# Fostering Employee Engagement: A Qualitative Study of Post-Merger Integration in the Agrochemical Industry

by Margaretha M., Prajnanta F., Prabandari S.p., Noermijati, N., Kurniawati, D.t.

# FOSTERING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF POST-MERGER INTEGRATION IN THE AGROCHEMICAL INDUSTRY

## Margaretha M., Prajnanta F., Prabandari S.P., Noermijati, N., Kurniawati, D.T. [*]

**Abstract:** Employee engagement has been a topic of constant interest over the past two decades, particularly in the modern business environment where frequent mergers and acquisitions occur. This study aims to identify the driving factors influencing engagement during PMI, ultimately affecting both employee and company performance. Unfortunately, very few studies examine how PMI affects employee engagement in the context of qualitative studies, particularly in Indonesia's agrochemical sector; therefore, this study is vital. These qualitative studies are drawn from semi-structured, in-depth interviews face-to-face and via Zoom. The target informants consisted of 5 senior managers, 3 middle managers, and 4 staff members who possessed at least 1 merger and acquisition of the target company. The results were analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana methods. The results indicate work-life balance, employee resilience, the role of the leader, and career growth opportunities are the main driving factors in enhancing engagement throughout PMI. From this study, the novelty found in the impact of PMI is that employees are becoming more generalists instead of specialists in managing work, and on top of that, they are more engaged with the organization. Organizational policies may encourage employee engagement by promoting work-life balance, resilience, the role of leader, and career growth, fostering a deeper sense of employee commitment.

**Key words:** career, engagement, leadership, post-merger integration, work-life balance

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## Introduction

In today's business competition, efficiency and innovation are the keywords that help companies survive in the long run (Ortiz-Villajos and Sotoca, 2018). Companies can enter new markets, obtain new technology or skill sets, gain experience and intellectual property, and expand through strategic mergers and acquisitions (Vidyakala and Devipriya, 2021b).

Employee engagement has received much attention from researchers over the past 20 years (Alam et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021). Employee engagement is a crucial management concept, impacting performance and competitiveness, leading leaders and managers in many nations to be more concerned with this concept (Chopra et al., 2023) and become the key elements to increase employee retention (Chopra et al., 2023; Zeeshan et al., 2021). According to the Gallup Engagement Index from 2022, 32% of employees are completely engaged with their employers, 50% merely "show up," and 18% are actively disengaged (Mirvis, 2023). Today's businesses view engaged employees as demonstrating a high level of organizational citizenship behaviour, exceptional creativity, higher performance, higher productivity, profitability, quality, and customer satisfaction, all of which result in higher shareholder returns (Deepalakshmi, 2024). From previous quantitative studies, factors affecting employee engagement are job satisfaction (Kim et al., 2021; Na-Nan et al., 2021), leadership (Thanh and Quang, 2022; Zeeshan et al., 2021), employee resilience (Okojie et al., 2023), career growth opportunity (McCafferty and Hamilton, 2020; Odhiambo, 2020), work-life balance (Kumar, 2022; Sulistiyani et al., 2022).

Recent studies on employee engagement have primarily focused on quantitative studies; however, qualitative studies on employee engagement in the context of PMI are limited (Reddy, 2015). Managing human resources is crucial for successful mergers and acquisitions, as heavy workload during the process can negatively impact employee stress and motivation, while job security concerns persist post-integration (Laihinen, 2022).

The previous study found that the institution experienced higher employee disengagement, resulting in increased stress, turnover, and reduced productivity, despite leadership emphasizing the importance of engagement (Allam, 2021). After a merger, employee alienation can harm employees' ability to perform at work. This alienation can be caused by various factors, including organizational justice, commitment, trust, perceived HR effectiveness, and communication strategy (Al-Hosani et al., 2020).

The research focuses on the agrochemical sector, which is essential to workforce absorption; however, very few human resources studies have been conducted on the PMI agrochemicals company issue. Therefore, this study will close the gaps by examining the driving factors influencing employee engagement in PMI in Indonesia's agrochemicals industry from a qualitative perspective.

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## Literature Review

Scholars studying mergers and acquisitions and organizational change have different approaches to predicting employee responses. Mergers and acquisitions can cause emotional reactions at all organizational levels, including fear of change, worry about potential job losses, and employee frustration (Vidyakala and Devipriya, 2021b). Mergers and acquisitions may reduce the employee's job security, as they feel uncertain about the organization's changes and if the new structure will fulfil their roles, increasing stress and distractions from their jobs (Khan et al., 2020). However, mergers can also provide opportunities for employees to learn new skills, gain diverse experiences, work in different offices worldwide, and advance their careers (Brueller et al., 2018).

*Hypothesis 1: Mergers and acquisitions can cause different responses among employees.*

Employee engagement is one of the main factors that companies must pay attention to ensure sustainability for better post-merger outcomes (Liang et al., 2017). However, research related to employee engagement in the context of PMI is limited due to its complexity, focusing more on financial outcomes and on Western countries, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other regions (Liang et al., 2017). However, not every merger and acquisition will succeed, especially since the post-close period is critical and significantly impacts the merger's ultimate success or failure (McKinsey and Company, 2022). The study of employees working in four hotel chains that have been merged with Marriott International in Egypt shows that mergers and acquisitions have a significant positive effect on employees' engagement, but they negatively affect employees' job security (Khairy, 2019).

*Hypothesis 2: Mergers and acquisitions increase the employee engagement.*

Work-life balance is the extent to which a person prioritizes personal and professional responsibilities and work-related activities in their home (Bernuzzia et al., 2022). The study from Laihinen (2022) found positive emotions can enhance employee identification with the post-acquisition organization and increase motivation and engagement in change. Retaining staff members and improving post-merger results depend on sustaining employee engagement throughout post-merger integration. Organizations can support employees in managing their work-life balance during this PMI by letting values guide actions, over-communicating, empathizing, involving employees in the transition, measuring employee engagement, and providing additional flexibility (Vidyakala and Devipriya, 2021b).

*Hypothesis 3: PMI negatively impacts the employee's work-life balance due to more tasks on top of ordinary jobs.*

Resilience is the capacity to recover from setbacks, uncertainties, failures, conflicts, or adversity, enabling individuals to bounce back, persist, and perform optimally despite significant threats (Susanto et al., 2023). Relational human resource management activities, such as training, development and supportive

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leadership, help build employee resilience and enhance employee well-being, supporting unique and long-term corporate success (Lee et al., 2022). Employee resilience is vital for organizational success, especially during post-merger integration. However, a study discovered an unexpected result - employee resilience seems to have a significant adverse impact on the effectiveness of integration in PMI. This surprising finding indicates that while employee resilience can enhance individual well-being and coping skills, it could impede the successful merging of entities by resisting necessary changes and new procedures. This unforeseen discovery emphasizes the need to manage employee resilience thoughtfully during PMI, maintaining equilibrium between individual well-being and organizational adaptation (Cooke et al., 2021; Zahoor et al., 2022). The three emotions negatively associated with employee resilience were emotional concern, feelings of dissatisfaction, and insecurity. The study by Khan et al. (2020) investigates how employee emotional resilience plays a part in overcoming obstacles and managing uncertainty during PMI. Employee resilience, which has yet to receive much attention in HRM research, is essential for companies looking to effectively manage, particularly during PMI phase (Cooke et al., 2021). However, problems concerning employee resilience have not received enough focus.

*Hypothesis 4: PMI will enhance the resilience of the employee due to the time pressure and get used to having workload practice.*

Leadership is crucial for promoting change management and guiding employees towards organizational goals, especially in the face of market competitiveness (Mansaray, 2019). The role of a leader during PMI process fosters a work-life balance (Al Dilby and Farmanesh, 2023), employee resilience (Ahmed et al., 2023; Li et al., 2022), and career opportunities (Li et al., 2022). This increases employee engagement, ultimately sustaining the company's long-term success and enhancing the overall performance of the organization (Lu et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023).

*Hypothesis 5: The role of leader is very crucial for employees during PMI.*

The term "career growth opportunity" describes the range of opportunities employees have to progress and grow in their careers within a company. Career growth opportunity is one crucial factor determining employee engagement (Karaca-Atik et al., 2023) and positively impacts employee satisfaction, which prolongs employee retention (Permana et al., 2021). Career growth opportunities are crucial to employees during PMI. It contributes to employee retention, satisfaction, motivation, and productivity. It is also cost-effective for the company and helps attract top talent (Brueller et al., 2018; Chopra et al., 2023).

*Hypothesis 6: Career growth opportunity is a crucial factor to employees during PMI.*

**Research Methodology**

This study explores the experiences of experienced employees from the leading post-patent agrochemical company (A), acquired by a giant state-owned Chinese

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company (B) in 2014. In 2017, B continued to expand the business by acquiring the biggest RandD company (C), then formed the group of company (D) in 2020. For data collection, this qualitative study conducted face-to-face semi-structured in-depth interviews (60%) and Zoom (40%) to understand the factors influencing employee engagement during the PMI process. The qualitative approach provided rich insights and valuable contributions to the existing literature. The predetermined questions were prepared before a series of structured, in-depth interviews between early September and November 2023. The purposive sampling was being used to identify the informants. To help the informants feel at ease and encourage them to offer more detail and transparency, a conversational Indonesian language approach was used during the interviews, with a maximum of one hour of discussion for each informant.

The number of selected informants was twelve, a combination of office employees in Jakarta and field staff in the area. The minimum age of the respondent requirement is 25 years, and a minimum of 5 years in the company is required to better understand the PMI process. It was appropriate to use all twelve informants/participants for this study in order to achieve saturation. All of the informants have been experienced in the company for seven to twelve years. To ensure confidentiality, the informants are being named $I_1 - I_{12}$.

**Table 1. Informant position, age and working experience in the company**

| No. | Informant | Position in the AB company | Age of Informant | Working experience in AB company |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | $I_1$ | Accounting Manager | 33 years old | 11 years |
| 2. | $I_2$ | Supply Chain Manager | 44 years old | 12 years |
| 3. | $I_3$ | HR Manager | 39 years old | 12 years |
| 4. | $I_4$ | Development Manager | 41 years old | 12 years |
| 5. | $I_5$ | Sales admin | 37 years old | 11 years |
| 6. | $I_6$ | Customer service | 40 years old | 10 years |
| 7. | $I_7$ | Sr. Sales Executive | 34 years old | 8 years |
| 8. | $I_8$ | Regional Sales Manager | 53 years old | 8 years |
| 9. | $I_9$ | Sr. Sales Executive | 33 years old | 8 years |
| 10. | $I_{10}$ | Finance Manager | 41 years old | 10 years |
| 11. | $I_{11}$ | Regional Sales Manager | 55 years old | 9 years |
| 12. | $I_{12}$ | National Sales Manager | 50 years old | 7 years |

*Data analysis*

Using a qualitative method, the data analysis for this study concentrated on the themes and patterns that showed up in the observations and interviews. Thematic analysis, a technique that includes identifying, coding, and categorizing the data into themes pertinent to the research topic, employee engagement during PMI, was used to analyze the data.

The data obtained through the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. Data collected was analyzed using Miles, Huberman and Saldana's method (2014). The steps to analyze the research using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's method involve a systematic approach to analyzing qualitative data, focusing on the themes and patterns that emerge from the data. The first process, which consists of several steps, is data management, which involves capturing and organizing information like interview notes and Zoom. The next step is data condensing, identifying important ideas, topics, and patterns. Data display strategies like matrices, networks, and concept maps are used to visually represent data, aiding in identifying relationships and patterns. The third step is data analysis, which involves identifying patterns and themes, providing a detailed account of the findings, organizing the data logically, explaining the data, and predicting outcomes. The fourth step is drawing and verifying conclusions based on key findings, identifying implications, and discussing limitations. The fifth step is writing about qualitative research using a clear writing style, visual displays, and quotes from data for depth and context.

Data was organized and classified into themes that, inductively derived from the information, were coded to identify and group into five sections: 1) Employee Responses to Merger and Acquisition in the Context of Indonesia PMI; 2) Employee Engagement during PMI: 3) Work-Life Balance during PMI; 4) Employee Resilience during PMI; 5) The Role of Leader during PMI; 6) Career growth opportunity during PMI.

## Research Results and Discussion

Six findings or sections provide a comprehensive understanding of the employee experience, engagement, resilience, leadership, and career aspects during and after the PMI process. By analysing the findings, organizations can gain insights into effectively managing and supporting employees through the changes and challenges brought about by mergers and acquisitions.

*Employee response to merger and acquisition*

The first section explains employee responses to mergers and acquisitions. More than 50% of them were feeling happy during PMI. The first informant ($I_1$) expressed his happiness because the company would be more respected than the previous one because it is more well-known. Meanwhile, 2 informants, $I_2$ and $I_{10,}$ felt the emergence of stress precisely because of the image of Chinese companies as stated, *"There is a feeling of lack of confidence, due to the image of poor quality of Chinese products. In addition, there will be many redundancies due to company*

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*efficiency"*. The third informant ($I_3$) showed a normal response because the information related to PMI was sufficiently conveyed so that it did not shock employees. $I_7$ showed an optimistic response: *"My feeling was more optimistic because with the acquisition by a large group Chinese company will be more aggressive in investment and easier expanding the market".* All informants agreed that there are positive and negative impacts felt by employees when there is PMI. The positive thing is that the administration system in the company (supply chain, finance, human resources and marketing) becomes more organized and has clearer directions. One of the informants ($I_{11}$) mentioned, *"The transfer of technology part of positive aspect PMI, as well as the company's increased professionalism and advancement in business and human capital development".* However, the negative thing they felt was the high pressure from the additional work that required adjustments, as stated by $I_{10}$: *"Negatively, there is more pressure on work, there was more demanding during the period".*

In summary, it can be concluded that the positive sides of merger and acquisition are such things as a better system from trading to marketing, the company becoming more innovative, more professional, stronger financials, and better talent acquisition. However, the negative sides of PMI are that the process increases the workload, induces competition among employees, and, on the other side, possible layoffs as the company thinks efficiency. These responses are consistent, as Sung et al. (2017) mentioned; explaining people's increasingly favourable or unfavourable work-related attitudes and behaviours during mergers and acquisitions is unsurprising.

PMI always bring some stress, job insecurity, anxiety and confusion with new culture due to the changes. Previous research supported that employees may experience problems such as loss of role identity, inability to fit into a new culture, stress, job insecurity, workload and anxiety due to ambiguity and mistrust between people, managers, and the company (Ye et al., 2023).

***Employee engagement during PMI***

Almost all informants claimed that there was an increase in employee engagement, including a survey relating to employee engagement in the company after PMI, when we questioned if there was a difference in employee engagement levels before and after PMI. In detail, eight informants said that engagement increases during PMI, and only four said it remains the same. Every informant agreed that PMI boosts employee engagement by increasing employee identification with the company. One of the informants ($I_2$) stated that *"engagement at both office and field staff levels remains high, the field staff's perception of engagement is higher. The engagement of employees is primarily driven by factors such as career opportunity, work-life balance, and the leadership role."*

While I9 said, *"We are always informed of the progress before becoming ADAMA until now. Everyone is still engaged positively with the company and endorsed by the same feeling between employee and leader, resiliency spirit, career opportunity and well being"*. As a summary of comments from all informants, the driving

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factors of engagement are employee resilience (7), work-life balance (10), role of leader (8), career opportunity (7), training (3), adaptability (1), togetherness/teamwork (3), and work environment (1). The study results are in line with previous studies. Employee engagement is essential for successful strategy implementation and, ultimately, successful PMI (Al Hosani et al., 2020).

### *Employee resilience during PMI*

Employees often feel alienated throughout the PMI. The question then becomes, "are workers more tough and better equipped to handle the challenges associated with PMI?" The researcher asked all informants about employee resilience, and ten out of twelve informants answered that employee resilience increases during the PMI. The first informant ($I_1$) said he is familiar enough with resilience in all conditions, especially during PMI. A new finding from this discussion is that three informants ($I_2$, $I_3$ and $I_4$) said that the new company's culture educates employees to be more generalists rather than specialists, which requires resilience from each employee. *We are used to doing several jobs (multitasking) that may be done by more than 1 person in other companies*. One of the informants ($I_3$) said: *"During PMI the work demands are getting higher, and this makes employees more and more resilient so that if employees do not have high resilience, they will be bounced by themselves"*. There is a comprehensive comment from $I_8$ as follows: *"Employees who are not acclimated to the pressure and adjustments in their work style, management, and regulations may ultimately quit; however, those that seek out new challenges and opportunities for advancement will make an effort to be trusted as company staff members*. A resilient person can think positively and strive to make sense of the bad things that happen (Eley et al., 2013). Additionally, some research showed that people can enhance their capacity for resilience (Howe et al., 2012). This study aligns with the study of Khan et al. (2020), which highlights the role of employee resilience in overcoming challenges and handling uncertainty.

### *Work-life balance during PMI*

Work-life balance was mentioned as the most important issue following the PMI company employee engagement survey. Surprisingly, ten out of twelve informants (83%) claimed that work-life balance is not a major issue during PMI. One of the informants ($I_4$) said that, *"The company has successfully balanced work and personal life by promoting togetherness through regular activities like traveling and lunch/dinner together. The company also pays attention to employees' families by providing dispensation for family matters."* However, two informants (I6 and I10) mentioned that their personal life with work is not balanced yet. *"This is something that is still sorely lacking at a company. The balance between work pressure and leisure is lacking, at least for the non-Sales department. However, when the Sales Department joins the customer tour, it is very helpful in refreshing or leaving work fatigue"*. It is understandable as they are from the Finance Department, which has a huge workload during the integration. However, all informants mentioned that the company has supported efforts to promote work-life

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balance by providing opportunities for all employees' outings and allowing all employees to attend yearly National Conferences, which are often reserved for sales teams only in other companies. During PMI, employees will get more work on top of their regular tasks; however, this in-depth interview shows that employees have a better work-life balance as they can manage the job pressure with their personal lives. Previous studies also support that employees' work-life balance increases their resilience and engagement (Jamillah et al., 2023).

### *The importance of the role of the leader during PMI*

All of the informants said that the leaders impact employees' level of engagement and resilience. As stated by the second informant ($I_2$): *"It is very clear the leader plays an important role during PMI. Our leader gave clear guidance during and post-merger and integration. So, there was no doubt about employee-related integration processes."* Another similar comment from one informant ($I_4$): *"The role of leader is very important because our leaders always support the subordinates, which clearly will increase our loyalty to the company. Leader figures not only increase employee resilience and engagement but also attract people outside the company to join."* $I_{11}$ added, *"The role of leader is very significant as the leader inspires all staff members, instilling confidence and preparing them to meet obstacles head-on with more resiliency and excellence".*

A leader's role in employee engagement is crucial for an organization's success and productivity. Based on the discussion, all employees see that all information during PMI was well-informed. The leader clearly communicates and directs during PMI so the employee has no hesitation in insecuring the job and develops more resilience and engagement. The previous research supports the impact of the role of leader on resilience (Shek and Wilkinson, 2022) and engagement (Alam et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2022). According to Truyen and Trang (2022), talent retention is also impacted by leadership styles. It is important to recognize strong leadership's impact on employee engagement and productivity throughout PMI.

### *Career growth opportunity*

All interviewees concurred that the company offers career growth opportunities within the country or global exposure. One of the informants ($I_2$) even more stated, *"The company offers local and global career opportunities. The management has prepared the best talents for the succession of all positions."* Informant 7 ($I_7$) added, *"The company is very open in providing opportunities for employees to have a career in Adama both at the local and global levels".* $I_{10}$ mentioned, *"The company is very supportive in terms of career development both locally and globally. This can be seen from the number of employees who move from one country to another within the company".* A study by Vidyakala and Devipriya (2021a) found that working environment, compensation and benefits and career growth and advancement activities are highly satisfied PMI made in their respective organizations. Therefore, leaders equip the talent pool with all the knowledge necessary to benefit from professional prospects. From the study, it is clear that career growth opportunity enhances employee engagement to retain the

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organisation's best talent. This finding supports the previous study that career growth opportunity clearly impacts employee engagement (Houssein et al., 2020; Veriyanti and Nurhayati, 2022).

**Conclusion**

The PMI process led to a more organized administrative system and increased recognition for the company, but it also imposed high-pressure work demands that required adjustments. This aligns with previous research highlighting psychological and soft issues employees face during PMI, such as uncertainty, stress, anxiety, and job-related challenges. The researchers aim to dig into the driving factors that influence employee engagement. This study found employee resilience, work-life balance, the role of the leader, and career growth opportunities are the key factors that affect employee engagement during PMI. Employee resilience increased during PMI, as organizations can develop resilience within individuals through training and exposure to risk. Leaders' actions and behaviours significantly impacted employee engagement, with leaders playing a vital role in setting priorities, instilling confidence, and inspiring employees to navigate the PMI process with commitment and engagement. Organizations can enhance resilience as a capability in people to better equip them for challenging and significant organizational transformations during PMI. Organizations can offer individualized training and different work experiences that can help one create resilience. As PMI enhances resilience, it positively affects employee engagement, as employees reported increased levels of engagement following the PMI due to their stronger identification with the company. Work-life balance emerged as a key issue following PMI, but the company has taken measures to support it through team outings and opportunities for professional growth. Leaders equipping employees with the necessary knowledge contributed to positive employee experiences.

This study adds to the academic and managerial literature on human resource management in various ways. First, the study will present a qualitative study in support of the claim that employee engagement is critical during PMI. The second benefit is that this research will help organisations improve retention rates by encouraging employee engagement through the driving forces, i.e. employee resilience, work-life balance, the role of the leader, and career growth opportunities. Third, the study will foster a stronger sense of commitment among its staff members by fostering employee well-being, providing chances for professional advancement, and investing in the development of exceptional leaders. By understanding and addressing these driving factors, organizations can develop effective strategies to enhance employee engagement and resilience, ultimately contributing to the success of PMI.

The study on employee engagement during PMI in the agrochemical sector in Indonesia may not apply to other markets or nations. Future research should use a more diverse sample in different industries and quantitative surveys to better

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understand the relationship between employee engagement and the driving factors. Investigating potential mediating factors like organizational culture, leadership style, and change management techniques could improve understanding of work dynamics. Longitudinal research could provide insights into how employee engagement changes over time during the PMI, allowing researchers to record dynamic changes and their long-term impact on employee well-being and organizational performance.

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# WSPIERANIE ZAANGAŻOWANIA PRACOWNIKÓW: JAKOŚCIOWE BADANIE INTEGRACJI PO FUZJI W BRANŻY AGROCHEMICZNEJ

**Streszczenie:** Zaangażowanie pracowników było tematem stałego zainteresowania naukowców ostatnich dwóch dekad, szczególnie w nowoczesnym środowisku biznesowym, w którym często dochodzi do fuzji i przejęć. Niniejsze badanie ma na celu zidentyfikowanie czynników wpływających na zaangażowanie podczas PMI, co ostatecznie wpływa zarówno na pracowników, jak i wyniki firmy. Niestety, bardzo niewiele badań pokazuje, w jaki sposób PMI wpływa na zaangażowanie pracowników w kontekście badań jakościowych, szczególnie w indonezyjskim sektorze agrochemicznym; dlatego też niniejsze badanie jest kluczowe. Niniejsze badania jakościowe opierają się na półustrukturyzowanych, pogłębionych wywiadach przeprowadzonych twarzą w twarz i za pośrednictwem platformy Zoom. Finalnymi informatorami byli: 5 starszych menedżerów, 3 średnich menedżerów i 4 pracowników, którzy uczestniczyli co najmniej w 1 fuzji i przejęciu firmy docelowej. Wyniki analizowano przy użyciu metod: Milesa, Hubermana i Saldany. Wyniki wskazują, że równowaga między życiem zawodowym a prywatnym, odporność pracowników, rola lidera i możliwości rozwoju kariery są głównymi czynnikami wpływającymi na zwiększenie zaangażowania w całym PMI. Z tego badania wynika, że nowość w zakresie wpływu PMI polega na tym, że pracownicy stają się bardziej generalistami niż specjalistami w zarządzaniu pracą, a ponadto są bardziej zaangażowani w organizację. Polityka organizacyjna może zachęcać pracowników do zaangażowania poprzez promowanie równowagi między życiem zawodowym a prywatnym, odporności, roli lidera i rozwoju kariery, wzmacniając głębsze poczucie zaangażowania pracowników.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kariera, zaangażowanie, przywództwo, integracja po fuzji, równowaga między życiem zawodowym a prywatnym

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