengthen valuable human capital through practices that preserve and develop employee capabilities, whereas the negative effect of talent acquisition suggests that the strategic value of acquired talent depends on effective alignment and utilization within the organization. More importantly, the study extends the application of RBV by positioning employee engagement as a moderating condition in the talent management–employee performance relationship, showing that engagement can strengthen some relationships while weakening another. However, these unexpected findings should be interpreted with caution because the cross-sectional design does not establish causality. Reverse causality may explain the negative relationship between talent acquisition and performance, as organizations experiencing lower performance may increase recruitment to address workforce or competency gaps. In addition, unobserved factors such as person–job fit, organizational support, workload, recruitment quality, and employee expectations may influence the observed relationships. The negative moderating effect of engagement on talent development may also reflect highly engaged employees having greater expectations regarding career progression and opportunities to apply newly acquired skills. Thus, the findings extend existing talent management research by highlighting the importance of contextual conditions and boundary factors in understanding how talent management practices translate into

employee performance.

6.3 Practical Implications

The findings provide several practical implications for human resource practitioners and policymakers in the UAE public sector. The negative relationship between talent acquisition and employee performance suggests that organizations such as ICP should place greater emphasis on person–job fit, competency matching, realistic job expectations, and effective onboarding rather than focusing only on attracting talented employees. However, this finding should not be interpreted as a reason to reduce recruitment, as increased recruitment may itself be a response to existing performance problems or skill shortages; instead, organizations should evaluate recruitment effectiveness through competency-based selection and post-recruitment performance monitoring. The positive effects of talent retention and development further highlight the importance of retaining experienced employees and providing development opportunities that are closely aligned with actual job responsibilities and competency needs. In addition, the different moderating effects of employee engagement suggest that engagement should not be treated as a universally positive condition across all talent management practices. While engagement can be strengthened through supportive leadership, recognition, career opportunities, and effective communication, development initiatives should also consider highly engaged employees' expectations and opportunities to apply newly acquired skills. Therefore, public organizations should regularly evaluate the alignment between talent management practices, employee expectations, and job requirements and monitor employee outcomes over time to determine whether these relationships persist beyond the cross-sectional findings.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the effects of talent acquisition, talent retention, and talent development on employee performance and the moderating role of employee engagement within the Federal Authority for Identity, Citizenship, Customs and Port Security (ICP) in the UAE. The findings demonstrate that talent retention and talent development positively contribute to employee performance, whereas talent acquisition has a significant negative effect. Employee engagement further demonstrates a conditional role by strengthening the effects of talent acquisition and talent retention while weakening the effect of talent development. Thus, the findings highlight that the effectiveness of talent management practices is not uniform and may depend on the level of employee engagement and the specific practice being implemented. By providing empirical evidence from a UAE public sector context, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of talent management and employee performance and highlights the importance of strategically aligning talent management and employee engagement initiatives.

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