# Research report



Project 2024/01

# Unlocking the potential of lower-level employees: a collaborative approach for upliftment and empowerment in South Africa's FMCG retail sector

August 2024

Project 2024/01

# Unlocking the potential of lower-level employees: a collaborative approach for upliftment and empowerment in South Africa's FMCG retail sector

Prepared by:

Ms Vickey de Villiers (Henley Business School Africa)

Mr Frans van der Colff (Henley Business School Africa)

Dr Semona Pillay (Wholesale & Retail Sector Education and Training Authority Research Leadership chair: Gauteng, University of Johannesburg)

**Acknowledgements**

**Executive summary**

Upliftment and empowerment are vital yet under-researched concepts in South Africa's fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) retail sector, particularly for lower-level employees whose contributions and development are often undervalued. This study aims to explore current initiatives aimed at uplifting and empowering lower-level employees in FMCG retail stores and to provide recommendations for continued and enhanced efforts. It also examines how participants define upliftment and empowerment, the benefits associated with these concepts for both employees and the business, and the degree to which lower-level retail employees feel empowered.

This qualitative study follows an interpretivist philosophical approach and is exploratory in nature. The research team conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 employees of FMCG retail stores and 13 individuals who have managerial experience in FMCG retail stores. Thematic analysis was used to extract codes, categories, and themes from the interview transcripts, while both inductive and deductive approaches to theory development were followed. To guarantee trustworthiness and rigour, quality checks were implemented throughout the study.

The participants identified varying levels of information sharing, training programmes, career progression, valuing employees' opinions, communication, and other initiatives from FMCG retail stores to uplift and empower their employees. Similarly, employees reported a mixed sense of empowerment. Participants highlighted opportunities for learning and growth, recognition, and management practices as key components of their definitions and perceived sense of upliftment and empowerment. When implemented effectively, these concepts offer several benefits for employees, retail stores, and customers. The authors build on the participants' recommendations, proposing a collaborative, people-centred approach to upliftment and empowerment. This approach includes open dialogue, transparency about business information and career progression pathways, learning opportunities, knowledge and skills development, and positive work relationships. When grounded in respect, acknowledgement, and inclusion, upliftment and empowerment foster a sense of belonging among employees.

**Contents**

**Introduction to the study**

Empowerment is a widely used term across multiple disciplines, including psychology (Cattaneo and Chapman, 2010), social development (Chaudhuri, 2016), education, and management (Lincoln *et al.*, 2002). Despite varying definitions (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995) and applications, its importance and benefits are well recognised. Examples include increased morale, better performance, personal growth, staff retention, and improved working relationships (Han *et al.*, 2023).

A previous study on employee theft in South Africa's fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) retail sector highlights the importance of a work environment characterised by recognition, inclusion, learning opportunities, and a sense of ownership among general employees (De Villiers *et al.*, 2023). However, general employees reported mixed experiences with these concepts and identified several challenges, including the societal tendency to look down on retail workers (De Villiers *et al.*, 2023). These concepts are closely linked with upliftment and empowerment, which are under-researched areas in South Africa's retail industry, especially among lower-level employees. This underscores the need for further research to explore and enhance these practices within the retail industry.

Therefore, this study addresses the need to better understand how upliftment and empowerment are applied within South Africa's FMCG retail sector, keeping in mind that the sector is 'the second largest employer after the government' (Teuteberg, 2021). It identifies actionable measures to improve these practices. In this context, upliftment and empowerment refer to giving employees opportunities to grow in the business, having a voice in decision-making, contributing to the success of the business, and providing learning opportunities. It involves the sense that employees can grow in the business, knowing what to do for this to happen, and feeling that their knowledge and expertise are respected and valued. Consequently, this study aims to explore and enhance empowerment practices, emphasising opportunities for growth, decision-making involvement, and knowledge appreciation within the FMCG retail sector.

**Research objective and areas of exploration**

The primary objective of this study is to investigate what is being done to uplift and empower lower-level retail employees employed in FMCG retail stores and to provide recommendations to uplift and empower these employees. The following areas of exploration (AoEs) have been formulated to address the primary objective:

- AoE 1: define upliftment and empowerment, the importance thereof, and the benefits associated with these concepts;
- AoE 2: determine the extent to which lower-level retail employees feel empowered and uplifted in their current employment circumstances;
- AoE 3: explore what FMCG retail stores do to uplift and empower their employees in their current employment circumstances from both employee and management perspectives; and
- AoE 4: uncover the perceptions and recommendations of lower-level retail employees and management of FMCG retail stores of what could be done to uplift and empower employees in their current employment circumstances.

**Literature review**

This section provides definitions and examples to contextualise upliftment and empowerment within the workplace. It then draws on literature from various fields, including psychology, organisational studies, and leadership, to discuss measures for uplifting and empowering employees.

*Contextualising employee upliftment and empowerment*

*Upliftment* is defined as an 'improvement of an area or situation' ('Upliftment', 2024) and uplifting is defined as 'positive in a way that encourages the improvement of a person's mood or spirit' ('Uplifting', 2024). Uplifting actions from leadership include providing clear direction, relying on trust and teamwork to propel people forward, knowing the team, being transparent, and monitoring progress (Hargreaves, Boyle and Harris, 2014).

*Structural empowerment* refers to the 'social structures that facilitate the employees' work' (Monje-Amor *et al.*, 2021, p. 780). Kanter (as cited by Echebiri, Amundsen and Engen, 2020,

p. 4) identified these structures as access to 'information, resources, support, and opportunity'. For example, do employees have the time and supplies required to perform their tasks that contribute to the organisation's goals (Dan *et al.*, 2018), awareness of the organisation's policies and objectives (Monje-Amor *et al.*, 2021), opportunities to learn and grow (Echebiri, Amundsen and Engen, 2020), and receive encouragement and feedback (Lundin *et al.*, 2022).

*Psychological empowerment* 'is a subjective, cognitive and attitudinal process that helps individuals feel effective, competent and authorised to carry out tasks' (Llorente-Alonso, García-Ael and Topa, 2023, p. 1759). Spreitzer (1995, p. 1443) explained that 'meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact' are key thoughts associated with this motivational construct. This includes the extent to which employees perceive their work as meaningful, their skills and capabilities to complete work-related tasks, freedom and choice on how to complete these tasks, and whether employees think their work influences the broader organisation (Monje-Amor *et al.*, 2021).

*Employee empowerment* is a management practice grounded in 'power-sharing, participative decision-making, devolution of responsibility, people-oriented leadership style' (Huq, 2017, p. 10), as well as 'access to information, collaboration, and enablement' (Huq, 2016, p. 558). Bowen and Lawler (1992) emphasised organisational performance as a central theme of employee empowerment. They stated that employees need to receive information about their organisation's performance, be rewarded for their contribution to the performance, 'have the knowledge and skills to understand and contribute to organisational performance', and have decision-making abilities that influence the organisation's performance (Bowen and Lawler, 1992, p. 5).

### Measures to uplift and empower employees

*Empowering leadership*

Lee, Willis and Tian (2018) explained that empowering leaders delegate authority, ask employees for inputs, and give them a voice in decision-making, which positively impacts creativity, citizenship behaviour, and trust grounded in mentorship and employee development. Instead of merely delegating tasks and responsibility, empowering leaders

deliberately motivate and develop employees (Amundsen and Martinsen, 2014). The Redelinghuys, Rothmann and Botha (2020, p. 5) study among retail employees in Gauteng found that empowering leaders have a positive influence on employees' job satisfaction, staff retention, and 'person-environment fit'.

*Employee involvement*

According to Bowen and Lawler (1992), there are three types of involvement that increasingly contribute to empowerment. Suggestion involvement does not change routine tasks or autonomy in decision-making, but encourages employee input. Job involvement alters some tasks so that 'employees believe their tasks are significant, they have considerable freedom in deciding how to do the work, they get more feedback, and they handle a whole, identifiable piece of work' (Bowen and Lawler, 1992, p. 36). High involvement extends to all lower-level employees in the organisation and is characterised by shared business information, teamwork, skills development, voice in decision-making, and employee ownership.

*Training programmes*

Upskilling and development empower employees and prepare them for future opportunities (Baker, 2020). Workplace learning programmes in the wholesale and retail sector could include workbooks and guides, partnerships with other entities, practical opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge, and mentorship (Dedosa Consulting and Durban University of Technology, 2019). A similar study identified financial and communication skills, customer service, and business management as some of the key skills required in this sector (Dem Tse Trading, 2022). Providing training and development opportunities will positively influence customer service, employee engagement, staff retention, safety and compliance, and sales (Bilyk, 2023).

*Positive working relationships*

Relationships characterised by mutual trust are an important component of employee empowerment (Expert Panel and Forbes Business Council, 2021). Ristić (2024) proposed reflecting on the following five important concepts as cornerstones of connection within relationships: consistency, care/kindness, fairness, appreciation, and understanding. Showing

people that they matter and taking time to get to know employees are also important principles of good relationships (Ristić, 2024).

Moreover, previous studies and existing theories have identified the following measures to uplift employees and contribute to an empowering work environment:

- Allow employees to make mistakes and provide *mentorship* through these mistakes (Expert Panel and Forbes Business Council, 2021). Mentorship can increase staff retention, productivity, and employees' perceived sense of value (Dedosa Consulting and Durban University of Technology, 2019).

- Blanchard, Carlos and Randolph (2001) explained that sharing business information with all employees is a crucial component of empowerment. Sharing information 'empowers employees with knowledge and instils a sense of ownership, further fuelling their motivation and overall engagement' (De Villiers *et al*., 2023, p. 45).

- *Career progression pathways* contribute to employees' perceived sense of empowerment (Harrop, 2023). Oglethorpe (2023) suggested having open, honest conversations with employees about their career development. These conversations can increase employee engagement and growth as well as help align employees' ambitions with organisational goals (Oglethorpe, 2024).

- Being approachable, considering employees' perspectives, and providing feedback will encourage *two-way communication* and make employees feel valued (Gavin, 2019). 'Employees who feel empowered to share information and ideas with their managers are likely to be more engaged and motivated' (Milliken and Tatge, 2016, p. 32). These concepts are closely related to recognition and giving employees a voice in decision-making. Positive psychology research shows that 'feeling noticed, being seen, and being treated with fairness and consideration all play a role in helping people feel that they matter' (Ristić, 2024, p. 22).

- *Respecting employees* is an important component of organisational success and empowerment (McFee, 2023). The perceived level of respect demonstrated by leadership in organisations influences employees' well-being, job satisfaction, and engagement (Porath, 2014).

**Methodology**

This section describes the study's research paradigm and approach, as well as the data collection and analysis processes.

*Research paradigm*

This study is grounded in the interpretivist research paradigm, which aims to gain a better understanding of participants' world views and interpretations of their environment (Willis, Jost and Nilakanta, 2007). Ling and Ling (2020) described this paradigm as a systematic and evidence-based investigation where researchers are actively involved and make interpretations throughout the research process. An interpretivist philosophical approach is primarily followed when conducting qualitative research (Tshabangu, Ba' and Madondo, 2021). It provides a descriptive analysis (Klenke, 2008) by using social interaction as the main source of information (O'Donoghue, 2007), and reflects a comprehensive understanding of a small sample (Burton and Bartlett, 2005).

*Research approach*

Qualitative research help researchers to answer 'why' questions and discover the 'human elements' associated with social phenomena (Given, 2008). Therefore, this study followed a qualitative research approach to gain a detailed understanding of participants' experiences (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016), views, and perspectives (Yin, 2011) on upliftment and empowerment in the retail industry. Qualitative research generally comprises small samples selected through non-probabilistic sampling techniques (Guest, Namey and Mitchell, 2013), such as purposive sampling. Qualitative data sources mainly comprise interviews, observations, and documents (Patton, 2002). Creswell (2013) stated that qualitative research is collected in a natural setting, and both inductive and deductive data analysis approaches are used to identify patterns or themes contained in the primary data. Furthermore, qualitative researchers contribute to the analysis and results by interpreting the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2014).

*Data collection*

This exploratory study used semi-structured interview guides to facilitate in-depth interviews. Participants included employees of FMCG retail stores and individuals with managerial

experience in FMCG retail stores, who were selected through purposive sampling. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in terms of gender, age group, geographic location, job description, and affiliated retail company. Specifically, the one-on-one interviewer-administered interviews were conducted online and lasted 30-60 minutes.

To maximise the data collection efforts and ensure a diversified sample, an independent market research company was approached to recruit employees who had been working at FMCG retail stores for at least one year. Fifteen employees (11 males and four females) were interviewed, with a pilot conducted at the end of March and the remaining interviews completed in early April 2024. These participants resided in the Western Cape, Gauteng, and Mpumalanga, and represented eight different FMCG retail companies. When the interviews were conducted, the participants mainly worked at grocery retailers in roles like stock controller, stock clerk, merchandiser, cashier, picker, packer, and general worker. Moreover, interviews were conducted with 13 individuals (10 males and three females) with retail store management experience between the end of March and May 2024. These participants worked in various management capacities for general merchandise and food retailers or wholesalers.

*Instrument*

The open-ended questions in the interview guides (see Annexures A and B) were designed to facilitate a natural conversation about what is being done to uplift and empower retail employees in FMCG retail stores. The questions aimed to understand the definitions and advantages of upliftment and empowerment, the extent to which lower-level retail employees feel empowered, current practices by FMCG retail stores, and recommendations for further enhancing employee upliftment and empowerment. Key topics included career growth opportunities, the value of employees' opinions, training programmes, communication, and the role of management.

*Ethical aspects*

This project was reviewed and approved by the University of Reading's Research Ethics Committee. The research team explained the purpose of the project and the research process to participants, who signed a consent form (see Annexure D) after reading the participant

information sheet (see Annexure C). As outlined in the information sheet, participation in this study was voluntary, data were held securely, confidentiality was maintained, and participants and their affiliated organisations remain anonymous. Furthermore, the interviews were recorded and transcribed to accurately capture the findings and main themes that emerged from the conversations, with direct quotes used to illustrate these points. As part of signing the consent form, participants acknowledged being informed about the project's purpose and requirements, and agreed to the participation arrangements outlined in the information sheet.

*Data analysis*

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the primary data collected throughout this study. First, the researchers read the interview transcripts several times to familiarise themselves with each participant's feedback and form an overarching understanding of the topic being studied (Bazeley, 2013). Thereafter, the data were coded and categorised by grouping similar statements (Flick, 2014) to identify the key themes emerging from the data. Guided by Creswell (2013), the researchers interpreted the data by reflecting on their meaning and linking them to existing literature. These actions were revisited multiple times, as 'qualitative data analysis is a continuous, iterative enterprise' (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014, p. 14). Thematic analysis facilitated a systematic and rigorous review of the data (Willig and Rogers, 2017) and generated a detailed description (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of the findings.

*Research reasoning approach*

This study was both inductive and deductive in its approach to theory development and data analysis. When an inductive approach is followed, qualitative data and the researcher's intuitive understanding thereof are used to develop themes, concepts, and theories related to the research topic (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). In contrast, a deductive approach 'begins with a broad theory' (Willis, Jost and Nilakanta, 2007, p. 41) and uses the data collected during the empirical component of the study to test existing theories and hypotheses (O'Reilly, 2009). As explained by Creswell (2013), the researchers continuously revisited the data and initial coding to identify a comprehensive list of themes through inductive reasoning and used deductive reasoning when comparing these themes with existing literature and theories.

Combining these two approaches facilitates complex reasoning (Creswell, 2013) and comprehensive interrogation of the data (Given, 2008).

*Quality checks*

The example of Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 189) was followed to assure trustworthiness by addressing 'credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability' throughout the study. More than one researcher reviewed and interpreted the information (Patton, 1999), a structured record of all the study documents was maintained (Nowell *et al.*, 2017), substantial time was spent engaging with the topic, and detailed descriptions were provided (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

**Analysis and findings**

This section presents a detailed discussion of the insights shared by employees and managers during the interviews. It focuses on key themes, interpretations of the data, and illustrative quotes relevant to each AoE. Where relevant, it also corroborates some of the key findings with existing literature.

***AoE 1: defining upliftment and empowerment, and the importance thereof***

*Participants' definitions of upliftment and empowerment*

From an employee perspective, the words 'upliftment' and 'empowerment' comprise opportunities to learn, including studying, gaining knowledge, and acquiring skills. As well as opportunities to grow in the business and being recognised. Additional mentions included motivation, having a goal to work towards, and achieving a better standard of living. Employees' thoughts on the topic were:

> Bettering a person or have [a] better life. Yeah, that's what it means. Better knowledge, better understanding, better opportunities as well.
>
> (E5)

> If maybe there was someone who can just recognise us, give us more skills, and opportunities to uplift ourselves.
>
> (E11)

Managers also identified opportunities to learn and recognition as important components of upliftment and empowerment. Other references included mentorship, involvement, mutual benefits, providing the necessary tools, and listening to employees. Furthermore, the managers revealed:

> I think from an employee perspective, upliftment and empowerment is basically to allow decision-making and participation … you've got to allow them to make decisions, you've got to listen to them.
>
> (M1)

> Empowering with knowledge, and mentorship.
>
> (M8)

*Why upliftment and empowerment matter*

Several employees and managers expressed that the first step towards upliftment and empowerment is acknowledging the importance of lower-level employees. These employees are the direct link between organisations and their customers, contributing significantly to customer satisfaction and the overall success of the organisations. The participants shared the below opinions:

> What I believe is everyone in the business is so important, though you do such a small job at your work, but you are a contribution to the success of the company.
>
> (E1)

> The people that get the shop ready for every customer that comes in, it's not the management actually, it's the people that make sure that the shelves are well packed, the floor is clean, it's mopped, it's nice…. So, the interests of the clients, the impressions of the clients, it's coming from the people that are on the ground, because they get to meet them daily.
>
> (E10)

Empowerment and upliftment from the lowest level in an organisation is vital for an organisation to thrive…. Because the person that is empowered there, the cashier, the till packer, the merchandiser, that's creating organisational success.

(M5)

How do you grow the business if you are not sharing your knowledge or empowering your people…? Without the employee, you cannot run the business … you have to empower them, and most likely they are the people to look after, so that they will look after your business.

(M8)

Other mentions included the need for employees to be heard, skills development, and career progression. The significance of specific components associated with upliftment and empowerment is illustrated as part of AoE 4.

*The benefits of upliftment and empowerment*
Employees and managers believe that empowerment and upliftment of lower-level employees would be beneficial for multiple stakeholders, including employees, retail stores, customers, and the broader community. Employees explained that upliftment and empowerment would help them perform better in their jobs and facilitate internal recruitment. Moreover, employees and managers identified increased productivity, job satisfaction, and staff retention as additional benefits. Participants shared:

If you empower them, make them understand that they are part and parcel of this business, a lot of things, wrong things that are happening, it won't happen.

(E12)

That would also keep more employees working at a place instead of them trying to find something that is better for upliftment or for better goals or for better opportunities or for recognition.

(E13)

I think it is very important also for the organisation because you tend to grow loyalty, you tend to grow people from within, you create a culture whereby people can aspire, they can see that there is growth.

(M2)

The more knowledge or information you give the people, the more productive they're able to become.

(M6)

Some of the managers further added that a more empowered workforce could assist with improved results of their organisations, success of the businesses, and reduce industrial relations issues, such as strikes. Managers' insights included:

The more you empower the people, the more respected they feel, the more confident they are, which leads to higher sales, lower staff turnover, and more profits.

(M5)

Because when you empower them and uplift them, they will know that you listen to them, and you are ready or willing to hear their opinions.

(M6)

Employees and managers also identified customer-related advantages associated with a more empowered workforce. The participants revealed:

If ever they invest in their employees, and then the employees they'll definitely know how to deal with customers.

(E7)

It will create goodwill with your customers, because you will have more customer-centric staff who are focused on serving customers.

(M9)

Definitely more productive and I think it makes for a happier kind of environment in store from a point of view of creating an environment where customers are happy to come in because your staff are happy.

(M11)

Some of the managers expressed that uplifting and empowering employees could have a more positive impact on the communities where stores operate. Managers' thoughts on the topic included:

I think the minute you're giving somebody value, it changes who they are on the inside. So, they go home, the communities are better, they treat their families better, etc.

(M3)

We are all creating our businesses in context, somewhere. It is not like we sit on the moon somewhere and people come out to the moon, they sit somewhere in a family, in a community, in a neighbourhood.

(M10)

*Correlations with previous studies and theories*

Employee empowerment is an important determinant of organisations' success (Huq, 2024). Frontline employees (often regarded as lower-level employees) have a significant impact on customer satisfaction and the success of the retail company (Petersen *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, empowered employees generally show increased performance, job satisfaction, and organisational commitment, and perceive their work as meaningful (Lee, Willis and Tian, 2018).

**AoE 2: the extent to which employees feel empowered and uplifted**

*Employee experiences and perceptions*

The employees offered varied responses to questions regarding their enjoyment of the work environment, sense of belonging in their organisations, feeling valued or appreciated, and

sense of upliftment and empowerment. Enjoying the work, learning, and being recognised contribute to employees' positive experiences in the work environment. Several employees explained that they make the work enjoyable, and some referred to positive work relationships. Negative components identified were low salaries and stagnation in one's role, with employees sharing:

> We as a staff we make ourselves enjoyable at work, but the environment of work it's not nice.
>
> (E2)

> I think the most thing [*sic*] that is making me enjoy my job is that we're working as a team, and also our supervisors, they recognise us. They were not only focusing on work, but they also, like, you know, when you're working with people and they want to know: 'How you? How's the family? How's life?'
>
> (E11)

Employees had mixed opinions about their sense of belonging and feeling valued by their organisations – some felt appreciated and supported, while others felt undervalued and overlooked. Key determinants included whether they are listened to, recognised, and supported by managers and colleagues. Employees had the following to say:

> I don't feel a sense of belonging. I just feel like, okay, well, I have to go there, and work, and get out…. See, the organisations they just want you to do your job and pay you, that's it. I don't think they value merchandisers.
>
> (E5)

> The belonging and the value thing, that is a very big part at the company. I'm not sure if that is something that they actually pride themselves on, but they always want to make their employees belong.
>
> (E13)

Yes, they do. Especially my boss, and all our colleagues, they value me because of when I do my job, I do my best.

<div align="right">(E14)</div>

When employees were asked about feeling uplifted and empowered, their responses varied, highlighting themes like learning, inclusion, career advancement, and recognition. These responses aligned with the key elements of upliftment and empowerment, as defined by the employees (see AoE 1). Below is some feedback from the employees:

They don't give us that empowerment that we need. Those guys, they worry about their pockets, not about their workers.

<div align="right">(E4)</div>

I do feel empowered, because you learn. I'm learning certain things.

<div align="right">(E6)</div>

My work environment is good, but as I'm saying, when it comes to being empowered at work, I think that that's where the problem lies … our supervisors and our managers, they don't delegate so much work, they don't teach you.

<div align="right">(E15)</div>

*Management's role in fostering upliftment and empowerment*
Both employees and managers affirmed that management is pivotal in fostering upliftment and empowerment, sharing examples of how management can contribute to and hinder upliftment and empowerment. Their reflections included management's interaction with employees, providing opportunities to learn and grow, fostering motivation, and the example set by management. The participants shared:

Managers play a vital role in changing perceptions, changing how the employees look at the job that they're doing, and what opportunities they can have.

<div align="right">(E1)</div>

They do, because if you don't have a good manager, you will be slacking to come to work … but if the manager is uplifting, then your mood changes; every day becomes a happy day, you know that I'm gonna get something fulfilment [*sic*].

(E8)

That's another point that I'll come back to about empowerment and upliftment is a lot of it has got to do on the management.

(M5)

Furthermore, managers were asked whether senior managers understand the challenges faced by lower-level employees. Responses suggested that senior managers in the retail industry generally do not understand these challenges. Although some are aware of these issues, many do not fully grasp them. Examples of this feedback are outlined below.

They know, but they do not understand.

(M6)

I have never seen a manager spending his hour of lunch in the canteen, sitting down with staff to get to go through how they get to eat, what they get to discuss about what is it that they get to go through. So, obviously if you've never been part of them, you cannot understand them.

(M12)

Very few have really, really worn the shoes and the blisters of that particular group of retail employments. So, my answer is no, they don't actually know what a cashier goes through and what a packer goes through. They've done it as a checklist tick, and invariably, they were cushioned through that process.

(M13)

*Correlations with previous studies and theories*

These findings resemble the argument by Fourie (2009) that the prevalence of opportunities, recognition, support, training, personal growth, information sharing, management, and clear

guidance and direction are important determinants of empowerment. Employees in a previous study about South Africa's FMCG retail sector concurred on the important role of management and had varied experiences regarding engagement, career growth possibilities, sense of belonging, and recognition (De Villiers *et al*., 2023).

**AoE 3: current initiatives to uplift and empower employees**

*Encouraging and valuing employee feedback*

The employees noted that management generally asks for their opinions, but several felt management does not value their opinions. They explained that the lack of implementation or the lengthy process to implement their suggestions makes them doubt the value placed on their opinions. Quotes from employees included:

> No, they just listen and then they do their own thing.
>
> (E8)

> They never use it…. So, it shows that my input is not that much valued.
>
> (E15)

*Information sharing*

Employees provided mixed responses regarding the sharing of business information, with some indicating that information is shared, others stating it is not, and some mentioning that only certain information is shared. The employees provided the following insight:

> They know everything themselves; they don't share the knowledge to the employees. The only thing that you can hear [is] when the store did bad [*sic*] on stocktake.
>
> (E2)

> They do each and every time we always have … on Wednesdays and Sundays of how much money they made and what's gonna [*sic*] happen, the sale, what's running now, what's the focus?
>
> (E3)

That's a very big no. Management, they hardly share, the only thing that they will always present it's the targets for that month…. We don't know how much numbers we are making [*sic*], that will forever stay hidden somewhere somehow.

(E10)

*Communication*

Although some of the interviewed managers deliberately attempt to foster communication with lower-level employees, several others indicated there is insufficient communication and shortcomings in this regard. Managers shared:

No, I don't think, and I'm not talking about meetings, I'm just talking about, like, walking to somebody and saying: 'How are you? What's up? What do you think? Do you have an idea for today?' And then taking that and executing on one or two things where you can.

(M3)

There's openness and everybody can access me, that's the first thing. So, there's a proper open-door policy.

(M4)

I don't think there's a lack of communication. I just think the communication is not clear and constructive to the staff.

(M9)

I make a point of walking around the store every morning and greeting everybody that's in.

(M11)

A few of the employees and managers also noted that communication and engagement between management and lower-level employees are mainly operational or occur when

employees are being reprimanded. However, positive actions seem to go unnoticed. Participants revealed:

Here in our company, whatever you have done wrong, there is the door for you. But if you have done good, it's like it's unnoticed.

(E2)

They only come when someone [has] done something wrong, and then they come on the floor. Because they are invisible on the floor you will never see them, they only come once when it's a trouble.

(E4)

There's people that have low self-esteem, and then to know that you are appreciated goes a long way…. But instead, you get a person that actually will talk to you and they want to reprimand you for doing something wrong, but when you are doing something good, it gets thrown out of the window.

(E9)

The only time they get spoken to is when they are being reprimanded, that's it.

(M13)

*Training programmes*

Nearly all the interviewed employees and managers affirmed the existence of training programmes. However, several participants voiced concerns about the conditions and implementation challenges associated with these programmes. Examples included limited coverage of topics, mainly during induction rather than ongoing, generally not available for lower-level employees, and insufficient time allocated for training. Some of the participants' thoughts were:

They give us trainings, they give us a lot of knowledge, they send us to places to go and learn about what we're doing, they grow you.

(E1)

There are facilities, there is everything, but there's no one there who is after these things…. Their excuse will be the shop is very busy, they don't need someone's gonna [*sic*] sit there and do nothing, you see? Everyone must be on the floor.

(E7)

There's very little, so we don't go out of our way to train, to give knowledge to the next person. There's no mentorships any more, specifically in my field.

(M3)

*Career advancement*

Some participants shared optimism and positive examples of career advancement and promotion within their organisations, while others did not share this sentiment or experience. A few participants also explained that different people have different career trajectories and goals – some want to advance to managerial positions, some want to rotate across different departments, and others prefer to specialise in their existing field. On this subject, the employees and managers asserted:

You stay in one position, you don't get a thank you for what you're doing. They do not recognise how hard you work, and you don't get any tap at the back of a well-done job [*sic*].

(E3)

There is [career advancement], especially if you are also interested in terms of growth, in terms of your growth. As an individual, it's up to you anyway.

(E12)

Our staff turnover, for example, is very, very low. So, there's not a lot of opportunities that come open for people to grow … the growth is more of a sort of a personal kind of growth.

(M1)

As I grew up the ranks, I was told that part of your role is to develop people, not only to manage. So, I think we've lost that, in a sense that people are not deliberately or consciously developing people for the next level, you know? People are just doing to achieve the results, get the incentives, and go home.

(M2)

Employees further explained that career advancement often depends on the managers and the working relationship with these managers, with some individuals progressing, while others do not. Two employees mentioned that although they might have years of experience, they often do not meet all the skill requirements for advertised positions. Additionally, several employees acknowledged the individual's role in their career advancement.

Other initiatives to uplift and empower lower-level employees included compliments and encouragement, management being hands on, spot prizes, conferences, increased responsibility, one-on-one conversations, and financial assistance during crisis. Although these initiatives are important and acknowledged, more could be done to uplift and empower lower-level employees in FMCG retail stores. Most participants concurred, contributing the following opinions:

I think it's more important than what we give it energy and effort in. Often, people at the coalface are, whether it's overtly or covertly, thought of to be it's okay, they must just do the job and get it done.

(M10)

I don't think we do enough. I think there is a gap there.

(M12)

### *AoE 4: perceptions and recommendations of what could be done*
*Opportunities to learn*

Employees mainly suggested partnerships with external training institutions (e.g., local colleges, training providers, and universities), while managers mainly proposed intentional on-the-job training and company-specific programmes. Suggestions included providing

mentorship, allocating dedicated time in work schedules for training, and offering training opportunities for employees at all levels. Participants shared the below during the interviews:

It is important to take your employees to training, to uplift them, to get them better, because why would you want a stagnant employee?

(E8)

As soon as you train them, they know the importance of them in this company, they know that by making sure that they uplift the standard of your company.

(E12)

Without them training us or getting to know us in a better way, they wouldn't be able to know if we are able to manage or handle a manager position.

(E13)

I think if the lower-level employees are more knowledgeable, it becomes easier for a manager to manage … when you train somebody, you've got to allow people to make mistakes. The moment that you do not allow them to make mistakes, you [are] actually not training, you're evaluating, and that's a downfall.

(M7)

In terms of specific areas or skills that could help lower-level employees grow in their organisations, participants recommended training in customer service, business concepts and processes, management and leadership, finance, and conflict management. Moreover, employees' suggestions comprised computer skills, completing Grade 12, administrative skills, safety and first aid, obtaining a forklift licence, and assisting in training new employees. Interestingly, a few participants proposed that managers should undergo training in cultural sensitivity, emotional intelligence, and people skills.

*Opportunities to grow in the organisation*

Several participants, especially employees, recommended opportunities for growth within their organisations. Specific suggestions included sharing information about career

progression pathways and time frames, rotating across different departments and product categories (in similar or varied roles), remuneration in line with career advancement, increasing responsibility, and involvement. The participants stated:

> If you don't grow in a space, you become demotivated. But if you know that you will be growing in a company, the more effort you put [in], the more [the] chances are that the company might give you like an opportunity, a better opportunity, then you're going to be motivated.
>
> (E5)

> To have such recognition to say, okay, someone is recognising my work, or what I do as such, and then I am being rewarded with a growth programme whatsoever, that will definitely help me to even do more, it will push me to go an extra mile.
>
> (E10)

> Being in one place, doing the very same thing over and over again at work, sometimes you get numb to the job.
>
> (E15)

> It does make for a happier, more productive, more kind of efficient environment if people know that they've got the potential to grow within.
>
> (M11)

Some managers explained the importance of the recruitment and onboarding process, identifying the most suitable roles for individuals, and the benefits of appointing more trainees and trainee managers. However, another manager cautioned against premature advancements that could hinder employees from gaining sufficient experience in specific roles.

*Recognition and value*

The interviews highlighted the importance of ensuring that all employees feel recognised, respected, appreciated, and valued. This can be fostered by acknowledging employees'

contributions and achievements, team-building activities, providing constructive feedback, and thoughtful communication. The employees and managers revealed:

> Like, yes, it is nice, you [are] working with people, but [at the] end of the day, if no one sees what you doing, or what you putting in, like, how can you stay there?
>
> (E4)

> When someone recognise[s] you, you feel motivated, you just wanna [*sic*] do more.
>
> (E11)

> If an employee feels that they're just a number, then that is going to be the worst self-fulfilling prophecy that you can throw at a business because they will then just become a number…. The way to actually reverse this is to catch them doing right, not to catch them doing wrong.
>
> (M4)

> As much as we call it an entry-level position, they come with a whole host of terms of reference, and their own skills and knowledge, and we must never not respect that.
>
> (M13)

*Employee input and participation*

The employees and managers suggested that employees should be given a voice in decision-making, listened to, asked to share their opinions, and provided with feedback when their suggestions cannot be implemented. Regarding this topic, the participants shared:

> It makes you feel that somebody acknowledges that you are there. And you feel that, yes, I am a person, I'm being acknowledged, I'm not just an employee, but it counts what I'm saying.
>
> (E6)

So, it's nice when you know that, okay, even though whatever you were suggesting might not be implemented, but the fact that you are being heard, instead of being dismissed, it's a nice feeling.

(E9)

When you feel that you don't have a voice, that's when things can go very, very wrong for an organisation, especially a customer-facing organisation like a retailer.

(M10)

Inclusivity is very important, including these people so that they feel part of the business. Any other specific training [then] becomes easy.

(M12)

*Transparency and information sharing*

A few participants recommended increased transparency and discussions about business matters. Examples included sharing information about the budget, the company's vision, progress towards targets, how each employee impacts the overall results of the store, and vice versa. On this subject, the employees and managers asserted:

It shows that the company does not have a discrimination on the employees because … they want each and every employee [to] know all the information that are around the company [*sic*].

(E14)

Once you give any employee ownership in the organisation, transparency to the financials, and understanding of how their action impacts the bottom line, that's when you get staff members emotionally involved in the business.

(M5)

If they don't understand why it's important to do the stuff, how it contributes to the total effectiveness of the organisation, then they won't really give your

customer the best value…. If your staff don't feel like what they are doing has a purpose to it, they're not going to do it purposefully.

(M9)

*Leadership and managerial approaches*

In line with management's pivotal role in fostering upliftment and empowerment, several recommendations were aimed at managers. Specific suggestions included having one-on-one conversations with employees, conveying purpose, leading by example, being approachable, being more visible, and spending time on the shop floor. During the interviews, the participants shared:

When you are a manager, be on the floor, everyone sees you, and then communicate to them so that they know you as a manager and then they won't fear you as a manager … so that they can explain everything they feel.

(E4)

The biggest thing for me is to set the example. I still work the till to this day, believe it or not…. The staff see, 'Hold on, this oke actually knows what my job is about….' Management has to be seen; there's no retail business that's a remote-control toy that you can sit far away and just hope.

(M4)

That was the flagship store, put another manager in, and the store was probably the worst-performing store in that region. Pulled the manager out, put another manager in, the only thing that he did is, every day, he went to all his employees and greeted them, within six months, that was a top-performing store again.

(M7)

Other overarching mentions and recommendations from the interviews were allowing room for mistakes, adopting a people-centred view, and engaging with employees about their interests, training needs, and career aspirations. The employees' and managers' insights included:

They [are] just focusing on the sales of the store, that's what they are pushing. Yes, they [are] supposed to push that, but they need to go back again to the employees.

(E6)

For me, it is grassroots, it starts small. You don't have to make big changes, you just have to make, you know, visible changes whereby staff can see that we are heading somewhere.

(E9)

We are so married to the numbers, that we're forgetting the people aspect of both leadership and management…. We don't manage boxes of stuff, we manage people, so you should be knowledgeable in terms of engaging with people.

(M2)

My view is that you have to do pre-emptive work, don't wait until it's broken before you are trying to fix it, it takes too long to fix.

(M10)

*Correlations with previous studies and theories*

Research shows that leading by example, providing feedback, recognising strengths, open communication, collective purpose, explaining the bigger picture of specific tasks, and fostering opportunities to grow and learn are cornerstones of employee empowerment (Gavin, 2019). BDO South Africa (2024) proposed that frontline employees in the retail industry can be empowered through training, skills development, communication, addressing employee well-being, career advancement, mentorship, and a supportive environment. Several studies highlight the importance of asking employees about their expectations, preferences, and requirements in this regard (Redelinghuys, Rothmann and Botha, 2020).

*Synthesis*

Table 1 links the interview questions to the key themes and findings that emerged from the interviews, thereby summarising the analysis and findings section.

**Table 1: Link between the interview questions and findings**

| | Interview questions | Themes and findings |
|---|---|---|
| *AoE 1: define upliftment and empowerment, and the importance thereof* | | |
| Employees | • What comes to mind when you hear the words 'upliftment' and 'empowerment'? How would you define these concepts?<br>• Will you be better at what you do if you have more skills and knowledge?<br>• Do you think it would be good for the organisation to spend time on upliftment and empowerment of employees and why?<br>• Prompts/Further questions: would it assist in ensuring increased productivity? Would it assist in assuring job satisfaction and staff retention?<br>• Do you contribute to the success of the business and how? | • Mainly includes opportunities to learn, grow in the business, and be recognised<br>• Benefits for employees, the organisation, and customers (e.g., employees will be better at what they do, increased productivity, job satisfaction, and internal recruitment)<br>• Employees spend a lot of time at work and contribute to customer satisfaction and organisational success |
| Managers | • What comes to mind when you hear the words 'upliftment' and 'empowerment'? How would you define these concepts?<br>• Is it important to empower and uplift lower-level employees and why?<br>• Do you believe empowerment and upliftment of lower-level employees will have a positive impact on the results of the organisation?<br>• Why do you think a more empowered workforce will assist in the success of the business?<br>• Do you think a more empowered workforce would reduce industrial relations issues, such as strikes?<br>• Do you think a more empowered workforce would increase productivity?<br>• Do you think a more empowered workforce would assist in ensuring sustainability?<br>• Do you think a more empowered workforce would have a more positive impact in the communities you operate in?<br>• Do you think a more empowered workforce would assist in ensuring job satisfaction and staff retention? | • Mainly entails opportunities to learn, recognition, leadership, and organisational factors<br>• Upliftment and empowerment are important (key reasons include being heard, contributing to skills and growth, and employees are dealing directly with customers)<br>• Positive impact on results, organisational success, productivity, job satisfaction, staff retention, customer service, industrial relations, and communities |
| *AoE 2: determine the extent to which lower-level retail employees feel empowered and uplifted in their current employment circumstances* | | |

| | Interview questions | Themes and findings |
|---|---|---|
| **Employees** | • Are you enjoying your work environment and why?<br>• Do you feel that you belong in the organisation?<br>• Do you feel that you are valued by the organisation?<br>• Do you feel empowered (and uplifted)?<br>• How does your manager contribute or take away from your sense of empowerment and upliftment? | • Varied sense of belonging, value, empowerment, and enjoyment of the work environment<br>• Important determinants include learning, work relationships with colleagues and management, career progression, enjoying the work, and recognition<br>• Managers play an important role |
| **Managers** | • What is the role of management in contributing or hindering empowerment?<br>• Do senior managers understand the challenges facing lower-level employees? | • Management plays an important role in contributing to or hindering empowerment<br>• Although some managers are aware of the challenges facing lower-level employees, management does not fully understand these challenges |
| | *AoE 3: explore what FMCG retail stores do to uplift and empower their employees in their current employment circumstances from both employee and management perspectives* | |
| **Employees** | • Does management ever ask your opinion?<br>• Does management value your opinion?<br>• Do you understand how the business works and how the success of the business is measured?<br>• Are you consulted or asked about business matters?<br>• Are there training programmes which you can attend to improve your skills?<br>• Do you feel that there are career opportunities for you in the organisation? Do you believe there are growth opportunities? Will it be easy for you to become a manager?<br>• How were you empowered or uplifted to get your current job position or to become better and more equipped in the position? | • Management generally asks for employees' opinions, but insufficient implementation casts doubt on whether their opinions are valued<br>• Varied levels of information sharing about business matters, prevalence of training programmes, and career opportunities |
| **Managers** | • What are you currently doing to empower and uplift lower-level employees?<br>• Are there specific initiatives or programmes in place?<br>• Do you have any plans or strategies in place to assist lower-level employees in growing in the organisation?<br>• Is there sufficient communication between senior management and lower-level employees?<br>• Do you believe we are doing enough to empower and uplift lower-level employees? | • Varied levels of information sharing, training programmes, career progression, and other initiatives<br>• Sufficient communication in some instances, but there is room for improvement and insufficient communication in other instances<br>• Several managers believe not enough is being done to empower and uplift lower-level employees |
| | *AoE 4: uncover the perceptions and recommendations of lower-level retail employees and management of FMCG retail stores of what could be done to uplift and empower employees in their current employment circumstances* | |

| | Interview questions | Themes and findings |
|---|---|---|
| Employees | • What improvement or change would you make to uplift and empower employees like yourself?<br>• Are there any specific areas or skills that you would like to be uplifted and empowered in so that you can grow in the organisation? | • Recommendations mainly focus on opportunities for learning and growth within the organisation, information sharing, asking opinions, and ensuring employees feel recognised and valued<br>• Examples demonstrate the significance and rationale of these recommendations<br>• Specific areas of interest or skills include customer service, business matters and processes, management and leadership, and finance |
| Managers | • What improvement or change would you make to uplift and empower employees?<br>• What are the key empowerment and upliftment areas or skills required for lower-level employees to grow in the organisation? | • Recommendations mainly relate to leadership, recruitment and orientation, training, and recognition<br>• Examples demonstrate the significance and rationale of these recommendations<br>• Key areas or skills for employees include business concepts, customer service, and conflict management |

## Conclusion and recommendations

This section presents the research study's key findings and makes recommendations for retailers to cultivate a work environment characterised by uplifted and empowered employees, with a specific focus on lower-level employees.

### *Takeaways from the literature review and interviews*

This report highlights several organisational factors (e.g., training and career progression programmes), managerial practices (e.g., information sharing and seeking employee input), and individual factors (e.g., perceived sense of recognition) associated with both the definition and perceived sense of upliftment and empowerment. Similarly, upliftment and empowerment encompass several benefits for employees (e.g., personal development, well-being, and job satisfaction) and for retail stores (e.g., productivity, staff retention, and organisational success). In turn, it also benefits customers (e.g., improved customer service and positive atmosphere) and the broader community (e.g., positive role models and collective prosperity).

Current and recommended measures primarily focus on training and growth opportunities, encouraging and valuing employee feedback, recognising employees, leadership and managerial approaches, transparency in business matters, and communication. While several

retail stores and managers are making efforts to uplift and empower employees, there is room for improvement and scalable measures across the FMCG retail industry.

*Recommendations*

Based on existing literature, positive examples and insights from participants, and previous experience, the authors propose a collaborative, people-centred approach to upliftment and empowerment. The authors argue that consulting and involving lower-level employees is essential to avoid patronising approaches and ensuring that everyone's input is considered and valued. Recognising the critical role of management, several of the suggestions are aimed at their efforts. The following checklist could help retailers initiate new measures and build on the success of their existing initiatives:

- Avoid assumptions or a top-down approach by engaging in open dialogue about managers' and employees' interpretations, expectations, needs, and strategies for upliftment and empowerment.

- Recognise, respect, and value each employees' strengths, experience, and contribution to the overall success of the organisation.

- Actively solicit and consider employees' input and engage with their suggestions by providing constructive feedback on implementation challenges, as well as opportunities for improvement or modification.

- Provide ongoing, practical, and theoretical learning opportunities for all employees, dedicating time to training that covers job-specific, organisational, and soft skills. When designing these learning opportunities, consider the knowledge and skills development areas identified by employees alongside those identified and required by the organisation.

- Initiate discussions about career progression pathways early on, incorporating employees' ambitions alongside the organisation's requirements, time frames, and available opportunities.

- Foster work relationships that demonstrate genuine interest in individuals, going beyond numbers and outcomes to support their personal growth and well-being.

- Encourage a sense of ownership by gradually delegating tasks and responsibilities, while avoiding undue burdens or expectations.

- Promote transparency by sharing information about business matters, ensuring employees understand how their contributions impact these matters and how the resulting outcomes affect them.

- Remember that upliftment and empowerment form part of an ongoing and inclusive process; and embrace mistakes as learning opportunities and adjust course along the way.

### *Synthesis*

Figure 1 summarises the linkage between the study's AoEs, literature review, interview findings, and recommendations.

| Aim | AoE | Literature | Key interview themes and findings | Recommendations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The primary objective of this study is to investigate what is being done to uplift and empower lower-level retail employees employed in FMCG retail stores and to provide recommendations to uplift and empower these employees. | AoE 1: define empowerment and upliftment, and the importance thereof | Organisational factors (e.g., resources, information, opportunities, support), management philosophy, and employees' experience thereof (e.g., meaning, self-determination, impact). Beneficial for employees, organisations, and customers. | Opportunities to learn, recognition, grow in the business, leadership and organisational factors. Benefits for employees, organisations, and customers. For instance, job satisfaction, staff retention, customer service, and organisational success. | Facilitate discussions where the organisation, management, and employees share their interpretations, ambitions, needs, and approaches regarding upliftment and empowerment. Provide opportunities for employees to reflect on and express how uplifted and empowered they feel within the work environment. |
| | AoE 2: determine the extent to which lower-level retail employees feel empowered and uplifted in their current employment circumstances | Influenced by recognition, training, information sharing, management, decision-making, etc. Minimal data on how retail employees in South Africa feel. | Varied sense of upliftment and empowerment. Important determinants include management, learning, working relationships, recognition, and career progression. | |
| | AoE 3: explore what FMCG retail stores do to uplift and empower their employees in their current employment circumstances from both employee and management perspectives | Ask employees for inputs and value their inputs, encourage teamwork, provide support, facilitate participative decision-making, adopt an empowering leadership style, motivate employees, instil a sense of ownership, implement skills development and training programmes, foster positive working relationships built on trust, provide mentorship, share business information, and provide career progression pathways. | Varied levels of asking and valuing employees' opinions, information sharing, training programmes, career opportunities, and communication. | Recognise, respect, and value employees, ask employees' input and engage with their suggestions, provide practical and theoretical learning opportunities, have honest discussions about career progression pathways, foster positive work relationships, encourage a sense of ownership, and promote transparency by sharing information about business matters. |
| | AoE 4: uncover the perceptions and recommendations of lower-level retail employees and management of FMCG retail stores of what could be done to uplift and empower employees in their current employment circumstances | | Mainly relate to learning/training and growth opportunities, recognition, information sharing, leadership, asking opinions, recruitment and orientation. | |

**Figure 1: Linking the study's AoEs, literature, interview findings, and recommendations**

**References**

Amundsen, S. and Martinsen, Ø.L. (2014) 'Empowering leadership: construct clarification, conceptualization, and validation of a new scale', *The Leadership Quarterly*, 25(3), pp. 487-511. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.11.009 (Accessed: 23 June 2024).

Baker, W.F. (2020) 'How kindness culture can elevate your business', *IESE Business School Insight*, 155, pp. 62-67. Available at: https://www.iese.edu/media/research/pdfs/ART-3396-E.pdf (Accessed: 18 July 2024).

Bazeley, P. (2013) *Qualitative data analysis: practical strategies*. London: Sage.

BDO South Africa (2024) *Frontline retail workers can make or break the customer experience, and in turn the business*. Available at: https://www.bdo.co.za/en-za/insights/2024/advisory/frontline-retail-workers-can-make-or-break-the-customer-experience,-and-in-turn-the-business (Accessed: 25 June 2024).

Bilyk, L. (2023) 'Empowering your retail workforce: why investing in training and development pays off', *LinkedIn Pulse*, 21 March. Available at: https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/empowering-your-retail-workforce-why-investing-training-linda-bilyk (Accessed: 25 June 2024).

Blanchard, K.H., Carlos, J.P. and Randolph, W.A. (2001) *Empowerment takes more than a minute*. 2nd edn. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Bowen, D.E. and Lawler, E.E. (1992) 'The empowerment of service workers: what, why, how, and when', *Sloan Management Review*, 33(3), pp. 31-39. Available at: https://www.proquest.com/docview/224962868?sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals (Accessed: 24 June 2024).

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 77-101. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa (Accessed: 19 June 2024).

Burton, D. and Bartlett, S. (2005) *Practitioner research for teachers*. London: Paul Chapman.

Cattaneo, L.B. and Chapman, A.R. (2010) 'The process of empowerment: a model for use in research and practice', *American Psychologist*, 65(7), pp. 646-659. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018854 (Accessed: 2 June 2024).

Chaudhuri, A. (2016) 'Understanding "empowerment"', *Journal of Development Policy and Practice*, 1(2), pp. 121-141. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/2455133315612298 (Accessed: 29 June 2024).

Creswell, J.W. (2013) *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches*. 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J.W. (2014) *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. 4th edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dan, X., Xu, S., Liu, J., Hou, R., Liu, Y. and Ma, H. (2018) 'Relationships among structural empowerment, innovative behaviour, self-efficacy, and career success in nursing field in mainland China', *International Journal of Nursing Practice*, 24(5), p. e12674. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/ijn.12674 (Accessed: 29 June 2024).

Dedosa Consulting and Durban University of Technology (2019) *How to design and harness the value of workplace learning in wholesale and retail*. Available at: https://www.wrseta.org.za/downloads/2018-19/How%20to%20Design%20and%20Harness%20the%20Value%20of%20Workplace%20Learning%20in%20Wholesale%20and%20Retail.pdf (Accessed: 26 June 2024).

Dem Tse Trading (2022) *Linking education and work: provider, employer and learner perceptions of preparation for and through work*. Available at: https://www.wrseta.org.za/downloads/WRSETA%20FINAL%20REPORT_Linking%20Education%20to%20World%20of%20Work_18%20March%202022.pdf (Accessed: 26 June 2024).

De Villiers, V., Van Der Colff, F., Stiehler-Mulder, B. and Mafuratidze, N. (2023) *Exploring a motivational approach to curb employee theft in FMCG retailing in South Africa*. Available at: https://content.henleysa.ac.za/exploring-a-motivational-approach-to-curb-employee-theft-in-fmcg-retailing-in-south-africa (Accessed: 25 June 2024).

Echebiri, C., Amundsen, S. and Engen, M. (2020) 'Linking structural empowerment to employee-driven innovation: the mediating role of psychological empowerment', *Administrative Sciences*, 10(3), p. 42. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci10030042 (Accessed: 29 June 2024).

Expert Panel and Forbes Business Council (2021) '15 ways to empower your employees', *Forbes*, 12 October. Available at: https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2021/10/12/15-ways-to-empower-your-employees/ (Accessed: 26 June 2024).

Flick, U. (2014) *The Sage handbook of qualitative data analysis*. London: Sage.

Fourie, A.S. (2009) *Psychological empowerment: a South African perspective*. PhD thesis. Available at: https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/2632/dissertation_fourie_%20a.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (Accessed: 21 June 2024).

Gavin, M. (2019) '7 ways to empower your employees' *Harvard Business School Online Business Insights Blog*, 17 October. Available at: https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/how-to-empower-employees (Accessed: 20 June 2024).

Given, L.M. (2008) *The Sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Guest, G., Namey, E.E. and Mitchell, M.L. (2013) *Collecting qualitative data: a field manual for applied research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Han, S., Harold, C.M., Kim, J.K. and Vogel, R.M. (2023) 'Perceived benefits and costs of empowerment: conceptualization, measure development, and its impact on empowering leadership', *Journal of Management*, 49(4), pp. 1246-1276. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063221081443 (Accessed: 30 June 2024).

Hargreaves, A., Boyle, A. and Harris, A. (2014) *Uplifting leadership: how organizations, teams, and communities raise performance*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Harrop, N. (2023) 'Empowering career growth: a strategic approach to employee retention', *LinkedIn Pulse*, 18 August. Available at: https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/empowering-career-growth-strategic-approach-employee-nichole-harrop- (Accessed: 27 June 2024).

Huq, R. (2016) 'An investigation of what employee empowerment means in theory and in practice', *Journal of Teaching and Education*, 5(2), pp. 551-566. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314033187_AN_INVESTIGATION_OF_WHAT_EMPLOYEE_EMPOWERMENT_MEANS_IN_THEORY_AND_IN_PRACTICE (Accessed: 23 June 2024).

Huq, R. (2017) *The psychology of employee empowerment: concepts, critical themes and a framework for implementation*. London: Routledge.

Huq, R. (2024) 'The art of self-mastery and the need to master the knowledge about employee empowerment', *LinkedIn Pulse*, 13 January. Available at: https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/art-self-mastery-need-master-knowledge-employee-empowerment-huq-btu8e (Accessed: 23 June 2024).

Klenke, K. (2008) *Qualitative research in the study of leadership*. Bingley: Emerald Group.

Lee, A., Willis, S. and Tian. A.W. (2018) 'When empowering employees works, and when it doesn't', *Harvard Business Review*, 2 March. Available at: https://hbr.org/2018/03/when-empowering-employees-works-and-when-it-doesnt (Accessed: 19 June 2024).

Lincoln, N.D., Travers, C., Ackers, P. and Wilkinson, A. (2002) 'The meaning of empowerment: the interdisciplinary etymology of a new management concept', *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 4(3), pp. 271-290. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2370.00087 (Accessed: 29 June 2024).

Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G. (1985) *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Ling, L. and Ling, P. (2020) *Emerging methods and paradigms in scholarship and education research*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global, Information Science Reference.

Llorente-Alonso, M., García-Ael, C. and Topa, G. (2023) 'A meta-analysis of psychological empowerment: antecedents, organizational outcomes, and moderating variables', *Current Psychology*, 43(2), pp. 1759-1784. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-04369-8 (Accessed: 23 June 2024).

Lundin, K., Silén, M., Strömberg, A., Engström, M. and Skytt, B. (2022) 'Staff structural empowerment – observations of first-line managers and interviews with managers and staff', *Journal of Nursing Management*, 30(2), pp. 403-412. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/jonm.13513 (Accessed: 24 June 2024).

McFee, A. (2023) *Employee empowerment: create an engaged and productive workforce*. Available at: https://hospitalityinsights.ehl.edu/employee-empowerment (Accessed: 16 July 2024).

Merriam, S.B. and Tisdell, E.J. (2016) *Qualitative research: a guide to design and implementation*. 4th edn. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Miles, M.B., Huberman, A.M. and Saldaña, J. (2014) *Qualitative data analysis: a methods sourcebook*. 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Milliken, F.J. and Tatge, L. (2016) 'How employee voice helps community engagement: breaking the silence', *IESE Insight*, 29, pp. 31-37. Available at: https://doi.org/10.15581/002.ART-2848 (Accessed: 18 July 2024).

Monje-Amor, A., Xanthopoulou, D., Calvo, N. and Abeal Vázquez, J.P. (2021) 'Structural empowerment, psychological empowerment, and work engagement: a cross-country study', *European Management Journal*, 39(6), pp. 779-789. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2021.01.005 (Accessed: 29 June 2024).

Nowell, L.S., Norris, J.M., White, D.E. and Moules, N.J. (2017) 'Thematic analysis: striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847 (Accessed: 19 June 2024).

O'Donoghue, T.A. (2007) *Planning your qualitative research project: an introduction to interpretivist research in education*. London: Routledge.

O'Reilly, K. (2009) *Key concepts in ethnography*. London: Sage.

Oglethorpe, A. (2023) *Confident career conversations*. Gorleston: Rethink Press.

Oglethorpe, A. (2024) *Seven empowering questions for employee engagement and career development*. Available at: https://www.antoinetteoglethorpe.com/employee-engagement-questions/ (Accessed: 27 June 2024).

Patton, M.Q. (1999) 'Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis', *Health Services Research*, 34(5 Pt 2), pp. 1189-1208. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1089059/ (Accessed: 19 June 2024).

Patton, M.Q. (2002) *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Perkins, D.D. and Zimmerman, M.A. (1995) 'Empowerment theory, research, and application', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5), pp. 569-579. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02506982 (Accessed: 29 June 2024).

Petersen, A., Paynter, N., Gest, D., Stella, J., An, D., Gong, G. and Traylor, E. (2023) *Retain frontline talent through flexibility, opportunity, learning and a compelling employee value proposition*. Available at: https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/consumer-business/retain-frontline-talent-through-flexibility.pdf (Accessed: 22 June 2024).

Porath, C. (2014) 'Half of employees don't feel respected by their bosses', *Harvard Business Review*, 19 November. Available at: https://hbr.org/2014/11/half-of-employees-dont-feel-respected-by-their-bosses?trk=article-ssr-frontend-pulse_little-text-block (Accessed: 16 July 2024).

Redelinghuys, K., Rothmann, S., and Botha, E. (2020) 'Outcomes of leader empowering behaviour in a retail organisation', *South African Journal of Business Management*, 51(1), p. a1837. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v51i1.1837 (Accessed: 26 June 2024).

Ristić, C. (2024) *Building quality relationships and resilient teams: organisations' secret weapon for weathering disruption?* [White paper]. Available at: https://content.henleysa.ac.za/building-quality-relationships-and-resilient-teams-candace-risti%C4%87-white-paper (Accessed: 26 June 2024).

Spreitzer, G.M. (1995) 'Psychological empowerment in the workplace: dimensions, measurement, and validation', *The Academy of Management Journal*, 38(5), pp. 1442-1465. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/256865 (Accessed: 23 June 2024).

Teuteberg, S. (2021) *Retail sector report 2021*. Available at: https://www.lrs.org.za/2021/11/23/retail-sector-report-2021/ (Accessed: 23 July 2024).

Tshabangu, I., Ba', S. and Madondo, S.M. (2021) *Approaches and processes of social science research*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference.

'Uplifting' (2024) *Cambridge Dictionary*. Available at: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/uplifting (Accessed: 24 June 2024).

'Upliftment' (2024) *Cambridge Dictionary*. Available at: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/upliftment (Accessed: 24 June 2024).

Willig, C. and Rogers, W.S. (2017). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research in psychology*. 2nd edn. London: Sage.

Willis, J., Jost, M. and Nilakanta, R. (2007). *Foundations of qualitative research: interpretive and critical approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Yin, R.K. (2011) *Qualitative research from start to finish*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

**Annexures**

*Annexure A: interview guide for employees*


Henley
Business School

**Upliftment and empowerment of lower-level retail employees**

**Questions for employees**

1. Are you enjoying your work environment and why?

2. Do you feel that you belong in the organisation?

3. Do you feel that you're valued by the organisation?

4. Does management value your opinion?

5. Are you consulted or asked about business matters?

6. Do you contribute to the success of the business and how?

7. Are there training programmes which you can attend to improve your skills?

8. Do you feel that there are career opportunities for you in the organisation? Do you believe there are growth opportunities? Will it be easy for you to become a manager?

9. Will you be rewarded for improving your skills and knowledge?

10. Will you be better at what you do if you have more skills and knowledge?

11. Do you understand how the business works and how the success of the business is measured?

12. What comes to mind when you hear the words 'upliftment' and 'empowerment'? How would you define these concepts?

13. What improvement or change would you make to uplift and empower employees like yourself?

14. Do you think it would be good for the organisation to spend time on upliftment and empowerment of employees and why?

    Prompts/ further questions: would it assist in ensuring increased productivity? Would it assist in assuring job satisfaction and staff retention?

15. Do you feel empowered?

    Prompt/ further question: How were you empowered or uplifted to get your current job position or to become better and more equipped in the position?

16. How does your manager contribute or take away from your sense of empowerment and upliftment?

17. Are there any specific areas or skills that you would like to be uplifted and empowered in so that you can grow in the organisation?

**Henley**
Business School

**Upliftment and empowerment of lower-level retail employees**

**Questions for managers**

1. What comes to mind when you hear the words 'upliftment' and 'empowerment'? How would you define these concepts?

2. Is it important to empower and uplift lower-level employees and why

3. What is the role of management in contributing or hindering empowerment?

4. Do you believe we are doing enough to empower and uplift lower-level employees

5. Do you believe empowerment and upliftment of lower-level employees will have a positive impact on the results of the organisation?

6. Why do you think a more empowered workforce will assist in the success of the business?

7. Do you think a more empowered workforce would reduce industrial relations issues such as strikes?

8. Do you think a more empowered workforce would increase productivity?

9. Do you think a more empowered workforce would assist in ensuring sustainability?

10. What are you currently doing to empower and uplift lower-level employees?

11. Are there specific initiatives or programmes in place?

12. Do you believe that all employees should have equal opportunities in the organisation - how can one ensure this?

13. Is there sufficient communication between senior management and lower-level employees?

14. Do senior managers understand the challenges facing lower-level employees?

15. Do you have any plans or strategies in place to assist lower-level employees in growing in the organisation?

16. How is the success of upliftment and empowerment of lower-level employees measured?

17. Do you think a more empowered workforce would have a more positive impact in the communities you operate in?

18. Do you think a more empowered workforce would assist in ensuring job satisfaction and staff retention?

19. What are the key empowerment and upliftment areas or skills required for lower-level employees to grow in the organisation?

**Information Sheet**

Upliftment and empowerment of retail employees

**Invitation paragraph**

You are being invited to take part in a research project because you are regarded an important stakeholder of this research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

**What is the purpose of the project?**

The purpose of this project is to investigate what is being done to uplift and empower retail employees employed in FMCG retail stores and to provide recommendations to uplift and empower these employees.

**Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen because your experience in retail will provide a valuable insight into what is being done to uplift and empower retail employees employed in FMCG retail stores.

**Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form). You can withdraw at any point until the end of the interview. You do not have to give a reason in the case of a withdrawal. You can contact the researcher at any time to ask questions about participation. All the data you provide will be held securely and treated confidentially (see below).

**What do I have to do?**

This interview might last one hour and will involve a natural conversation about what is being done to uplift and empower retail employees employed in FMCG retail stores.

Interviews will be recorded only for use by the research team, and transcription and will be kept in a secure place and deleted once the project is completed. Privacy and confidentiality will be rigorously maintained and neither you nor the organisation will be named in any research outputs, including any information that might reveal your identity or that of the organisation (see below).

**Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?**

With your permission, interviews will be recorded and then transcribed, only as a way to accurately present findings and main themes that emerge from our conversation. Material collected will only be used for the purpose of transcribing, summarising and making sense of the data by the research team. Data collected will be destroyed within three years of the project's end. The audio recordings of your activities made during this research will be used only for analysis, with transcribed direct quotes used for illustration in analysis and results section of the whitepaper and reports. No other use will be made of data without your written permission, and no one outside the research team involved in the project will be allowed access to the original recordings (see below)

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

There are no reasonably foreseeable discomforts, disadvantages, or risks to participation.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

You will play an important part in creating an understanding of what is being done to uplift and empower retail employees employed in FMCG retail stores.

**Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications.

**What type of information will be sought from me and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research project's objectives?**

The data collected is important in achieving the research objectives as it offers the possibility to understand your experienced and understandings in detail. This project has been reviewed by the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. You will be given a copy of the information sheet and a signed consent form to keep.

Thank you for taking the time to read through the information.

**Contact for further information**

Daniel Petzer (Henley Business School Africa) daniep@henleysa.ac.za

Frans van der Colff (Henley Business School Africa) frans@henleysa.ac.za

Vickey de Villiers (Henley Business School Africa) vickeyv@henleysa.ac.za

*Annexure D: consent form*

# Consent Form



1. I have read and had explained to me by

   ……………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………….

   the accompanying Information Sheet relating to the project on:

   …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

2. I have had explained to me the purposes of the project and what will be required of me, and any questions I have had have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to the arrangements described in the Information Sheet in so far as they relate to my participation.

3. I understand that participation is entirely voluntary and that I have the right to withdraw from the project any time, and that this will be without detriment.

4. This project has been reviewed by the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct.

5. I have received a copy of this Consent Form and the accompanying Information Sheet.


Name:

Date of birth:

Signed:

Date: