

Employee engagement and cultural values in the workplace: a comparative analysis of divergent paradigms in Gabon and Japan

Ekome Toungh Alain-Denis¹

Iradukunda Sengesho Benigne²

Nizeyimana Jean Baptiste³

1. Joint PhD Researcher at Lisala University and UNCR University, Economics and Management Sciences Department, Human Resources Management
2. Joint MPhil Researcher at Lisala University and UNCR University, IT Department, Film and TV Production
3. Lecturer at Lisala University, Faculty of Psychology and Education, Department of Technopedagogy

ABSTRACT

This study examines the comparative dynamics of employee engagement and the influence of cultural values in the workplace in Gabon and Japan, two countries with profoundly different cultural heritages yet both grappling with the fundamental challenge of fostering workforce

¹ Joint PhD Researcher at Lisala University and UNCR University, Economics and Management Sciences Department, Human Resources Management

commitment in an era of global transformation. Despite their divergent trajectories, both nations face critical questions about how traditional values intersect with modern organizational practices to shape employee motivation, satisfaction, and performance. The research employs a comparative case study methodology, drawing on empirical studies, survey data, organizational reports, and scholarly analyses spanning 2020-2026. Japan presents a paradox: a nation with a legendary work ethic yet persistently low workforce engagement. Gallup's Japan Spotlight Report reveals that only 7% of Japanese employees are engaged at work, compared to 21% globally, with disengagement costing Japan more than \$500 billion annually (HR Leader, 2025; LinkedIn, 2025). Traditional workplace priorities—hierarchy, lifetime employment, and worker loyalty—are becoming obsolete, failing to unlock talent or inspire innovation (HR Leader, 2025). The linguistic challenge is telling: there is no native Japanese word for "engagement" in the HR sense, and translation gaps distort survey results, with employees hesitating to recommend their company due to concern about responsibility if the recommendation backfires (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025). The perfectionism effect further depresses scores—Japanese customers score satisfaction about 30% lower than other markets even when they like products, and employees similarly hesitate to give high scores (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025). Yet change is underway: younger generations are quietly walking away from traditional systems, demanding purpose, flexibility, and growth (LinkedIn, 2025). Only 24% of Japanese workers aspire to leadership roles, 48% consider ESG factors in employment decisions, and just 33% have access to hybrid work (The Manila Times, 2025). Inclusive leadership and psychological safety emerge as critical levers, requiring leaders to value both belongingness and uniqueness, admit imperfection, and recognize inner diversity (Meiji University, 2025).

Gabon presents a different landscape shaped by hierarchical structures, multilingual workplaces, and the tension between tradition and modernization. A 2025 book on professional engagement in Gabon, based on empirical studies in Libreville, Franceville, and Oyem, analyses challenges including imbalances between personal and professional life, shortcomings in HR policies, and regional constraints (Lehmanns, 2025). Gabonese workplaces blend hierarchical respect with relationship-building, where communication balances formality with personal connection, decisions flow top-down, and employees show deference to senior colleagues (Safeguard Global, 2025; Rivermate, 2025). The multilingual environment—French dominates corporate settings

while Fang and Myene are used in labor-intensive industries and local commerce—creates distinct communication dynamics across sectors (Safeguard Global, 2025). Building trust through personal relationships is paramount; negotiations prioritize relationship-building alongside business deals, and patience is essential as discussions unfold gradually (Rivermate, 2025). While punctuality is valued, flexibility is required—meetings may start late, and decisions take time. Foreign observers note that "the combination of your formal and informal procedures, attitudes, and beliefs results in the experience that both your workers and consumers have" (Safeguard Global, 2025). The proposed solutions for strengthening engagement include inclusive leadership, strengthened local skills, improved working conditions, innovative management, and modern technologies (Lehmans, 2025).

Japan's strength lies in its sophisticated understanding of engagement drivers, research-based leadership models, and growing recognition of the need for transformation—yet its challenge is dismantling deeply embedded hierarchical structures and cultural norms that suppress engagement. Gabon's advantage is the organic integration of relationship-building into workplace culture, the value placed on personal connection, and the opportunity to build engagement frameworks aligned with communal values—yet its challenge is weak institutional HR capacity, regional disparities, and the need to formalize practices that currently operate informally. Both countries demonstrate that employee engagement requires: (1) recognition that cultural values fundamentally shape workplace expectations; (2) leadership that builds trust and values employees as individuals; (3) psychological safety enabling employees to express opinions without fear; (4) balance between hierarchy and inclusion; (5) attention to work-life integration; (6) communication styles adapted to cultural contexts; (7) investment in skills development and career growth; and (8) willingness to evolve traditional practices to meet contemporary needs.

KEYWORDS: Employee engagement, cultural values, Gabon, Japan, workplace culture, hierarchical structures, inclusive leadership, psychological safety, organizational commitment, work-life balance

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude examine les dynamiques comparatives de l'engagement des employés et l'influence des valeurs culturelles en milieu de travail au Gabon et au Japon, deux pays aux héritages culturels profondément différents mais confrontés tous deux au défi fondamental de favoriser l'engagement de la main-d'œuvre à une ère de transformation mondiale. Malgré leurs trajectoires divergentes, les deux nations sont confrontées à des questions critiques sur la manière dont les valeurs traditionnelles interagissent avec les pratiques organisationnelles modernes pour façonner la motivation, la satisfaction et la performance des employés. La recherche emploie une méthodologie d'étude de cas comparative, s'appuyant sur des études empiriques, des données d'enquête, des rapports organisationnels et des analyses savantes couvrant la période 2020-2026. Le Japon présente un paradoxe : une nation avec une éthique de travail légendaire mais un engagement de la main-d'œuvre constamment faible. Le Japan Spotlight Report de Gallup révèle que seulement 7 % des employés japonais sont engagés au travail, contre 21 % au niveau mondial, le désengagement coûtant au Japon plus de 500 milliards de dollars par an (HR Leader, 2025; LinkedIn, 2025). Les priorités traditionnelles du lieu de travail—hiérarchie, emploi à vie et loyauté des travailleurs—deviennent obsolètes, ne parvenant pas à libérer les talents ou à inspirer l'innovation (HR Leader, 2025). Le défi linguistique est révélateur : il n'existe pas de mot japonais natif pour "engagement" dans le sens RH, et les lacunes de traduction faussent les résultats des enquêtes, les employés hésitant à recommander leur entreprise par crainte de responsabilité si la recommandation se retourne contre eux (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025). L'effet de perfectionnisme déprime davantage les scores—les clients japonais notent leur satisfaction environ 30 % moins que les autres marchés même lorsqu'ils apprécient les produits, et les employés hésitent de même à donner des notes élevées (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025). Pourtant, le changement est en cours : les jeunes générations s'éloignent silencieusement des systèmes traditionnels, exigeant du sens, de la flexibilité et de la croissance (LinkedIn, 2025). Seulement 24 % des travailleurs japonais aspirent à des postes de direction, 48 % considèrent les facteurs ESG dans leurs décisions d'emploi, et seulement 33 % ont accès au travail hybride (The Manila Times, 2025). Le leadership inclusif et la sécurité psychologique émergent comme des leviers critiques, exigeant des dirigeants qu'ils valorisent à la fois l'appartenance et l'unicité, admettent l'imperfection et reconnaissent la diversité intérieure (Meiji University, 2025).

Le Gabon présente un paysage différent façonné par des structures hiérarchiques, des lieux de travail multilingues et la tension entre tradition et modernisation. Un livre de 2025 sur l'engagement professionnel au Gabon, basé sur des études empiriques à Libreville, Franceville et Oyem, analyse les défis incluant les déséquilibres entre vie personnelle et professionnelle, les lacunes des politiques RH et les contraintes régionales (Lehmanns, 2025). Les lieux de travail gabonais allient respect hiérarchique et établissement de relations, où la communication équilibre formalité et connexion personnelle, les décisions descendent du haut vers le bas, et les employés montrent de la déférence envers les collègues seniors (Safeguard Global, 2025; Rivermate, 2025). L'environnement multilingue—le français domine dans les contextes d'entreprise tandis que le fang et le myènè sont utilisés dans les industries à forte intensité de main-d'œuvre et le commerce local—crée des dynamiques de communication distinctes selon les secteurs (Safeguard Global, 2025). L'établissement de la confiance par des relations personnelles est primordial ; les négociations privilégient l'établissement de relations parallèlement aux accords commerciaux, et la patience est essentielle car les discussions se déroulent progressivement (Rivermate, 2025). Bien que la ponctualité soit valorisée, la flexibilité est requise—les réunions peuvent commencer en retard et les décisions prennent du temps. Les observateurs étrangers notent que "la combinaison de vos procédures formelles et informelles, attitudes et croyances détermine l'expérience de vos travailleurs et consommateurs" (Safeguard Global, 2025). Les solutions proposées pour renforcer l'engagement incluent le leadership inclusif, le renforcement des compétences locales, l'amélioration des conditions de travail, la gestion innovante et les technologies modernes (Lehmanns, 2025).

La force du Japon réside dans sa compréhension sophistiquée des moteurs de l'engagement, ses modèles de leadership fondés sur la recherche et la reconnaissance croissante du besoin de transformation—mais son défi est de démanteler des structures hiérarchiques profondément ancrées et des normes culturelles qui suppriment l'engagement. L'avantage du Gabon est l'intégration organique de l'établissement de relations dans la culture du lieu de travail, la valeur accordée à la connexion personnelle et l'opportunité de construire des cadres d'engagement alignés sur les valeurs communautaires—mais son défi est la faible capacité RH institutionnelle, les disparités régionales et le besoin de formaliser des pratiques qui fonctionnent actuellement de manière informelle. Les deux pays démontrent que l'engagement des employés nécessite : (1) la

reconnaissance que les valeurs culturelles façonnent fondamentalement les attentes en milieu de travail ; (2) un leadership qui établit la confiance et valorise les employés en tant qu'individus ; (3) la sécurité psychologique permettant aux employés d'exprimer leurs opinions sans crainte ; (4) l'équilibre entre hiérarchie et inclusion ; (5) l'attention à l'intégration travail-vie personnelle ; (6) des styles de communication adaptés aux contextes culturels ; (7) l'investissement dans le développement des compétences et la croissance de carrière ; et (8) la volonté de faire évoluer les pratiques traditionnelles pour répondre aux besoins contemporains.

MOTS-CLÉS : Engagement des employés, valeurs culturelles, Gabon, Japon, culture du lieu de travail, structures hiérarchiques, leadership inclusif, sécurité psychologique, engagement organisationnel, équilibre travail-vie personnelle

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Auteurs correspondant Ekome Tounq Alain-Denis, Iradukunda Sengesho Benigne and Nizeyimana Jean Baptiste

Adresses électroniques ekometounq@cirep.ac.cd, benigneira0@gmail.com, nizeyimana.jb@dphu.ac.cd ,

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1. INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement—the emotional commitment employees have to their organization and its goals—has emerged as a central concern in contemporary human resources management. Engaged employees are more productive, innovative, and loyal; they generate better customer outcomes and contribute to organizational resilience. Yet engagement is not a universal construct that can be measured and managed uniformly across cultures. It is deeply shaped by cultural values, social norms, and historical traditions that influence how employees relate to work, authority, and community.

Understanding the relationship between culture and engagement is essential for organizations operating across borders, for policymakers seeking to strengthen workforce productivity, and for scholars seeking to develop culturally grounded theories of organizational behavior. Gabon and Japan, two countries with profoundly different cultural heritages yet both facing significant

workforce challenges, offer a compelling comparative lens through which to examine these dynamics.

Japan presents a paradox that has captured global attention. A nation renowned for its legendary work ethic, commitment to quality, and corporate loyalty finds itself at the bottom of global employee engagement rankings. Gallup's Japan Spotlight Report reveals that only 7% of Japanese employees are engaged at work, compared to 21% globally—a figure that has remained stagnant for over a decade (HR Leader, 2025). The cost of disengagement is estimated at more than \$500 billion annually (LinkedIn, 2025). Traditional workplace pillars—hierarchy, lifetime employment, and worker loyalty—are becoming obsolete, failing to unlock talent or inspire innovation (HR Leader, 2025). Yet change is stirring. Younger generations are quietly walking away from traditional systems, demanding purpose, flexibility, and growth (LinkedIn, 2025). The question facing Japanese leaders is whether they can transform workplace culture fast enough to engage a new generation.

Gabon presents a different landscape. A Central African nation with rich cultural diversity, Gabon's workplaces blend hierarchical respect with relationship-building. French dominates corporate settings, while Fang and Myene are widely used in government, manufacturing, and local commerce (Safeguard Global, 2025). Decision-making is top-down, employees show deference to senior colleagues, and building trust through personal relationships is paramount (Rivermate, 2025). A 2025 book on professional engagement in Gabon, based on empirical studies in Libreville, Franceville, and Oyem, analyses challenges including imbalances between personal and professional life, shortcomings in HR policies, and regional constraints (Lehmanns, 2025). The proposed solutions include inclusive leadership, strengthened local skills, and improved working conditions—themes that resonate across both countries.

This study examines the comparative dynamics of employee engagement and cultural values in the workplace in Gabon and Japan. Drawing on empirical studies, survey data, organizational reports, and scholarly analyses, it explores how cultural values shape engagement, how traditional practices both enable and constrain workforce commitment, and what lessons each country might offer the other. The analysis is organized around four interconnected themes: (1) the conceptual foundations of employee engagement and culture; (2) the engagement landscape in each country;

(3) the cultural values and workplace norms that shape engagement; and (4) implications for leadership, HR practice, and policy.

The study contributes to scholarship on cross-cultural human resources management, organizational behavior, and the relationship between culture and work. It argues that effective engagement strategies must be culturally grounded, recognizing that what motivates employees in one context may not translate to another, while also acknowledging that all workers share fundamental needs for meaning, respect, and connection.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptualizing Employee Engagement

Employee engagement has been conceptualized in multiple ways. Kahn (1990) defined personal engagement as the "harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles," encompassing physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. The most widely used framework in contemporary research identifies three elements: vigor (energy and mental resilience while working), dedication (sense of significance, enthusiasm, and challenge), and absorption (being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in work) (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

The relationship between engagement and organizational outcomes is well-documented. Engaged employees demonstrate higher productivity, better customer ratings, lower turnover, and improved safety outcomes (Gallup, 2025). Engagement is also linked to employee well-being and life satisfaction—it is one of the five elements of PERMA (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationship, Meaning, Accomplishment) that positive psychology identifies as foundational to human flourishing (Meiji University, 2025).

2.2 Culture and Engagement

Culture shapes engagement in profound ways. Hofstede's dimensions of national culture—power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation—

influence how employees relate to authority, how they define meaningful work, and what they expect from employers. In high power distance cultures, employees may expect clear direction from superiors and feel uncomfortable with participatory decision-making. In collectivist cultures, group harmony may take precedence over individual expression.

The challenge of measuring engagement across cultures is significant. Survey questions designed in one cultural context may not translate meaningfully to another. Dale Carnegie Tokyo (2025) notes that there is no native Japanese word for "engagement" in the HR sense, and key survey questions lose nuance in translation. For example, when asked "Would you recommend your family or friends to join our company?" Japanese employees hesitate to answer "Yes," not because they dislike the company, but because they do not want responsibility if the friend hates the company or the company does not like their friend.

2.3 Japan's Engagement Paradox

Japan's persistently low engagement scores have attracted significant research attention. The Gallup Japan Spotlight Report, released in 2025, found that only 7% of Japanese employees are engaged—one of the lowest rates globally (HR Leader, 2025). The report attributes this to the obsolescence of traditional workplace priorities. "The traditional Japanese workplace priorities of hierarchy and worker loyalty are becoming obsolete because they undermine engagement, performance, and wellbeing" (HR Leader, 2025).

Key findings from recent research include:

- **Engagement costs:** Disengagement costs Japan more than \$500 billion annually (LinkedIn, 2025).
- **Workforce ambition:** Only 24% of Japanese workers strongly aspire to leadership roles, well below the APAC average of 37% (The Manila Times, 2025).
- **ESG influence:** Only 48% consider CSR or ESG commitments when choosing an employer—the lowest score in the region (The Manila Times, 2025).
- **Flexibility gap:** While 65% say flexibility is important, only 33% have access to hybrid work (The Manila Times, 2025).

- **Relocation reluctance:** Japan has the lowest rates of openness to relocation, with only 9% open to moving overseas for work (The Manila Times, 2025).
- **Upskilling momentum:** Encouragingly, one in three workers (33%) are pursuing skills development independently through certifications and online platforms (The Manila Times, 2025).

The linguistic dimension is significant. Dale Carnegie Tokyo (2025) explains that translation gaps distort survey results. The "perfectionism effect" means Japanese customers score satisfaction about 30% lower than other markets even when they like products; similarly, employees hesitate to give high scores because "perfect" is an almost unreachable standard.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, changes began to emerge. Japanese employees "long known for company loyalty began to demand a greater sense of personal connection with their work and to question whether their organisation's purpose was aligned with their own values" (HR Leader, 2025). One leader told Gallup: "We improved working conditions, but scores didn't budge; it wasn't until we focused on 'work worth doing' that engagement increased." Another said: "We had structured everything around comfort—better chairs, better hours—but until we made work itself feel valuable, the energy just wasn't there."

2.4 Gabon's Workplace Landscape

Gabon's workplace culture is shaped by hierarchical structures, multilingual dynamics, and the importance of personal relationships. Key features include:

- **Hierarchy and authority:** Gabonese workplaces, especially in traditional industries and government, tend to be hierarchical, with senior management making key decisions. Employees show deference to senior colleagues and managers (Safeguard Global, 2025). Decision-making power typically resides at the top (Rivermate, 2025).
- **Communication styles:** Communication balances formality with personal connection. Face-to-face meetings are highly valued for building rapport. While directness is appreciated in some contexts, indirect communication may be used to maintain harmony or show respect, particularly when addressing superiors or sensitive topics (Rivermate, 2025).

- **Multilingual environment:** French dominates corporate settings, while Fang is widely spoken in government and business sectors, particularly in northern and central Gabon. In manufacturing and retail, Fang or Myene are used for daily operations; management-level communication may be in French (Safeguard Global, 2025).
- **Relationship-building:** Establishing trust and rapport is crucial in business relationships. Negotiations prioritize relationship-building alongside the business deal itself. Rushing the process can be counterproductive (Rivermate, 2025).
- **Punctuality and flexibility:** Punctuality is valued but flexible—meetings may start a few minutes late, especially in informal settings. Patience is required as discussions unfold gradually (Rivermate, 2025).

A 2025 book by Mbina Yembi (2025) provides the first comprehensive analysis of professional engagement in Gabon. Based on empirical studies in Libreville (economic and political center), Franceville (industrial and mining center), and Oyem (northern region offering perspective on remote areas), the book analyses challenges including:

- Imbalances between personal and professional life
- Shortcomings in HR policies
- Regional constraints affecting work in different contexts

The book proposes concrete solutions: inclusive leadership, strengthened local skills, better working conditions, innovative management, and modern technologies (Lehmanns, 2025).

2.5 Leadership and Engagement

Research in both countries highlights the critical role of leadership in fostering engagement. Meiji University's Hirai (2025) identifies three key elements: inclusion, psychological safety, and inclusive leadership.

Inclusion means each individual can feel accepted and respected. Research links inclusion to two elements: belongingness (feeling one has a place) and uniqueness (being able to display one's

unique attributes). Japanese society, with its emphasis on peer pressure, sometimes secures belongingness by suppressing uniqueness. Yet engagement requires both (Meiji University, 2025).

Psychological safety indicates a state where individuals feel safe enough to take risks—to express opinions different from others, to point out issues without hesitation. The essence is an environment where trying or taking a risk is allowed without fear of failure. When psychological safety is low, people cannot point out problems, leading to organizational cover-ups and project failures (Meiji University, 2025).

Inclusive leadership aims for people with various characteristics to feel accepted, respected, and able to exercise their abilities safely. Hirai (2025) emphasizes two keys: admitting one is imperfect and weak (counterintuitive for those who associate leadership with strength), and valuing "inner diversity"—the various aspects of oneself. When leaders accept their own imperfections, they become more tolerant of others and can naturally exercise inclusive leadership.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do levels and drivers of employee engagement differ between Gabon and Japan, and what cultural factors explain these differences?
2. What workplace norms, communication styles, and leadership practices shape employee engagement in each country?
3. How are traditional cultural values evolving in response to generational change, globalization, and shifting workforce expectations?
4. What lessons can be drawn from comparative analysis for developing culturally grounded yet effective employee engagement strategies?

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative case study methodology to examine employee engagement and cultural values in Gabon and Japan. The research design integrates document analysis of primary sources with synthesis of secondary literature to develop a comprehensive understanding of engagement dynamics in both countries.

Primary sources analyzed include: Gallup Japan Spotlight Report (HR Leader, 2025; LinkedIn, 2025); Reeracoen × Rakuten Insight APAC Workforce Whitepaper 2025 (The Manila Times, 2025); Dale Carnegie Tokyo analysis of engagement in Japan (2025); Meiji University research on inclusive leadership and psychological safety (2025); Safeguard Global and Rivermate guides to Gabonese workplace culture (2025); and Mbina Yembi's book on professional engagement in Gabon (Lehmanns, 2025).

The comparative framework examines four dimensions of employee engagement: (1) engagement levels and trends; (2) cultural values and workplace norms; (3) leadership and management practices; and (4) challenges and opportunities for improvement.

The analysis covers the period from approximately 2020 to 2026, capturing recent developments including post-pandemic workplace changes and emerging research on engagement.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Engagement Levels and Trends

Japan: Japan's engagement landscape is characterized by persistently low scores despite high work ethic. Key findings include:

- **Engagement rate:** Only 7% of Japanese employees are engaged at work, compared to 21% globally—a figure that has remained stagnant for over 13 years (HR Leader, 2025; LinkedIn, 2025).
- **Economic impact:** Disengagement costs Japan more than \$500 billion annually (LinkedIn, 2025).

- **Ambition gap:** Only 24% of Japanese workers strongly aspire to leadership roles, well below the APAC average of 37% (The Manila Times, 2025).
- **ESG disconnect:** Only 48% consider CSR or ESG commitments when choosing an employer—the lowest score in the region (The Manila Times, 2025).
- **Flexibility gap:** While 65% say flexibility is important, only 33% have access to hybrid work arrangements (The Manila Times, 2025).
- **Relocation reluctance:** Only 9% are open to moving overseas for work, the lowest in APAC (The Manila Times, 2025).
- **Upskilling momentum:** Encouragingly, 33% are pursuing skills development independently through certifications and online platforms (The Manila Times, 2025).
- **Generational shift:** Younger generations are quietly walking away from traditional systems, demanding purpose, flexibility, and growth (LinkedIn, 2025).

Gabon: Gabon lacks systematic engagement data comparable to Japan's Gallup surveys. However, the 2025 book by Mbina Yembi provides qualitative insights from empirical studies across three cities:

- **Libreville:** As economic and political center, reflects issues of large companies and public institutions (Lehmanns, 2025).
- **Franceville:** As industrial and mining center, highlights challenges associated with involvement in strategic sectors such as energy and natural resources (Lehmanns, 2025).
- **Oyem:** As northern city, offers unique perspective on work in remote areas, particularly in primary and informal sectors (Lehmanns, 2025).
- **Identified challenges:** Imbalances between personal and professional life, shortcomings in HR policies, and regional constraints (Lehmanns, 2025).
- **Proposed solutions:** Inclusive leadership, strengthened local skills, better working conditions, innovative management, and modern technologies (Lehmanns, 2025).

Table 1: Comparative Engagement Indicators

Dimension	Japan	Gabon	
Engagement rate	7% (global avg 21%) (HR Leader, 2025)	Not systematically measured	
Economic impact of disengagement	\$500+ billion annually (LinkedIn, 2025)	Not quantified	
Leadership aspiration	24% (vs. 37% APAC avg) (The Manila Times, 2025)	Not measured	
ESG consideration in job choice	48% (lowest in APAC) (The Manila Times, 2025)	Not measured	
Hybrid work access	33% (The Manila Times, 2025)	Not measured	
Upskilling initiative	33% pursuing independent skills development (The Manila Times, 2025)	Addressed in proposed solutions (Lehmanns, 2025)	
Generational dynamics	Youth demanding purpose and flexibility (LinkedIn, 2025)	Youth mentioned as demographic factor	

5.2 Cultural Values and Workplace Norms

Japan: Japanese workplace culture is undergoing transformation as traditional values prove inadequate for engagement. Key features include:

- **Traditional pillars:** Hierarchy, lifetime employment, and worker loyalty have long defined Japanese workplaces. The Gallup report finds these are "becoming obsolete because they undermine engagement, performance, and wellbeing" (HR Leader, 2025).
- **Linguistic dimension:** There is no native Japanese word for "engagement" in the HR sense. Most companies write "engagement" in katakana, reproducing the sound but not the meaning (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025).
- **Translation gaps:** Key survey questions lose nuance in Japanese. Employees hesitate to answer "yes" to recommending their company because they don't want responsibility if the recommendation backfires (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025).
- **Perfectionism effect:** Japanese customers score satisfaction about 30% lower than other markets even when they like products. Similarly, employees hesitate to give high scores because "perfect" is an almost unreachable standard (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025).
- **Belongingness vs. uniqueness:** Japanese society sometimes secures belongingness by suppressing uniqueness. Yet engagement requires both—feeling one has a place while being able to display one's unique attributes (Meiji University, 2025).
- **Purpose deficit:** One leader told Gallup: "We improved working conditions, but scores didn't budge; it wasn't until we focused on 'work worth doing' that engagement increased." Another said: "We had structured everything around comfort—better chairs, better hours—but until we made work itself feel valuable, the energy just wasn't there" (HR Leader, 2025).

Gabon: Gabonese workplace culture blends hierarchical respect with relationship-building. Key features include:

- **Hierarchy and authority:** Gabonese workplaces, especially in traditional industries and government sectors, tend to be hierarchical, with senior management making key decisions. Employees generally show deference to senior colleagues and managers, using formal greetings and respectful language (Safeguard Global, 2025). Decision-making power typically resides at the top (Rivermate, 2025).
- **Communication styles:** Communication balances formality with personal connection. Face-to-face meetings are highly valued for building rapport and discussing important matters. While directness is appreciated in some contexts, indirect communication may be used to maintain

harmony or show respect, particularly when addressing superiors or sensitive topics (Rivermate, 2025).

- **Multilingual environment:** French dominates corporate settings, documentation, and client interactions. Fang is widely spoken in government and business sectors, particularly in northern and central Gabon. In manufacturing and retail, Fang or Myene are used for daily operations, especially in labor-intensive industries (Safeguard Global, 2025).
- **Relationship-building:** Establishing trust and rapport is crucial. Negotiations prioritize relationship-building alongside the business deal itself. Rushing the process can be counterproductive (Rivermate, 2025).
- **Punctuality and flexibility:** Punctuality is valued but flexible—meetings may start a few minutes late, especially in informal settings. Patience is required as discussions unfold gradually (Rivermate, 2025).
- **Personal connection:** "The combination of your formal and informal procedures, attitudes, and beliefs results in the experience that both your workers and consumers have" (Safeguard Global, 2025). This recognition that workplace culture shapes all experiences reflects understanding that engagement is embedded in organizational fabric.

Table 2: Comparative Cultural Values and Workplace Norms

Dimension	Japan	Gabon	
Hierarchy	Traditional hierarchy becoming obsolete (HR Leader, 2025)	Strong hierarchical structures; respect for authority (Safeguard Global, 2025; Rivermate, 2025)	
Communication	Indirect; concern about responsibility for recommendations (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025)	Balances formal and personal; indirect for harmony/respect (Rivermate, 2025)	

Decision-making	Top-down but questioned by younger generations	Top-down; senior management decides (Safeguard Global, 2025)	
Language environment	Japanese with engagement concept untranslatable	French (corporate); Fang/Myene (government, labor) (Safeguard Global, 2025)	
Relationship focus	Traditional loyalty structures weakening (HR Leader, 2025)	Personal relationships and trust paramount (Rivermate, 2025)	
Work meaning	"Work worth doing" key to engagement (HR Leader, 2025)	Not systematically studied	
Punctuality	Generally punctual	Valued but flexible; meetings may start late (Rivermate, 2025)	

5.3 Leadership and Management Practices

Japan: Japanese leadership practices are evolving in response to engagement challenges. Key findings include:

- **Gallup's three engagement drivers (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025):**
 - **Satisfaction with immediate manager:** People don't quit companies; they leave bosses. Engagement rises when managers build strong, trusting relationships and create people-centered cultures.
 - **Belief in senior leadership:** If the "Why" and "Where we are going" are not communicated clearly, doubt appears. When the message is clear and believable, people work harder.
 - **Pride in the organization:** When leaders speak positively about the organization and teams feel part of something worth defending, engagement improves.

- **The emotional trigger:** "I feel valued by my boss." Employees know they are valued when the boss clearly and specifically says so, their contribution is recognized, and their work feels meaningful and appreciated. Once people feel truly valued, they become more confident, inspired, enthusiastic, and empowered (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025).
- **Inclusive leadership (Meiji University, 2025):**
 - **Admit imperfection:** Leaders who admit they are imperfect can rely on others and appreciate their help. This nurtures inclusive culture.
 - **Value inner diversity:** Recognizing various aspects of oneself—strengths, weaknesses, constraints—and accepting them enables tolerance of others.
- **Psychological safety:** Essential for engagement. When psychological safety is low, people cannot point out problems, leading to organizational cover-ups and project failures (Meiji University, 2025).

Gabon: Gabonese leadership practices reflect hierarchical structures with emerging attention to inclusion. Key features include:

- **Formal authority:** Decision-making power typically resides at the top. Lower-level employees may not have authority to make final decisions (Rivermate, 2025).
- **Respect and deference:** Employees show deference to senior colleagues and managers. Addressing superiors requires formal language and titles (Rivermate, 2025).
- **Relationship-building:** Leaders invest time in getting to know counterparts before detailed negotiations. Socializing outside formal meetings can be beneficial (Rivermate, 2025).
- **Proposed solutions:** The 2025 book on professional engagement calls for inclusive leadership, strengthened local skills, and improved working conditions (Lehmanns, 2025).
- **Communication approach:** Leaders use face-to-face meetings to build rapport and discuss important matters. Phone calls are common, but email is increasingly used for formal communication and documentation (Safeguard Global, 2025).

Table 3: Comparative Leadership and Management Practices

Dimension	Japan	Gabon	
Key leadership drivers	Satisfaction with manager; belief in senior leadership; pride in organization (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025)	Formal authority; relationship-building (Rivermate, 2025)	
Emotional trigger	Feeling valued by boss (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025)	Not systematically studied	
Inclusive leadership	Emerging as critical; admit imperfection; value inner diversity (Meiji University, 2025)	Called for in proposed solutions (Lehmanns, 2025)	
Psychological safety	Essential for engagement (Meiji University, 2025)	Not systematically studied	
Manager-employee relationship	Critical for engagement; people leave bosses, not companies	Respect and deference expected (Rivermate, 2025)	
Communication with employees	Clear "Why" from senior leadership essential (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025)	Face-to-face meetings valued for rapport (Safeguard Global, 2025)	

5.4 Challenges and Opportunities

Japan: Japan faces significant challenges but also emerging opportunities.

Challenges:

- **Deeply embedded hierarchy:** Traditional workplace structures that suppress engagement remain entrenched.
- **Generational disconnect:** Younger workers are walking away from systems designed for previous generations.
- **Translation barriers:** Survey tools designed elsewhere may not capture authentic engagement in Japanese context.
- **Perfectionism culture:** High standards inhibit positive responses and risk-taking.
- **Flexibility gap:** Hybrid work adoption lags despite employee demand.
- **ESG disconnect:** Workers do not see employer commitments as relevant to job choices.

Opportunities:

- **Upskilling momentum:** One in three workers pursuing independent skills development (The Manila Times, 2025).
- **Post-pandemic openness:** COVID-19 prompted questioning of traditional arrangements.
- **Research-based interventions:** Gallup and Dale Carnegie offer evidence-based approaches.
- **Inclusive leadership models:** Meiji University research provides culturally grounded frameworks.
- **Cost-free drivers:** The most powerful engagement drivers—feeling valued, clear purpose—cost nothing to implement (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025).

Gabon: Gabon faces distinct challenges and opportunities.

Challenges:

- **HR policy shortcomings:** Weak institutional frameworks for employee engagement (Lehmanns, 2025).
- **Work-life imbalance:** Tensions between personal and professional life (Lehmanns, 2025).
- **Regional disparities:** Different challenges in urban, industrial, and remote areas (Lehmanns, 2025).
- **Informal sector:** Large informal sector complicates formal engagement strategies.
- **Limited research:** Systematic engagement data lacking.
- **Infrastructure gaps:** Regional constraints affect work conditions.

Opportunities:

- **Relationship culture:** Organic integration of personal connection into workplace.
- **Community values:** Potential to build engagement frameworks aligned with communal traditions.
- **Proposed solutions framework:** Inclusive leadership, skills strengthening, improved conditions (Lehmanns, 2025).
- **Multilingual workforce:** Diverse linguistic capabilities enabling varied communication.
- **Natural resource sector:** Strategic industries provide platform for engagement innovation.

Table 4: Comparative Challenges and Opportunities

Dimension	Japan	Gabon	
Key challenges	Embedded hierarchy; generational disconnect; translation barriers; perfectionism; flexibility gap; ESG disconnect (HR Leader, 2025; The Manila Times, 2025; Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025)	HR policy shortcomings; work-life imbalance; regional disparities; informal sector; limited research (Lehmanns, 2025)	
Key opportunities	Upskilling momentum; post-pandemic openness; research-based interventions; inclusive leadership models; cost-free drivers (The Manila Times, 2025; Meiji University, 2025; Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025)	Relationship culture; community values; proposed solutions framework; multilingual workforce; strategic industries (Lehmanns, 2025; Safeguard Global, 2025; Rivermate, 2025)	

5.5 Summary of Comparative Findings

Table 5: Comprehensive Comparative Analysis

Dimension	Japan	Gabon	
Engagement rate	7% (global avg 21%) (HR Leader, 2025)	Not systematically measured	
Key engagement drivers	Satisfaction with manager; belief in leadership; pride; feeling valued (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025)	Not systematically studied; hierarchical respect (Rivermate, 2025)	
Workplace culture	Traditional hierarchy becoming obsolete; tension between belongingness and uniqueness (HR Leader, 2025; Meiji University, 2025)	Hierarchical; relationship-focused; multilingual (Safeguard Global, 2025; Rivermate, 2025)	
Communication style	Indirect; perfectionism inhibits positive responses (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025)	Balances formal and personal; indirect for harmony/respect (Rivermate, 2025)	
Leadership approach	Inclusive leadership emerging; admit imperfection; value inner diversity (Meiji University, 2025)	Formal authority; relationship-building; inclusive leadership called for (Rivermate, 2025; Lehmanns, 2025)	
Generational dynamics	Youth demanding purpose, flexibility, growth (LinkedIn, 2025)	Youth mentioned as demographic factor	

Key identified challenges	Disengagement costing \$500B+; low leadership aspiration; flexibility gap (The Manila Times, 2025; LinkedIn, 2025)	HR policy gaps; work-life imbalance; regional disparities (Lehmans, 2025)	
Key strengths	Research sophistication; upskilling momentum (The Manila Times, 2025)	Relationship culture; community values; multilingual capabilities (Safeguard Global, 2025; Rivermate, 2025)	
Proposed solutions	Purpose-driven work; inclusive leadership; psychological safety (Meiji University, 2025; HR Leader, 2025)	Inclusive leadership; skills strengthening; improved conditions; modern technology (Lehmans, 2025)	

6. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

6.1 Explaining Divergent Engagement Landscapes: Culture and Context

The dramatic differences between Japan's and Gabon's engagement landscapes reflect fundamentally different cultural, economic, and historical contexts.

Japan's engagement crisis emerges from the obsolescence of once-functional systems. Lifetime employment, seniority-based promotion, and unquestioning loyalty created stability during Japan's post-war industrialization but now suppress the very qualities—innovation, initiative, authentic connection—that contemporary economies require. The Gallup finding that traditional workplace priorities "undermine engagement, performance, and wellbeing" (HR Leader, 2025) reflects a system designed for a different era struggling to adapt.

The linguistic dimension is revealing. That there is no native Japanese word for "engagement" in the HR sense (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025) suggests the concept itself is culturally foreign—imported from Western management discourse into a context where relationships to work have

historically been understood differently. The translation gaps and perfectionism effect that depress survey scores are not merely measurement artifacts but reflections of deeper cultural patterns—concern about responsibility, avoidance of causing trouble, and standards that make "good" feel inadequate.

The generational shift is perhaps the most significant signal. Younger Japanese workers are not protesting the old system; they are "simply walking away from it" (LinkedIn, 2025). This quiet refusal may prove more transformative than overt resistance, gradually eroding the demographic base of traditional practices.

Gabon's engagement landscape is less systematically documented but reveals different dynamics. Hierarchical structures remain functional rather than obsolete—employees expect clear authority and show appropriate deference (Safeguard Global, 2025). The challenge is not that hierarchy is failing but that HR policies are underdeveloped, work-life balance is strained, and regional disparities create uneven experiences (Lehmanns, 2025). The emphasis on relationship-building and personal connection (Rivermate, 2025) suggests that Gabonese workplaces may have organic resources for engagement that Japanese workplaces, with their more formal structures, lack.

6.2 The Universal Need for Meaning and Value

Despite their differences, both countries' experiences point to universal human needs that engagement must address. The Japanese leader who discovered that "work worth doing" was more important than better chairs and hours (HR Leader, 2025) articulates a truth that transcends culture: people need to feel their work matters. Puri Lal and Kalashi's transformation in Nepal (cited in earlier paper) echoes this—when work becomes meaningful, motivation follows.

The Dale Carnegie finding that "feeling valued by the boss" is the emotional trigger for engagement (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025) reflects a fundamental human need for recognition and appreciation. This is not culturally specific—Gabonese employees who receive respectful treatment from superiors and build personal relationships (Rivermate, 2025) are experiencing the same dynamic in a different cultural idiom.

6.3 The Leadership Imperative

Both countries highlight the critical role of leadership in fostering engagement. The Gallup framework's three drivers—satisfaction with immediate manager, belief in senior leadership, and pride in the organization—all depend on leadership behavior (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025). When managers build trusting relationships, when senior leaders communicate clearly, when organizational leaders inspire pride, engagement follows.

Hirai's (2025) articulation of inclusive leadership offers a particularly valuable framework. The emphasis on admitting imperfection and valuing inner diversity challenges traditional notions of leadership as strength and certainty. For Japanese leaders socialized to project confidence and competence, admitting weakness may feel countercultural. Yet Hirai's argument—that leaders who cannot accept their own imperfections will expect perfection from others, and that self-acceptance enables acceptance of others—resonates across cultures.

In Gabon, the call for inclusive leadership in engagement solutions (Lehmanns, 2025) suggests similar recognition that leadership style shapes employee experience. The hierarchical context may require different expressions of inclusion—perhaps showing respect for subordinates while maintaining appropriate authority—but the underlying principle is universal.

6.4 Psychological Safety as Foundation

Psychological safety emerges as essential for engagement across both contexts. Meiji University's definition—"a state in which an individual can feel safe enough to take a risk in an organization" (Meiji University, 2025)—captures what enables employees to express opinions, point out problems, and contribute fully.

In Japan, where indirect communication and concern about causing trouble inhibit frank expression, building psychological safety requires deliberate effort. Leaders must create environments where disagreement is welcome and mistakes are learning opportunities rather than failures.

In Gabon, where communication balances formality with personal connection and indirectness may be used to maintain harmony (Rivermate, 2025), psychological safety may manifest differently. Employees may need to know that respectful disagreement is possible—that raising concerns will not damage relationships or violate hierarchy in ways that cannot be repaired.

6.5 Implications for HR Practice and Policy

The findings have significant implications for human resources practice and policy.

First, engagement strategies must be culturally grounded. Importing Western engagement frameworks into Japan without adapting to linguistic and cultural context will fail. Similarly, applying Japanese or Western approaches to Gabon without understanding local dynamics of hierarchy, relationship, and multilingual communication would be misguided.

Second, measurement must account for culture. Japan's experience with translation gaps and perfectionism effects demonstrates that engagement surveys designed elsewhere may not capture authentic experience. Local validation and adaptation are essential.

Third, leadership development is foundational. Both countries' experiences highlight that engagement depends fundamentally on leadership behavior. Investing in leadership capabilities— inclusive leadership, communication skills, relationship-building—is the most direct path to engagement improvement.

Fourth, purpose and meaning matter more than perks. The Japanese leader's discovery that better chairs and hours did not move engagement scores until work itself felt valuable is a lesson for all organizations. Engagement strategies must address the content and significance of work, not just working conditions.

Fifth, generational change demands adaptation. Younger workers in both countries (and globally) have different expectations and values. Organizations that fail to adapt will lose talent and relevance.

Sixth, informal culture matters as much as formal policy. The combination of formal and informal procedures, attitudes, and beliefs shapes employee experience (Safeguard Global, 2025). HR policies are important, but they are filtered through informal culture that may support or undermine them.

Seventh, research and data are essential. Japan benefits from sophisticated engagement research; Gabon lacks systematic data. Investing in research infrastructure—including locally validated survey tools, qualitative studies, and cross-sectoral analysis—would enable evidence-based policy.

7. CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis of employee engagement and cultural values in Gabon and Japan reveals two distinct landscapes shaped by fundamentally different cultural, economic, and historical contexts, yet united by common human needs for meaning, recognition, and connection. Japan, with its legendary work ethic and sophisticated research infrastructure, presents a paradox: a nation where only 7% of employees are engaged, where disengagement costs exceed \$500 billion annually, and where traditional workplace pillars—hierarchy, lifetime employment, loyalty—have become obsolete (HR Leader, 2025; LinkedIn, 2025). Yet change is stirring: younger generations are quietly walking away, demanding purpose, flexibility, and growth (LinkedIn, 2025). The linguistic challenge—no native word for "engagement"—reveals how deeply cultural patterns shape workforce experience, while translation gaps and perfectionism effects distort measurement (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025). Research points to clear drivers: satisfaction with immediate managers, belief in senior leadership, pride in the organization, and the emotional trigger of feeling valued (Dale Carnegie Tokyo, 2025). Inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and respect for both belongingness and uniqueness emerge as critical levers (Meiji University, 2025).

Gabon presents a different landscape. Hierarchical structures remain functional, with employees showing appropriate deference to senior colleagues and decision-making flowing top-down (Safeguard Global, 2025; Rivermate, 2025). Multilingual workplaces—French in corporate settings, Fang and Myene in government and labor-intensive industries—create distinct communication dynamics (Safeguard Global, 2025). Personal relationships and trust are

paramount; negotiations prioritize relationship-building alongside business deals (Rivermate, 2025). A 2025 book provides the first systematic analysis of professional engagement in Gabon, identifying challenges including work-life imbalance, HR policy shortcomings, and regional disparities, and proposing solutions including inclusive leadership, skills strengthening, improved working conditions, and modern technology (Lehmanns, 2025).

Several cross-cutting conclusions emerge from this analysis.

First, engagement is culturally embedded but universally human. The specific manifestations differ—Japanese indirectness vs. Gabonese relationship-building, Japanese hierarchy becoming obsolete vs. Gabonese hierarchy still functional—but the underlying needs are universal: to feel valued, to do meaningful work, to trust leaders, to belong while being oneself.

Second, leadership is the critical lever. In both countries, the quality of leadership—immediate managers, senior leaders—fundamentally shapes engagement. Investing in leadership capabilities is the most direct path to improvement.

Third, measurement must be culturally sensitive. Japan's experience with translation gaps and perfectionism effects demonstrates that engagement surveys designed elsewhere may not capture authentic experience. Local validation and adaptation are essential.

Fourth, generational change demands adaptation. Younger workers in both countries have different expectations and values. Organizations that fail to adapt will lose talent and relevance.

Fifth, purpose matters more than perks. Better conditions without meaningful work do not create engagement. The discovery that "work worth doing" drives engagement more than comfortable surroundings is universally applicable.

Sixth, informal culture shapes formal policy. The combination of formal and informal procedures, attitudes, and beliefs determines employee experience. HR policies must be supported by cultures that embody their values.

Seventh, research infrastructure enables progress. Japan's sophisticated engagement research provides evidence for intervention. Gabon's lack of systematic data represents an opportunity to build research capacity that can inform culturally grounded policy.

For Japan, the path forward involves dismantling traditional structures that suppress engagement while building new ones aligned with contemporary needs. The cost-free drivers identified by Dale Carnegie—feeling valued, clear purpose—offer immediate opportunities. Inclusive leadership and psychological safety provide frameworks for cultural transformation. The upskilling momentum among workers suggests latent energy waiting to be harnessed (The Manila Times, 2025).

For Gabon, the priority is building HR infrastructure and research capacity while leveraging organic cultural strengths. The emphasis on personal relationships and trust provides foundation for engagement strategies that feel authentic. The proposed solutions framework—inclusive leadership, skills strengthening, improved conditions, modern technology—offers a roadmap (Lehmanns, 2025). Developing systematic engagement measurement would enable evidence-based progress.

For the broader community of scholars and practitioners, this comparison underscores that employee engagement is not a universal construct to be measured and managed uniformly but a culturally embedded phenomenon requiring locally grounded understanding. The Japanese paradox and the Gabonese opportunity both illuminate that effective engagement strategies must honor cultural heritage while evolving to meet contemporary needs—recognizing that what motivates workers in Tokyo may differ from Libreville, while also acknowledging that all workers share fundamental needs for meaning, respect, and connection.

8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the comparative analysis relies primarily on secondary sources and published research rather than primary data collection. Direct fieldwork in both countries, including interviews with employees, managers, and HR professionals, would strengthen comparative insights.

Second, data availability differs dramatically between the two countries. Japan benefits from extensive survey research, including Gallup's systematic engagement measurement. Gabon lacks comparable engagement data; the analysis relies on qualitative cultural descriptions and one book providing initial empirical research.

Third, the Gabonese sources primarily target foreign employers seeking to understand local context rather than providing systematic analysis of employee engagement from workers' perspectives. The employee voice is mediated through cultural guides rather than captured directly.

Fourth, the study focuses on formal sector employment with limited attention to informal sector dynamics, which are significant in Gabon and where engagement may take different forms.

Fifth, the study does not systematically address intersectional dimensions—how gender, ethnicity, class, and geography shape engagement experiences.

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10. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author conceived the study, designed the comparative framework, conducted the literature review and document analysis, synthesized findings across countries, and drafted the complete manuscript. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy of information presented and interpretations offered.

11. COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential competing interest.

12. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

As sole author, I performed all roles including conceptualization, methodology development, investigation, formal analysis, writing, review, editing, and project administration.

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14. DATA AVAILABILITY

All sources analyzed in this study are publicly available documents, including news reports, academic publications, organizational guides, and research studies. Primary sources are cited in the references and accessible through the referenced publications and organizations.

15. DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of any institution or organization with which the author may be affiliated. The analysis is

provided for scholarly purposes and should not be construed as policy guidance or investment advice. Employee engagement and workplace culture are subject to change, and readers should consult current official sources for specific information about Gabon, Japan, and human resources management.

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