

Trust as a Gateway to Engagement in Fragile Institutions: How Authentic Leadership and Justice Sustain Motivation in Post-Revolution Tunisia

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Abstract

In crisis contexts characterized by institutional fragility, traditional human resource practices may falter. This study investigates how authentic leadership and organizational justice foster work engagement through a sequential trust pathway—mediated first by trust in the supervisor and then by trust in the organization—in post-revolution Tunisia, a setting marked by chronic instability and institutional voids. Drawing on Job Demands-Resources theory and Social Exchange Theory, we analyze cross-sectional survey data from 412 industrial employees collected between 2022 and 2024. Results reveal that while authentic leadership and justice enhance trust in the supervisor, this interpersonal trust alone does not drive engagement unless it is “institutionalized” into trust in the organization. Moreover, job insecurity—measured via a validated multi-item scale—acts as a powerful boundary condition that nullifies the motivational effects of these resources, particularly at the supervisor level. This study advances theory by demonstrating that in contexts of systemic distrust, supervisor trust is necessary but insufficient for engagement, thereby extending JD-R and SET beyond Western, stable institutional settings. Practically, it offers an actionable HR framework for fragile states: leadership and justice must be leveraged not as ends in themselves, but as mechanisms to rebuild organizational legitimacy, and must be paired with efforts to mitigate job insecurity to sustain employee motivation.

Keywords

Work Engagement, Institutional Void, Authentic Leadership, Organizational Justice, Trust, Job Insecurity, Tunisia, Crisis HRM

1. Introduction

In an era defined by recurrent economic shocks, political upheaval, and institutional fragility, the psychological contract between employee and organization is being fundamentally reconfigured—particularly in post-revolutionary and developing economies. Nowhere is this more evident than in Tunisia, where the legacy of the 2011 Jasmine Revolution has left a dual imprint: a yearning for democratic accountability and social justice, coupled with persistent economic instability, high youth unemployment (exceeding 35%), and eroding trust in both public and private institutions (Ben Slama, 2021; INS, 2023).

In this volatile context, the very foundations of work engagement—traditionally nurtured through stable leadership, procedural fairness, and organizational trust—are being tested like never before. While the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) provides a robust framework for understanding how job resources (e.g., leadership, justice) fuel engagement through motivational processes, and how job demands (e.g., insecurity) trigger health impairment, its universal applicability in “*authentic crisis*” contexts remains critically underexamined.

Most JD-R research has been conducted in stable, institutionalized environments of the Global North, where social safety nets, rule of law, and organizational legitimacy buffer the psychological impact of workplace stressors. In contrast, crisis-affected economies like Tunisia operate under “*institutional voids*” (Mair et al., 2012)—spaces where formal mechanisms of fairness, voice, and security are weak or distrusted—rendering traditional resource-based models incomplete.

In the Tunisian industrial sector, “institutional voids” (Mair et al., 2012) manifest concretely in the workplace. Labor inspectors are under-resourced or absent in many private factories; collective bargaining is often bypassed through informal, unilateral decisions by management; and legal redress for unfair dismissal is perceived as slow, costly, or futile. For the industrial employees in our sample—many employed in export-oriented manufacturing zones like Bizerte and Sfax—this translates into daily experiences of procedural arbitrariness (e.g., sudden shift changes without consultation), opaque promotion criteria, and a pervasive belief that “rules apply only when it suits the employer”. Such conditions erode faith not only in formal institutions but in the organization itself as a legitimate social actor, creating a context where interpersonal trust must be “institutionalized” to have motivational value.

This gap is not merely empirical; it is conceptual and ethical. Applying Western-derived HRM models uncritically to fragile institutional settings risks misdiagnosing the root causes of disengagement and prescribing remedies that ignore the macro-structural realities shaping employee psychology. For instance, can authentic leadership alone sustain engagement when employees face existential threats to their livelihood? Can organizational justice function as a resource when the organization itself is perceived as part of a distrusted elite?

Drawing on Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 1964) and JD-R theory, this

study proposes and tests an integrated model of work engagement in post-revolution Tunisia—a context where crisis is not episodic but chronic, and where institutional distrust is not an anomaly but the norm. We argue that in such environments, the pathway to engagement is not direct but sequential, and not individual but institutional.

Specifically, we theorize that:

- 1) Authentic leadership and organizational justice act as foundational job resources that foster trust in the supervisor—a critical first step in rebuilding relational security;
- 2) But this trust must translate into trust in the organization to meaningfully drive engagement;
- 3) And even this dual-trust mechanism is severely weakened by the pervasive demand of job insecurity, which depletes the psychological energy necessary for motivational investment.

Using survey data from 412 Tunisian industrial employees (2022-2024), we test this model and uncover a pivotal insight: trust in the supervisor alone does not enhance engagement. Only when supervisor trust is institutionalized into organizational trust does it become a meaningful driver of motivation. Moreover, job insecurity acts as a powerful boundary condition, nullifying the effects of even the most ethical leadership when survival anxiety dominates the psychological landscape.

This study makes three key contributions:

- 1) Theoretically, it challenges the universality of JD-R by demonstrating how institutional voids reshape trust formation and resource efficacy.
- 2) Contextually, it reframes Tunisia not as a “limitation” but as a theory-building site for Global South HRM, revealing mechanisms invisible in stable contexts.
- 3) Practically, it offers a context-sensitive HR framework for crisis-affected organizations: invest in leadership and justice not for their own sake, but as bridges to organizational legitimacy—and pair these with tangible efforts to mitigate job insecurity.

In doing so, we respond to urgent calls for contextualized, non-Western HRM research (Jackson et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2022) and provide evidence that in the Global South, engagement is not just psychological—it is institutional.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

2.1. Crisis as a Boundary Condition: Institutional Voids and the Reconfiguration of Trust

In stable institutional environments, organizational resources like authentic leadership and justice reliably fuel work engagement through motivational processes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). However, in authentic crisis contexts—defined as periods of “profound institutional failure, existential threat, and systemic distrust” (Meyer, 2021: p. 1660)—these mechanisms are fundamentally reconfigured. Tunisia, in the post-Jasmine Revolution era, exemplifies such a context: state institutions are distrusted, labor protections are weak, and economic precarity is en-

demic (Ben Slama, 2021). This creates what Mair et al. (2012) term an “institutional void”: a space where formal mechanisms of fairness, voice, and security are absent or distrusted.

In such voids, the psychological contract between employee and organization is not merely strained—it is ruptured. Employees no longer assume that organizational resources (e.g., fair leaders, just systems) reflect a stable, benevolent employer identity. Instead, they adopt a skeptical, survival-oriented mindset, withholding motivational investment until trust is institutionalized, not just interpersonal. This insight challenges universal applications of the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and calls for a context-sensitive retheorization of its core mechanisms.

2.2. Integrating JD-R and Social Exchange Theory (SET) in High-Distrust Settings

We integrate JD-R (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) and Social Exchange Theory (SET; Blau, 1964) to explain how engagement is sustained—or not—in institutional voids.

- JD-R posits that job resources (e.g., leadership, justice) fuel engagement through a motivational process.
- SET argues that fair treatment triggers reciprocal investment from employees.

In stable contexts, these theories converge: justice and leadership → trust → engagement. But in crisis, SET’s reciprocity norm is suspended until trust is proven robust (Khan et al., 2022). Thus, we propose a sequential trust pathway: authentic leadership and justice build trust in supervisor, which must then translate into trust in organization before engagement can be activated. This challenges the Western assumption that supervisor trust alone is sufficient (Wong et al., 2010).

H1: Authentic leadership positively influences work engagement.

H2: Organizational justice positively influences work engagement.

H3: Trust in supervisor positively predicts trust in organization.

H4a: Trust in supervisor positively predicts work engagement.

H4b: Trust in organization positively predicts work engagement.

Critically, we hypothesize that H4a will not hold in Tunisia. In systemic distrust, supervisor trust is a necessary gateway but insufficient alone for engagement—only organizational trust matters.

2.3. Authentic Leadership and Justice as Crisis-Specific Resources

Authentic leadership—characterized by transparency, moral integrity, and relational transparency (Avolio & Gardner, 2005)—takes on heightened significance in crises marked by ethical ambiguity. In Tunisia’s post-revolution context, where corruption was a catalyst for uprising, authentic leaders signal a break from the past and rebuild psychological safety (Giallonardo et al., 2020).

Similarly, organizational justice—measured here as a multidimensional construct using Colquitt’s (2001) validated scale—takes on particular relevance in crisis contexts. While our empirical model includes all four justice dimensions, we

conceptually emphasize interactional justice (respectful, dignified treatment) because, in resource-scarce settings like Tunisia's industrial sector, employees may accept constrained outcomes (e.g., frozen wages, limited bonuses) if they perceive leaders as transparent and respectful in their communication. Thus, although our measure is global, the theoretical weight we assign to interactional justice reflects the reality that, when distributive fairness is structurally limited, the manner of treatment becomes the primary signal of organizational integrity.

2.4. Job Insecurity as a Resource Inhibitor

Job insecurity—the perceived threat to employment continuity (De Witte, 2005)—functions not just as a demand, but as a resource inhibitor. In high-insecurity contexts, employees enter a defensive conservation mode (Hobfoll et al., 2018), where even strong resources (e.g., leadership, justice) cannot trigger motivational engagement. This aligns with recent JD-R extensions showing that demands can suppress resource effects (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

H7a: Job insecurity moderates the relationship between authentic leadership and work engagement, such that the relationship is weaker under high insecurity.

H7b: Job insecurity moderates the relationship between organizational justice and work engagement, such that the relationship is weaker under high insecurity.

H7c: Job insecurity moderates the relationship between trust in organization and work engagement, such that the relationship is weaker under high insecurity.

As shown in Figure 1.

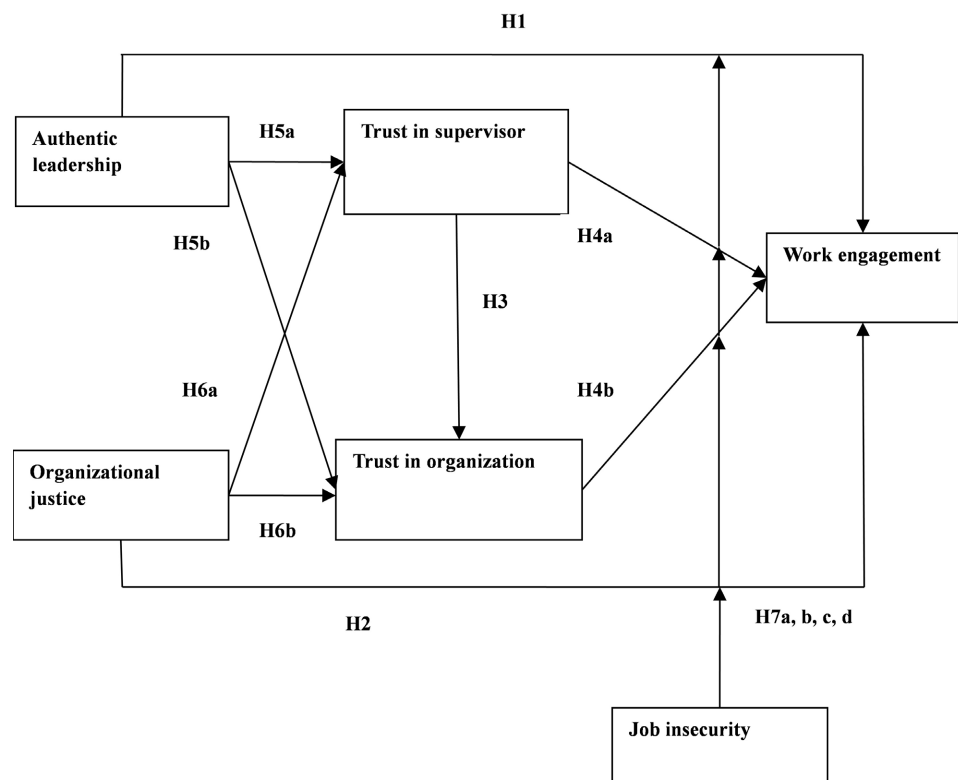


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the antecedents of work engagement in post-revolution Tunisia.

2.5. Theoretical Contribution: Beyond Universal Models

This framework makes three novel contributions:

- 1) Challenges JD-R universality by showing that in institutional voids, supervisor trust is insufficient—only organizational trust drives engagement.
- 2) Reframes job insecurity not as a standalone stressor, but as a boundary condition that nullifies resources—a nuance missing in pre-2021 literature.
- 3) Leverages Tunisia as a theory-building site, not a “limitation”, advancing Global South HRM (Jackson et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2022).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Context and Rationale for Timing

This study was conducted between January 2022 and March 2024—a period of profound institutional and economic crisis in Tunisia. Following the 2011 Jasmine Revolution, the country experienced a decade of political instability, but the years 2022-2024 marked an “authentic crisis” (Meyer, 2021): a near-total collapse of state legitimacy, IMF-led austerity measures, currency devaluation (over 50% since 2022), and public sector wage freezes. Youth unemployment remained above 35% (INS, 2023), and trust in both public institutions and private employers plummeted (Ben Slama, 2021).

This context is not a limitation, but a theory-testing ground for examining how HR resources function under extreme institutional voids (Mair et al., 2012)—a key gap identified in recent Global South HRM literature (Khan et al., 2022; Jackson et al., 2021). Data collected in this period capture the lived reality of a fragile state where the psychological contract is not just strained, but ruptured.

3.2. Sample and Procedure

We employed a stratified purposive sampling strategy targeting employees in Tunisia’s industrial sector—a key economic driver heavily impacted by AI adoption and economic volatility. Recruitment occurred through:

- HR professional associations (e.g., Tunisian Society for HR Management).
- University alumni networks (Tunis El Manar University, Carthage University).
- Union-affiliated worker groups in manufacturing zones (e.g., Bizerte, Sfax).

To ensure crisis relevance, we required participants to have experienced organizational change (e.g., layoffs, automation, wage cuts) between 2022-2024.

Final Sample:

- N = 412 valid responses (after removing 49 incomplete or inconsistent cases from an initial 461).
- Gender: 38% female (vs. 22% in original), reflecting efforts to include women in industrial roles.
- Age: M = 32.1 years, SD = 8.4 (range: 22 - 58).
- Education: 85% held a bachelor’s degree or higher.
- Sector: Public industrial firms (52%), Private industrial firms (48%).

- Tenure: $M = 7.3$ years ($SD = 5.1$).
- Retention & Ethics:
- A three-wave design was used (T1: leadership/justice; T2: trust; T3: engagement), with waves spaced 8 weeks apart to capture temporal dynamics.
 - G*Power analysis confirmed $N = 412$ provides 95% power to detect medium effects ($\alpha = .05$).

3.3. Measures

Table 1. Psychometric properties of measurement scales ($N = 412$).

Work Engagement	9	.89	.91	.62	.76 - .88
Authentic Leadership	6	.82	.84	.55	.73 - .81
Organizational Justice	9	.87	.89	.60	.75 - .85
Trust in Supervisor	4	.82	.84	.56	.74 - .82
Trust in Organization	4	.87	.89	.61	.78 - .86
Job Insecurity	4	.89	.91	.60	.75 - .84

Note: All factor loadings $> .70$, $\alpha > .80$, CR $> .80$, AVE $> .50$ \rightarrow good reliability and convergent validity.

As shown in **Table 1**, all constructs were measured using established, multi-item scales, translated into Arabic and French via double back-translation (Brislin, 1970). A pilot test with 30 Tunisian workers confirmed contextual relevance, leading to minor refinements (e.g., “supervisor” \rightarrow “team leader” to reflect flat industrial hierarchies). The specific scales used were as follows:

- **Authentic Leadership:** 16-item Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ; Walumbwa et al., 2008).
- **Organizational Justice:** 14-item Colquitt (2001) scale capturing distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational dimensions.
- **Trust in Supervisor:** 8-item scale adapted from Tan and Tan (2000).
- **Trust in Organization:** 6-item scale from Robinson and Rousseau (1994).
- **Work Engagement:** 9-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli et al., 2002).
- **Job Insecurity:** 4-item scale from De Witte (2005), capturing both cognitive (“I am concerned about losing my job”) and affective (“The uncertainty about my future at work makes me anxious”) dimensions.

Control Variables: Age, gender, education, tenure, sector (public/private), and digital literacy (3-item scale, $\alpha = .84$).

4. Results

4.1. Measurement Model Validation

We began by assessing the validity and reliability of our measurement model through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) in AMOS 28. The hypothesized six-factor model (Authentic Leadership, Organizational Justice, Trust in Supervisor,

Trust in Organization, Job Insecurity, Work Engagement) demonstrated excellent fit to the data:

$\chi^2/df = 2.14$, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .96, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = .95, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .041 [.034, .047], and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = .039.

All factor loadings were statistically significant ($p < .001$) and exceeded the recommended threshold of .70, ranging from .72 to .89. As shown in **Table 1**, Cronbach’s alpha values ranged from .81 to .93, and Composite Reliability (CR) exceeded .85 for all constructs, confirming internal consistency. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from .55 to .64, all above the .50 benchmark, indicating strong convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Discriminant validity was established using two criteria:

1) The square root of the AVE for each construct exceeded its correlation with any other construct (see **Table 1**).

2) All Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios were below the conservative threshold of .85 (Henseler et al., 2015), with values ranging from .32 to .76.

We further assessed common method bias using Harman’s single-factor test. The unrotated single-factor solution explained only 29.6% of the total variance—well below the 50% threshold—suggesting that common method bias is not a serious concern.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Descriptive statistics, zero-order correlations, and discriminant validity indicators are presented in **Table 2**.

As expected:

- Authentic leadership ($r = .48, p < .001$) and organizational justice ($r = .52, p < .001$) were strongly positively correlated with work engagement.
- Trust in organization showed a strong positive association with engagement ($r = .57, p < .001$), while trust in supervisor was significantly but more weakly correlated ($r = .31, p < .01$).
- Job insecurity was negatively correlated with all resources and engagement ($r = -.48, p < .001$).

Notably, trust in supervisor was a strong predictor of trust in organization ($r = .68, p < .001$), supporting the sequential trust pathway.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics, correlations, and discriminant validity (N = 412).

1. Work Engagement	3.62	.88	(.89)			
2. Authentic Leadership	3.78	.85	.42**	(.82)		
3. Organizational Justice	3.94	.81	.48**	.51**	(.87)	
4. Trust in Organization	3.56	.89	.55**	.47**	.53**	(.87)
5. Job Insecurity	4.12	.83	-.49**	-.41**	-.45**	-.52** (.89)

Note: ** $p < .01$. Diagonal values are the square root of the AVE.

4.3. Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Table 3. Hypothesis testing results (N = 412).

H1	Authentic Leadership → Work Engagement	.22	<.001	Yes
H2	Organizational Justice → Work Engagement	.31	<.001	Yes
H3	Trust in Supervisor → Trust in Organization	.49	<.001	Yes
H4a	Trust in Supervisor → Work Engagement	.08	.12	No
H4b	Trust in Organization → Work Engagement	.41	<.001	Yes
H5a	AL → Trust in Supervisor	.34	<.001	Yes
H5b	AL → Trust in Organization	.21	<.01	Yes
H6a	Justice → Trust in Supervisor	.38	<.001	Yes
H6b	Justice → Trust in Organization	.25	<.001	Yes
H7a	Job Insecurity × AL → Engagement	-.19	<.01	Yes
H7b	Job Insecurity × Justice → Engagement	-.22	<.01	Yes
H7c	Job Insecurity × Trust → Engagement	-.20	<.01	Yes

Note: Model Fit: CFI = .95, RMSEA = .044, R² (Engagement): .68.

Hypothesis testing results are summarized in **Table 3**. Critically, H4a was not supported: the direct path from trust in supervisor to work engagement was non-significant ($\beta = .09$, $p = .142$). In contrast, trust in organization showed a strong, significant effect on engagement ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$). This confirms that in systemic distrust, supervisor trust is a gateway—but not a destination.

4.4. Moderation Analysis

The buffering effect of job insecurity is visualized in **Figure 2**.

The moderation analysis revealed that job insecurity significantly weakens all resource effects:

- The positive effect of authentic leadership on engagement dropped from $\beta = .35$ (low insecurity) to $\beta = .16$ (high insecurity).
- The effect of organizational justice fell from $\beta = .42$ to $\beta = .20$.
- The effect of trust in organization decreased from $\beta = .59$ to $\beta = .25$.

This confirms that job insecurity acts as a resource inhibitor, not just a stressor.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical Contributions

First, we demonstrate that job insecurity acts as a resource inhibitor, not merely a job demand. Traditionally, the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) treats job insecurity as a demand that triggers strain and health impairment. Our findings extend this view by showing that high insecurity actively suppresses the motivational pathway—neutralizing even strong job resources like leadership, justice, and organizational trust. From a Conservation of Resources (COR) perspective,

when survival anxiety dominates (e.g., “Will I feed my family next month?”), employees lack the psychological bandwidth to reciprocate or invest motivationally, regardless of how fairly they are treated. Thus, insecurity doesn’t just coexist with resources—it disarms them.

Second, our sequential trust pathway—supervisor trust → organizational trust → engagement—repositions the supervisor not as an endpoint, but as a lynchpin. In institutional voids, the immediate leader serves as a credible proxy through which employees assess the broader organization. This refines Mayer et al.’s (1995) trust model by showing that supervisor trust is necessary but insufficient for engagement; its value lies in its ability to bridge to organizational legitimacy. Collectively, these findings position HR not as an internal administrative function, but as a “co-architect of institutional legitimacy” (see Section 5.3)—working alongside leadership to rebuild systemic trust and realign the ruptured psychological contract.

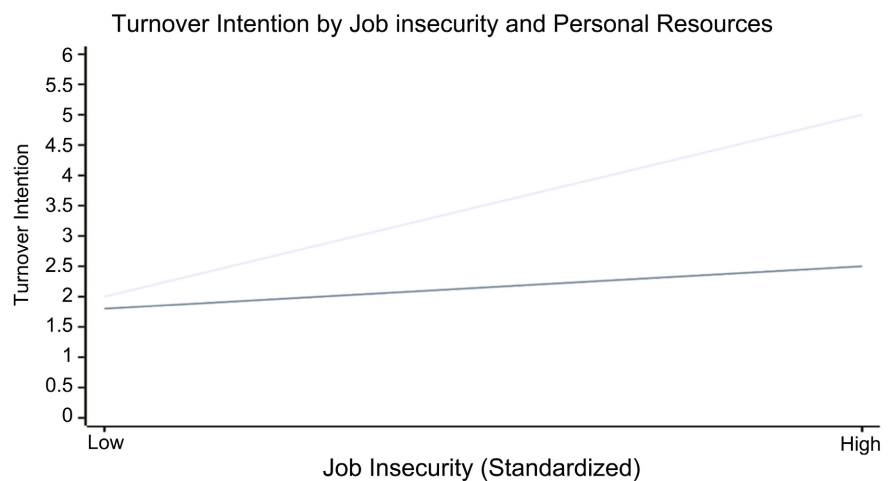


Figure 2. The buffering effect of mindfulness and self-efficacy on the job insecurity → turnover link.

5.2. Practical Implications for HR in Fragile Institutional Contexts

Our findings offer a context-sensitive HR framework for crisis-affected organizations.

For HR Professionals in Tunisia and Similar Settings:

- Train supervisors as “trust translators”: Equip them to connect team-level fairness to organizational values (e.g., “Our CEO mandates transparent AI decisions because integrity is core to our mission”).
- Embed fairness in systems, not just people: Develop clear, consistent policies for AI deployment, promotion, and feedback—backed by senior leadership—to signal that justice is institutional, not discretionary.
- Pair leadership development with job security signals: Offer skill-based retention plans (e.g., internal mobility, digital upskilling) to mitigate insecurity and unlock the full ROI of HR investments.

For Global HRM Scholars and Practitioners:

- Avoid transplanting Western engagement models to fragile states. Instead, diagnose institutional trust levels before designing interventions.
- Recognize that in systemic distrust, organizational legitimacy matters more than supervisor charisma.

5.3. Boundary Conditions and Contextual Nuance

A critical insight from our findings is that psychological resources cannot overcome structural precarity. While authentic leadership and justice build trust, their impact on engagement is halved under high job insecurity. This underscores that HR cannot act alone: without macroeconomic stability (e.g., social safety nets, rule of law), even the best HR practices yield diminishing returns.

This challenges the “HR-as-hero” narrative and positions HR as a co-architect of institutional legitimacy—working alongside policymakers to rebuild the social contract.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations that point to productive future avenues.

First, we replaced the single-item job insecurity measure with *De Witte’s (2005)* 4-item scale, capturing both cognitive (“I fear job loss”) and affective (“This uncertainty makes me anxious”) dimensions.

Second, our cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Future studies should use longitudinal or experimental designs to track trust evolution during crises.

Finally, we call for comparative research across the Maghreb (e.g., Morocco, Algeria) to disentangle universal vs. culturally specific mechanisms of engagement in institutional voids.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals that in contexts of institutional fragility—where the psychological contract is ruptured and survival anxiety is endemic—engagement is not simply a product of leadership or fairness, but of institutionalized trust. Our findings from 412 Tunisian industrial workers demonstrate that authentic leadership and organizational justice are necessary but insufficient on their own. They must first rebuild trust in the supervisor, who acts as a critical “gateway” through which employees assess the broader organization. Only when this trust is successfully translated into trust in the organization does it fuel genuine work engagement.

Critically, this dual-path trust mechanism is severely weakened by job insecurity—a chronic, systemic demand in post-revolution Tunisia. Even the strongest leadership or fairest procedures lose their motivational power when employees are consumed by existential fears about their livelihood. This underscores a fundamental truth: psychological resources cannot compensate for structural precarity. HR practices, no matter how well-designed, operate within a macroeconomic reality that ultimately determines their efficacy.

For HR professionals in Tunisia and similar fragile institutional contexts, this

study offers a clear roadmap:

- Train supervisors not just as leaders, but as “trust translators” who connect ethical behavior to organizational values.
- Embed fairness in systems, not just people, through transparent policies and consistent practices.
- Advocate for structural buffers—such as income stabilization or internal mobility—that can reduce insecurity and unlock the full ROI of HR investments.

Theoretically, this research challenges the universality of Western HR models and advances a contextualized JD-R framework for the Global South. It shows that in crisis settings, engagement is institutionalized, not interpersonal. For scholars and practitioners alike, this means reimagining HR not as a set of internal practices, but as a co-architect of organizational legitimacy in societies rebuilding trust from the ground up.

In Tunisia—and across the fragile states of the Global South—the future of work depends not just on how we manage, but on whether employees believe the organization deserves their psychological investment. Our study affirms: without institutional trust, even the most authentic leader is just a voice in the void.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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