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Enhancing Employee Engagement: A Qualitative Examination of Post-Merger Integration in the Agrochemical Sector

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Abstract

Staff involvement in work has drawn ongoing attention for more than twenty years, especially in contemporary corporate settings marked by regular mergers and acquisitions. The purpose of this research is to pinpoint the key elements that shape involvement levels during the post-merger integration (PMI) phase, which in turn influence both workforce and organizational outcomes. Regrettably, there is a scarcity of qualitative investigations exploring the effects of PMI on staff involvement, notably within Indonesia's agrochemical industry, making this investigation particularly important. Data for this qualitative analysis were collected through detailed semi-structured interviews conducted both in person and remotely via Zoom. Participants included 5 high-level executives, 3 mid-level supervisors, and 4 regular employees, each with experience in at least one acquisition involving the acquired firm. Findings were processed applying the analytical approach outlined by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana. Key discoveries reveal that equilibrium between professional and personal life, staff adaptability, leadership contributions, and prospects for professional advancement serve as primary motivators for boosting involvement amid PMI. A unique insight from this research regarding PMI effects is that workers tend to develop broader skill sets rather than narrow expertise in task handling, while simultaneously showing greater attachment to the firm. Company guidelines could strengthen staff involvement by emphasizing support for personal-professional equilibrium, adaptability, leadership effectiveness, and advancement possibilities, thereby cultivating stronger loyalty among personnel.

Keywords: Career, Engagement, Leadership, Post-merger integration, Work-life balance

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Introduction

In the current landscape of corporate rivalry, effectiveness and creativity stand out as essential terms for ensuring long-term viability of enterprises [1]. Through planned mergers and acquisitions, organizations can access fresh markets, acquire advanced technologies or competencies, build expertise and proprietary assets, and achieve growth [2].

Staff involvement has attracted considerable scholarly focus over the last two decades [3, 4]. This concept plays a vital role in management practices, affecting productivity and competitive edge, prompting executives and supervisors across various countries to prioritize it [5] and recognize it as a core aspect for retaining talent [5, 6]. As reported in the 2022 Gallup Engagement Index, only 32% of workers feel fully committed to their organizations, 50% simply attend work without deeper involvement, and 18% exhibit active detachment [7]. Modern enterprises regard committed workers as those displaying strong organizational citizenship traits, outstanding innovation, superior output, increased efficiency, profits, service standards, and client contentment, ultimately yielding better returns for investors [8]. Prior quantitative research identifies elements



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impacting staff involvement, including contentment with roles [4, 9], management approaches [6, 10], worker adaptability [11], possibilities for professional advancement [12, 13], and personal-professional equilibrium [14, 15].

Most recent investigations into staff involvement rely heavily on quantitative methods; qualitative explorations of involvement within PMI contexts remain scarce [16]. Effective handling of personnel resources is essential for merger and acquisition success, given that intense demands during integration can heighten worker tension and reduce drive, alongside ongoing worries about employment stability after consolidation [17].

An earlier investigation revealed elevated levels of worker detachment in an organization, leading to greater tension, staff exits, and lowered output, even though management stressed the value of involvement [18]. Following a merger, feelings of detachment among staff can impair their workplace effectiveness. Such detachment may stem from issues like fairness in the organization, dedication, confidence, viewed HR efficiency, and communication approaches [19].

This investigation centers on the agrochemical field, which plays a significant role in employment opportunities; yet, limited research on human resource aspects has addressed PMI challenges in agrochemical firms. Thus, this work addresses existing shortcomings by exploring, through a qualitative lens, the motivators of staff involvement during PMI in Indonesia's agrochemical domain.

Literature review

Researchers examining mergers, acquisitions, and structural shifts employ varied frameworks to anticipate worker reactions. Such processes can trigger affective responses across all hierarchical levels, such as anxiety over transitions, concerns regarding employment loss, and worker dissatisfaction [2]. Mergers and acquisitions often diminish perceived employment stability, as personnel grapple with ambiguity about structural shifts and whether the emerging framework will accommodate their positions, resulting in heightened tension and reduced focus on duties [20]. Conversely, mergers may offer chances for workers to acquire novel abilities, accumulate varied expertise, collaborate in global locations, and progress professionally [21].

Hypothesis 1: Mergers and acquisitions elicit varied reactions from personnel.

Staff involvement represents a critical aspect that organizations need to monitor to promote endurance and improved results after mergers [22]. Nonetheless, inquiries into involvement amid PMI are constrained owing to inherent complexities, with emphasis often placed on monetary results and studies in Western contexts, potentially restricting applicability elsewhere [22]. That said, not all mergers and acquisitions achieve success, particularly as the period following closure proves pivotal in determining overall triumph or shortfall [23]. An examination of personnel in four Egyptian hotel groups integrated with Marriott International indicated that mergers and acquisitions positively influence staff involvement significantly, though they adversely impact perceived employment stability [24].

Hypothesis 2: Mergers and acquisitions elevate levels of staff involvement.

Personal-professional equilibrium refers to the degree an individual balances commitments and tasks between career and home life [25]. Research by Laihinen [17] suggests that uplifting feelings can strengthen worker alignment with the consolidated entity and boost drive and participation in transformations. Preserving personnel retention and enhancing outcomes after mergers hinge on upholding involvement during post-merger integration. Firms can aid staff in navigating personal-professional equilibrium in this phase by aligning actions with core values, maintaining transparent communication, showing understanding, including workers in change processes, tracking involvement metrics, and offering greater scheduling flexibility [2].

Hypothesis 3: PMI adversely affects workers' personal-professional equilibrium because of additional responsibilities alongside routine duties.

Adaptability denotes the ability to rebound from difficulties, ambiguities, setbacks, disputes, or challenges, allowing people to recover, endure, and operate effectively under substantial risks [26]. Practices in relational human resource management, including education, growth opportunities, and encouraging management, contribute to fostering worker adaptability and improving welfare, aiding distinctive and sustained business achievement [27]. Worker adaptability is crucial for firm prosperity, especially in post-merger integration. Yet, one investigation uncovered an unanticipated outcome: adaptability appears to negatively influence integration success during PMI. This counterintuitive result implies that although adaptability supports personal welfare and coping, it might hinder effective entity consolidation by opposing required adjustments and novel protocols. This unexpected observation highlights the importance of carefully handling adaptability in PMI, balancing personal welfare with structural needs [28, 29]. Three feelings linked negatively to adaptability were worry over emotions, discontent, and instability. The work by Khan *et al.* [20] explores the contribution of emotional adaptability among staff in surmounting hurdles and handling ambiguity in PMI. Adaptability among workers, underexplored in HRM scholarship, is indispensable for firms aiming to navigate this stage proficiently [28]. Still, concerns related to worker adaptability lack sufficient examination.

Hypothesis 4: PMI will strengthen worker adaptability owing to deadlines and familiarity with increased demands.

Management plays a pivotal role in driving organizational transformation and directing personnel toward corporate objectives, particularly amid intense market rivalry [30]. During the post-merger integration phase, effective management supports the maintenance of personal-professional equilibrium [31], builds worker adaptability [32, 33], and facilitates avenues for professional advancement [33]. These elements collectively strengthen staff involvement, thereby promoting sustained corporate viability and improving overall firm effectiveness [34, 35].

Hypothesis 5: Management effectiveness is highly essential for personnel throughout the PMI phase.

The concept of "professional advancement possibilities" refers to the various options available to workers for progressing and developing their careers inside an organization. Such possibilities represent a key determinant of staff involvement [36] and exert a favorable influence on worker contentment, which in turn extends tenure within the firm [37]. Opportunities for professional advancement hold significant importance for workers during PMI, contributing to retention, fulfillment, drive, and output levels. These opportunities also prove economically advantageous for the organization while aiding in the recruitment of high-caliber professionals [5, 21].

Hypothesis 6: Professional advancement possibilities constitute a vital element for personnel amid PMI.

Materials and Methods

This investigation examines the perspectives of seasoned workers from a prominent off-patent agrochemical firm (A), which was purchased by a major state-controlled Chinese enterprise (B) in 2014. In 2017, B further grew its operations by purchasing the largest research and development entity (C), subsequently establishing the corporate group (D) in 2020. For gathering information, this qualitative research employed in-person semi-structured detailed interviews (60%) alongside remote sessions via Zoom (40%) to gain deeper understanding of the elements affecting staff involvement throughout the post-merger integration phase. The qualitative methodology yielded in-depth perspectives and meaningful additions to the current body of knowledge. Pre-planned questions were developed prior to conducting a sequence of structured, thorough interviews spanning early September to November 2023. Purposive selection was applied to choose the participants. To create a comfortable environment and prompt participants to share more openly and comprehensively, interviews were carried out in conversational Indonesian, with each session limited to a maximum of one hour.

A total of twelve participants were chosen, comprising a mix of headquarters personnel in Jakarta and operational staff in regional locations. Criteria for participants included a minimum age of 25 years and at least five years of tenure with the firm to ensure sufficient familiarity with the PMI experience. Utilizing all twelve participants proved sufficient to reach data saturation. Each participant had been with the organization for between seven and twelve years. To protect privacy, participants were assigned codes I1 through I12.

Table 1. Participant Roles, Ages, and Tenure in the Organization

No.	Participant Code	Role in the Organization	Age	Years of Experience in the Organization
1	I1	Accounting Manager	33	11
2	I2	Supply Chain Manager	44	12
3	I3	HR Manager	39	12
4	I4	Development Manager	41	12
5	I5	Sales Administrator	37	11
6	I6	Customer Service Representative	40	10
7	I7	Senior Sales Executive	34	8
8	I8	Regional Sales Manager	53	8
9	I9	Senior Sales Executive	33	8
10	I10	Finance Manager	41	10
11	I11	Regional Sales Manager	55	9
12	I12	National Sales Manager	50	7

Data analysis

Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the data analysis in this study emphasized the themes and patterns that emerged from observations and interviews. Thematic analysis was employed, a method that entails identifying, coding, and grouping data into themes related to the core research topic: employee engagement during post-merger integration (PMI).

The interview data were transcribed word-for-word and subjected to thematic analysis techniques. The analysis adhered to the approach outlined by Miles *et al.* [38]. Their framework offers a systematic process for qualitative data analysis, centered on identifying emergent themes and patterns. The initial stage is data management, encompassing the collection and orderly arrangement of materials such as interview notes and Zoom recordings. This is succeeded by data condensation, during which significant concepts, topics, and patterns are distilled and coded. Data display methods—including matrices, networks, and concept maps—are utilized to visually depict the data, thereby facilitating the recognition of connections and trends. The following stage involves data interpretation, which includes detecting patterns and themes, delivering comprehensive descriptions of the results, structuring the information coherently, interpreting the findings, and forecasting possible outcomes.

The subsequent phase focuses on formulating and validating conclusions, emphasizing primary insights, examining implications, and addressing limitations. The final stage involves reporting the qualitative findings in a lucid writing style, incorporating visual elements and participant quotations to provide greater depth and contextual nuance.

Data were systematically arranged and categorized into themes derived inductively from the material, which were then coded and consolidated into six key sections: 1) Employee Responses to Merger and Acquisition in the Context of Indonesian PMI; 2) Employee Engagement during PMI; 3) Work-Life Balance during PMI; 4) Employee Resilience during PMI; 5) The Role of Leaders during PMI; 6) Career Growth Opportunities during PMI.

Results and Discussion

The six thematic sections deliver an in-depth perspective on employees' experiences, levels of engagement, resilience, leadership influences, and career prospects during and following the PMI process. Through these insights, organizations can better understand how to effectively manage and assist employees navigating the disruptions and obstacles inherent in mergers and acquisitions.

Employee responses to merger and acquisition

This section examines employees' reactions to mergers and acquisitions. More than half of the participants reported positive emotions during PMI. For example, the first informant (I1) conveyed joy, explaining that "the company would gain greater respect compared to before, as the acquirer is far more renowned." In contrast, two informants (I2 and I10) experienced stress tied to stereotypes about Chinese firms, with one noting: "I felt a sense of uncertainty stemming from the perception of lower-quality Chinese products. Moreover, there would likely be significant redundancies in the name of efficiency." Informant I3 exhibited a neutral stance, crediting this to sufficient prior communication about the PMI that avoided shocking employees. Meanwhile, I7 displayed optimism: "I felt more positive overall, as being acquired by a major Chinese conglomerate would enable more aggressive investments and smoother market expansion."

All participants recognized both advantageous and disadvantageous aspects of PMI. On the positive side, they pointed to streamlined and clearer administrative processes across supply chain, finance, human resources, and marketing. Informant I11 highlighted: "Technology transfer is a key positive element of PMI, along with heightened professionalism and progress in both business operations and human capital development." Negatively, participants frequently cited intensified workloads and adaptation demands, as expressed by I10: "On the downside, work pressure escalated significantly, with much higher demands during that phase."

In summary, the advantages of mergers and acquisitions encompass superior systems from trading to marketing, increased innovation, greater professionalism, robust financial backing, and enhanced talent attraction. However, the downsides include heavier workloads, heightened internal competition, and potential job cuts aimed at efficiency. These varied reactions align with existing research, as Sung *et al.* [39] noted that evolving positive or negative work-related attitudes and behaviors during mergers and acquisitions is to be expected.

PMI inevitably generates stress, job insecurity, anxiety, and cultural disorientation due to organizational upheaval. Prior studies reinforce this, indicating that employees commonly encounter issues like eroded role identity, challenges integrating into a new culture, stress, job insecurity, excessive workloads, and anxiety fueled by uncertainty and distrust among colleagues, managers, and the organization [40].

Employee engagement during PMI

The vast majority of informants reported elevated employee engagement post-PMI, supported by company surveys comparing engagement levels before and after the process. Specifically, eight informants noted an increase, while four observed no significant change. Universally, participants agreed that PMI strengthened employees' organizational identification. Informant I2 remarked: "Engagement remains strong among both office and field personnel, with field staff perceiving it even more positively. Employee engagement is mainly fueled by elements like career prospects, work-life balance, and leadership influence."

Informant I9 added: "We have been consistently updated on developments from the pre-ADAMA phase to the present. Staff continue to show positive engagement with the company, bolstered by shared sentiments between employees and leaders, a resilient mindset, career prospects, and overall well-being." Synthesizing all responses, the key drivers of engagement were employee resilience (cited by 7 informants), work-life balance (10), leadership role (8), career opportunities (7), training (3), adaptability (1), teamwork and unity (3), and work environment (1).

These outcomes resonate with prior literature, which emphasizes that employee engagement plays a pivotal role in successful strategy execution and, ultimately, effective PMI [19].

Employee Resilience during PMI

Employees frequently experience feelings of alienation during the PMI process. This raises the key question: Are employees becoming more resilient and better prepared to cope with the associated challenges? When queried on this topic, ten out of twelve informants reported that employee resilience rises during PMI. The first informant (I1) indicated familiarity with maintaining resilience across various situations, particularly amid PMI disruptions.

A novel insight emerging from these discussions is that three informants (I2, I3, and I4) observed how the acquiring company's culture encourages employees to develop as generalists rather than specialists, thereby demanding greater resilience. As one explained, employees grow accustomed to multitasking roles that might typically be handled by multiple individuals in other organizations. Informant I3 noted: "PMI brings escalating work demands, which progressively build employee resilience; without strong resilience, individuals may end up leaving on their own accord."

Informant I8 provided a detailed perspective: "Those unaccustomed to the intensified pressure, shifts in work styles, management approaches, and regulations may eventually depart; conversely, individuals who embrace new challenges and growth opportunities will strive to earn trust as valued team members." This aligns with the view that resilient individuals maintain positive thinking and seek meaning in adverse events [41]. Furthermore, research indicates that resilience can be cultivated and strengthened over time [42]. The present findings are consistent with Khan *et al.* [20], who emphasized employee resilience as vital for navigating challenges and managing uncertainty.

Work-Life Balance during PMI

According to the post-PMI employee engagement survey, work-life balance emerged as the top concern. However, contrary to expectations, ten out of twelve informants (83%) stated that it does not pose a significant problem during PMI. Informant I4 highlighted: "The organization effectively supports harmony between professional and personal spheres by fostering camaraderie through frequent group activities, such as travel outings and shared meals. It also demonstrates care for employees' families by offering flexibility for personal or family-related needs."

In contrast, two informants (I6 and I10) reported ongoing imbalances, noting: "This remains a notable shortfall in the company. The equilibrium between job demands and personal downtime is insufficient, particularly for non-Sales roles. That said, customer tours for the Sales team provide valuable opportunities to recharge and alleviate work-related exhaustion." These views came from Finance Department members, who faced substantial workloads during integration. Nonetheless, all participants acknowledged company initiatives to enhance work-life balance, including inclusive employee outings and access to annual National Conferences—events often limited to sales personnel in other firms.

Although PMI typically adds tasks atop regular duties, these in-depth interviews reveal that employees generally achieve improved work-life balance by effectively managing professional pressures alongside personal commitments. This observation is supported by prior research, which links better work-life balance to heightened resilience and engagement [43].

The Role of Leaders during PMI

Every informant affirmed that leaders significantly influence employees' engagement and resilience levels. Informant I2 emphasized: "The importance of leadership during PMI is undeniable. Our leaders provided explicit direction throughout the merger and integration phases, eliminating any uncertainty around employee-related procedures."

A comparable view came from I4: "Leadership plays a critical role, as our leaders consistently back their teams, thereby boosting loyalty to the organization. Effective leaders not only foster resilience and engagement but also make the company appealing to external talent." Informant I11 further elaborated: "Leadership has a profound impact, motivating the entire workforce, building assurance, and equipping staff to confront challenges with greater resilience and superior performance." Overall, strong leadership is essential for organizational success and productivity. Discussions revealed that transparent communication from leaders during PMI alleviated job insecurity, enabling employees to build resilience and deepen engagement. These insights are corroborated by existing studies on leadership's effects on resilience [44] and engagement [3, 45]. Additionally, leadership approaches influence talent retention [46]. Thus, robust leadership during PMI markedly enhances employee engagement and productivity.

Career Growth Opportunities during PMI

All participants agreed that the company provides ample avenues for career advancement, both domestically and internationally. Informant I2 stated: "The organization facilitates career paths at local and global scales, with management actively grooming top talents for succession planning across roles." Informant I7 added: "The company is highly receptive to offering employees chances for progression within Adama, whether locally or worldwide." Informant I10 observed: "There is strong support for career development on both local and international fronts, evidenced by numerous employees relocating between countries within the group."

Research by Vidyakala and Devipriya [47] similarly found high satisfaction with work environments, compensation, benefits, and career advancement initiatives post-PMI in their organizations. Leaders, in turn, invest in developing the talent pipeline to capitalize on these professional opportunities. This study demonstrates that accessible career growth fosters greater

employee engagement and aids in retaining high-performing individuals. These results align with prior work indicating that career advancement opportunities positively affect engagement [48, 49].

Conclusion

The post-merger integration (PMI) process resulted in a more structured administrative framework and elevated company prestige, yet it also brought intensified work pressures necessitating significant adaptations. These outcomes resonate with prior studies that underscore the psychological and interpersonal difficulties employees encounter during PMI, including uncertainty, stress, anxiety, and various job-related obstacles.

This research sought to explore the primary drivers influencing employee engagement. The findings identify employee resilience, work-life balance, leadership roles, and career advancement opportunities as the core elements shaping engagement levels throughout PMI. Notably, employee resilience strengthened during this period, suggesting that organizations can cultivate individual resilience through targeted training and exposure to challenging situations. Leadership behaviors and actions exerted a profound influence on engagement, with leaders proving instrumental in establishing clear priorities, building confidence, and motivating employees to approach the PMI transition with dedication and involvement.

Organizations stand to benefit by treating resilience as a developable skill, better preparing employees for major transformational changes amid PMI. Tailored training programs and varied work experiences can effectively foster this trait. As PMI bolsters resilience, it concurrently enhances employee engagement, evidenced by participants reporting higher engagement post-PMI, driven by deeper organizational identification. Although work-life balance surfaced as a prominent concern in post-PMI surveys, the company implemented supportive initiatives—such as group outings and professional development events—to address it. Furthermore, leaders' efforts to equip staff with essential skills and knowledge contributed to overall positive employee experiences.

This study enriches both academic and practical discourse on human resource management in several respects. Firstly, it provides qualitative evidence reinforcing the importance of employee engagement for successful PMI. Secondly, it offers organizations actionable insights to boost retention by leveraging key drivers—namely resilience, work-life balance, effective leadership, and career prospects—to sustain engagement. Thirdly, it encourages the cultivation of greater employee commitment through prioritized well-being, growth opportunities, and investment in strong leadership.

By proactively addressing these drivers, organizations can formulate robust strategies to elevate engagement and resilience, thereby increasing the likelihood of PMI success.

Given that this research focuses on employee engagement during PMI within Indonesia's agrochemical industry, its findings may not fully generalize to other sectors or countries. Future studies could incorporate broader, cross-industry samples and employ quantitative methods to more precisely examine the linkages between engagement and its drivers. Additional exploration of mediating variables—such as organizational culture, specific leadership approaches, and change management practices—would deepen insights into workplace dynamics. Moreover, longitudinal designs could track evolving engagement patterns over the course of PMI, capturing temporal shifts and their enduring effects on employee well-being and organizational outcomes.

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