

# Work Engagement, Organizational Culture, and Employee Loyalty in Shaping Performance: A Qualitative Case Study of Sustainability Strategy in a Post-Merger State-Owned Port Operator

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores how work engagement, organizational culture, and employee loyalty shape employee performance, with particular attention to the role of sustainability strategy in a post-merger state-owned port operator. A qualitative embedded case study was conducted at PT Pelindo Multi Terminal, involving five purposively selected managerial and strategic informants representing human capital, terminal operations, corporate strategy, and sustainability functions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and internal document reviews, and were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by coding, constant comparison, analytic memos, and data triangulation. The findings indicate that work engagement contributes to proactive problem-solving, responsiveness, and employee involvement in operational activities, while organizational culture provides behavioral direction and shared values. Employee loyalty supports organizational continuity and commitment, particularly during post-merger transformation. However, these employee-related factors do not consistently translate into performance when sustainability practices are not sufficiently integrated into organizational processes and performance management. Sustainability strategy emerged as a structural and contextual mechanism through which employee engagement, cultural alignment, and loyalty can be translated into more visible and sustainable performance outcomes. The findings further reveal that post-merger cultural heterogeneity, differences in organizational readiness, and uneven internalization of sustainability values can constrain this process. The study contributes to the strategic human resource management literature by highlighting the importance of integrating sustainability strategy with employee-related organizational resources and performance management. Practically, the findings suggest the need for stronger sustainability-oriented performance indicators, participatory mechanisms, and cross-unit cultural integration within post-merger state-owned port organizations.

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## INTRODUCTION

Organizational performance is increasingly shaped not only by investment in infrastructure and technology but also by the quality, engagement, and commitment of human resources as critical drivers of operational excellence (Ruiz et al., 2024; Ali et al., 2024). This issue is particularly important in the port and logistics sector, where intensifying regional competition, increasing international service standards, technological developments, and growing sustainability demands require organizations to maintain a workforce that is technically capable, psychologically engaged, and aligned with organizational objectives. In such a context, employee performance represents an important organizational outcome because employees are responsible for translating organizational strategies, operational requirements, and service standards into day-

to-day work practices. Consequently, managing human resources strategically has become increasingly important for organizations seeking to maintain operational effectiveness while responding to changing business and sustainability requirements (Ali et al., 2024; Ruiz et al., 2024).

Employee performance is not limited to compliance with standard operating procedures but is also influenced by employees' work engagement, internalization of organizational values, and loyalty toward the organization (Zanabazar et al., 2024; Firdaus et al., 2023; Kholik & Yusri, 2025). Work engagement reflects the extent to which employees demonstrate energy, dedication, and involvement in their work, whereas organizational culture provides shared values and behavioral expectations that guide how employees respond to organizational challenges. Employee loyalty, in turn, reflects employees' longer-term commitment to the organization and its goals. Previous studies indicate that employees with higher levels of engagement, stronger understanding and internalization of organizational values, and greater organizational loyalty tend to demonstrate better, more innovative, and more sustained performance (Kholik, 2024; Siregar & Indrawan, 2024; Lombongadil & Djamil, 2023). However, the presence of these employee-related factors does not necessarily ensure that individual capabilities and commitment will be consistently translated into organizational performance. Their contribution may depend on how effectively employee attitudes and behaviors are aligned with organizational systems, strategic priorities, and changing organizational conditions.

The constructs examined in this study have each received considerable attention in the existing literature, although their evidence bases remain relatively fragmented. Work engagement is generally understood as a positive and persistent work-related psychological state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption, and previous studies have linked it to green human resource practices, green leadership, perceived organizational support, and supervisor support (Tran, 2023; Tahir, 2025). Organizational culture, which encompasses shared values, beliefs, assumptions, and norms that influence employee behavior and organizational problem-solving, has also been associated with employee motivation, pro-environmental behavior, and performance across different organizational settings (Ahmad et al., 2023; Kaur Bagga et al., 2023; Fiolita & Safaria, 2024). Similarly, employee loyalty, reflected in employees' long-term commitment, retention intention, and dedication to organizational goals, has been associated with lower turnover and greater performance stability in both public and private sector contexts (Kolibu et al., 2023; Ford et al., 2021). At the same time, sustainability strategy has developed beyond a predominantly environmental orientation toward a broader framework incorporating economic, social, and governance dimensions of organizational practice (Faeni et al., 2025; George et al., 2021; Somwethee et al., 2025). Despite the growing body of research on these constructs, much of the existing evidence examines them separately or focuses on statistical relationships between individual variables. Consequently, there remains limited understanding of how work engagement, organizational culture, employee loyalty, and sustainability strategy interact within a single organization, particularly where organizational transformation and historical complexity shape employees' experiences and behaviors. This gap highlights the need for a context-sensitive investigation that can explain not only whether these factors are associated with performance, but also how their relationships are interpreted and enacted within an organizational setting.

The need to examine these relationships becomes particularly important in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) operating in the port sector, where organizational transformation, operational demands, and sustainability objectives must be pursued simultaneously. The terminal operator examined in this study faces distinctive organizational challenges arising from cultural heterogeneity inherited from corporate mergers, structural changes following organizational restructuring, and differences in employees' readiness to adopt transformation and sustainability agendas. As an organization formed through the integration and restructuring of a national port holding company, the organization is required to align employees' values, behaviors, and commitment with a corporate vision that emphasizes sustainable performance and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles (Satriawan & Pratama, 2025; Jayadi et al., 2025; Kolibu et al., 2023). These conditions create a complex organizational environment in which employees from different organizational backgrounds may interpret organizational values, strategic priorities, and sustainability initiatives differently. Such differences may influence how engagement, culture, and loyalty are translated into everyday work behaviors and, ultimately, employee performance. Therefore, the post-merger context provides an important setting for examining how sustainability strategy can connect employee-related factors with performance while simultaneously addressing organizational integration and sustainability objectives.

Although the relationships among work engagement, organizational culture, employee loyalty, sustainability, and performance have been examined extensively through quantitative and variance-based approaches (Hair et al., 2019; Ringle et al., 2024), these approaches primarily focus on estimating the strength and direction of relationships among predefined constructs. Such evidence is valuable for identifying patterns of association, but it provides more limited insight into the contextual, historical, and organizational meanings that employees and managers attach to sustainability practices, engagement, culture, and loyalty within a post-merger SOE. In particular, statistical relationships alone may not fully explain how employees interpret organizational change, how different cultural backgrounds influence the adoption of sustainability practices, or how sustainability initiatives become connected to everyday performance. Therefore, a qualitative and context-

sensitive inquiry is warranted to complement the existing quantitative evidence and to explore the organizational processes through which sustainability strategy may connect engagement, culture, and loyalty with employee performance (Creswell, 2018).

A qualitative case study is particularly appropriate for examining these processes because it enables the researcher to investigate organizational phenomena within their real-life context and to capture the meanings and experiences of key organizational actors. Much of the existing literature on the engagement–culture–loyalty–performance nexus relies on cross-sectional surveys and variance-based techniques such as Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which are useful for testing hypothesized relationships across larger samples (Hair et al., 2019; Ringle et al., 2024). However, the present study is concerned not only with whether relationships among these constructs exist, but also with how and why they are perceived and enacted within an organization characterized by a complex institutional and post-merger history. An in-depth qualitative examination of a single, information-rich case therefore provides an opportunity to reconstruct the reasoning, experiences, and situated meanings that organizational actors attach to sustainability practices, employee engagement, organizational culture, and loyalty. This approach can also help reveal contextual mechanisms and organizational processes that may remain less visible in a purely statistical model (Creswell, 2018).

The Indonesian port and logistics sector provides an information-rich setting for examining these relationships because state-owned port operators have undergone substantial organizational consolidation while facing increasing expectations for operational efficiency, service quality, and sustainability. These organizations have been required to strengthen national logistics competitiveness and service standards while simultaneously responding to Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) expectations from international shipping partners, regulators, and investors (Faeni et al., 2025; Satriawan & Pratama, 2025). The simultaneous demands for organizational consolidation and sustainability alignment create a complex setting in which employee engagement, organizational culture, and loyalty must be reconciled with organization-wide strategic priorities. In a post-merger environment, this reconciliation is particularly important because employees may bring different organizational histories, values, work practices, and interpretations of organizational change. Examining these processes within a state-owned port operator therefore provides an opportunity to understand how employee-related factors are translated into sustainability-oriented behaviors and performance within a specific organizational and institutional context.

Against this background, this study aims to explore how work engagement, organizational culture, and employee loyalty are perceived by key organizational actors in relation to employee performance, with particular attention to how sustainability strategy connects these employee-related factors with performance in a post-merger state-owned port operator. Rather than assuming a predetermined causal relationship, the study seeks to understand how these relationships are interpreted and enacted within the organizational context. Accordingly, the study addresses two research questions: (1) How do work engagement, organizational culture, and employee loyalty relate to employee performance from the perspective of key organizational informants? and (2) How does sustainability strategy function as a contextual mechanism connecting these factors with employee performance within a post-merger state-owned port operator? Addressing these questions contributes to the literature by providing a context-sensitive understanding of sustainability-oriented human resource management in a state-owned enterprise undergoing organizational transformation. It also offers practical insights into how organizations can align employee engagement, cultural integration, loyalty, and sustainability priorities to support more consistent and sustainable performance outcomes.

## METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design (Creswell, 2018) to obtain an in-depth, contextualized understanding of how work engagement, organizational culture, and employee loyalty relate to employee performance through sustainability strategy as an intervening mechanism. A single-case, embedded design was chosen because the phenomenon under study is bounded within one organization, PT Pelindo Multi Terminal, while multiple organizational units (human resources, operations, and corporate sustainability) served as embedded units of analysis. This approach is consistent with recommendations for studying strategic human resource and sustainability phenomena that are highly context-dependent and cannot be adequately captured through variance-based methods alone (Creswell, 2018).

The overall research process followed four stages. In the preparatory stage, the researchers reviewed organizational documents and refined the interview guide around the study's conceptual model linking work engagement, organizational culture, loyalty, sustainability strategy, and employee performance. In the data collection stage, interviews, observation, and document review were conducted concurrently so that emerging insights from one source could inform follow-up questions in another. In the analysis stage, data were coded, categorized, and synthesized into the analytic themes reported below. In the final stage, preliminary interpretations were validated with informants and integrated into the context-grounded analytical framework presented in this article.

### Research Design and Setting

This study employed a qualitative case study approach using a single-case, embedded design to explore how work engagement, organizational culture, and employee loyalty are perceived in relation to employee performance, with particular attention to the role of sustainability strategy within a post-merger organizational context. The qualitative approach was selected because the study seeks to understand organizational processes, perceptions, experiences, and contextual relationships that may not be sufficiently captured through statistical relationships among predefined variables. In line with the qualitative case study perspective, the design enables the researchers to examine the phenomenon within its real organizational setting and to explore how key organizational actors interpret engagement, culture, loyalty, sustainability practices, and performance (Creswell, 2018).

The case was bounded by the post-merger organizational context of PT Pelindo Multi Terminal, a state-owned port terminal operator formed through the integration and restructuring of a national port holding company. The selection of this organization was purposeful because the case incorporates several conditions that are central to the research problem, including organizational integration, cultural heterogeneity, changes in organizational structure, sustainability priorities, and the need to maintain employee performance. These conditions provide an information-rich context for examining how employee-related factors are connected with sustainability-oriented organizational practices. The study therefore focuses on understanding the processes within this specific case rather than making statistical generalizations to all state-owned enterprises or port operators.

The embedded case study design was used to examine the phenomenon through several organizational domains that are directly related to the research focus. These domains include human capital, terminal operations, sustainability, and corporate strategy. The inclusion of these organizational domains allows the study to consider different perspectives concerning employee engagement, organizational culture, employee loyalty, sustainability implementation, and performance. Comparing perspectives across these domains also provides an opportunity to identify convergent and divergent interpretations of the relationships among the study constructs and to examine how sustainability priorities are understood and implemented across organizational functions.

The research design was structured around two interconnected levels of analysis. At the organizational level, the study examined the post-merger context, organizational integration, sustainability orientation, and related transformation challenges. At the employee-related level, it examined how engagement, cultural alignment, and loyalty were perceived in relation to employee performance. The analysis then considered how these two levels interact within the organizational context, particularly how sustainability strategy may provide a structural and contextual connection between employee-related factors and performance. Accordingly, the study does not seek to statistically test a predetermined mediation model; instead, it aims to identify and interpret the organizational processes and contextual conditions through which such relationships may emerge within the case (Creswell, 2018).

### Participants and Data Sources

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, guided by the principle of information power rather than statistical representativeness (Creswell, 2018). This approach was considered appropriate because the study sought information-rich perspectives from organizational actors with direct knowledge of human resource management, operational activities, sustainability implementation, and organizational transformation within the post-merger setting. Selection therefore emphasized the relevance of each informant's organizational position, responsibilities, and direct involvement in the processes examined in this study.

Five key informants participated in the study: (1) a Senior Manager for Human Capital, (2) a Senior Manager for Terminal Operations, (3) a Senior Manager for Sustainability, (4) the Head of the Human Capital Division, and (5) the Head of the Corporate Strategy/Sustainability Division. These informants represented the human resources, operations, corporate strategy, and sustainability functions of PT Pelindo Multi Terminal. Their positions provided direct visibility into employee engagement, organizational culture, employee loyalty, sustainability implementation, and performance-related practices across different organizational functions. In particular, their responsibilities required them to interpret or translate organizational policies and sustainability priorities into human resource, operational, and strategic practices.

The adequacy of the sample was assessed on the basis of information power rather than a predetermined numerical target. The five informants were considered sufficiently information-rich because, collectively, they covered the principal organizational functions relevant to the research questions and had direct responsibility or decision-making involvement in human resource strategy, operational management, corporate strategy, and sustainability governance. In addition, the interviews generated convergent accounts around the principal themes identified in the analysis. This rationale is consistent with qualitative case study conventions, in which the depth, relevance, and strategic positioning of informants are more important than numerical breadth (Creswell, 2018).

To strengthen the credibility and contextual interpretation of the interview accounts, interview data were complemented by non-participant observations of workplace interactions and routines and by reviews of relevant internal documents. The documentary sources included internal sustainability reports, human resource policies, and internal communication materials. These additional sources were not treated as substitutes for participant perspectives but were used to corroborate, contextualize, and compare information obtained from the interviews.

It should be noted that all five informants occupied managerial or strategic positions. Consequently, the participant group primarily represents a managerial-level perspective on engagement, organizational culture, loyalty, sustainability strategy, and employee performance. The study therefore does not claim that these perspectives fully represent the experiences of frontline or non-managerial employees. This boundary is explicitly acknowledged in interpreting the findings and constitutes an important limitation for future research, particularly research involving frontline operational staff and employees from different hierarchical levels.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data were collected through three complementary sources: semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and internal document reviews. The use of multiple data sources was intended to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships among work engagement, organizational culture, employee loyalty, sustainability strategy, and employee performance within the post-merger organizational context. Combining these sources also enabled the researchers to compare participants' accounts with observed organizational practices and available documentary evidence.

Semi-structured interviews constituted the primary source of empirical data. Interviews were conducted with the five purposively selected managerial and strategic informants described in the Participants section. The interview approach provided sufficient structure to ensure that the major research constructs were addressed while allowing informants to elaborate on their experiences, interpretations, and observations concerning employee engagement, organizational culture, loyalty, sustainability practices, and performance. The interview discussions focused on how employees responded to organizational transformation, how legacy cultural differences were perceived following the merger, how employee commitment and loyalty were manifested in practice, and how sustainability priorities were connected to employee and organizational performance.

The interview process also explored the organizational conditions that may strengthen or constrain the translation of employee-related factors into performance. Particular attention was given to informants' interpretations of employee participation in sustainability initiatives, the integration of sustainability values into organizational practices, and the influence of post-merger cultural differences on employee behavior. This approach allowed the researchers to capture not only participants' views about the existence of particular organizational conditions but also their explanations of how those conditions influenced everyday organizational practices.

To complement the interview data, the researchers conducted non-participant observations of workplace interactions and routines. The observations were used to examine how organizational values, employee engagement, communication, collaboration, and sustainability-related practices were manifested in the organizational setting. Rather than treating observations as independent evidence of causal relationships, the researchers used them to contextualize and compare the accounts provided by informants. This helped identify areas of convergence or difference between reported organizational practices and observable workplace activities.

The third source of data consisted of relevant internal organizational documents, including sustainability reports, human resource policies, and internal communication materials. These documents were reviewed to understand the formal organizational expectations, policies, and strategic priorities related to sustainability, human resource management, and organizational transformation. Documentary evidence was used to provide organizational context and to corroborate information obtained through interviews and observations.

The three sources of evidence were considered complementary rather than interchangeable. Interview data provided participants' interpretations and experiences, observations provided contextual evidence concerning workplace practices and interactions, and documents provided formal organizational perspectives and policy-related information. The integration of these sources supported data triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the subsequent thematic analysis. This multi-source approach was particularly important for examining a post-merger organization in which formal corporate values, managerial interpretations, and everyday employee practices may not always be fully aligned.

### **Data Analysis and Trustworthiness**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis through an iterative process guided by the qualitative data analysis procedures of Miles et al. (2014), particularly data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing

and verification. The analysis incorporated evidence from the semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and internal organizational documents to ensure that the emerging interpretation was grounded in multiple sources of evidence.

The analysis proceeded through several interconnected stages. First, interview transcripts, observation notes, and relevant document excerpts were reviewed and subjected to initial open coding. The initial coding process focused on identifying recurring concepts and meaningful statements related to work engagement, organizational culture, employee loyalty, sustainability strategy, and employee performance. Codes were kept sufficiently close to the empirical material at this stage to avoid imposing predetermined relationships among the constructs.

Second, related codes were compared and grouped into broader analytical categories. Through constant comparison, the researchers examined similarities, differences, and patterns across informants, organizational functions, and data sources. Particular attention was given to convergent and divergent accounts concerning employee engagement, cultural integration, loyalty, sustainability practices, and their perceived relationship with performance. Categories were subsequently refined through repeated examination of the interview, observation, and documentary evidence.

Third, the categories were iteratively developed into higher-order analytical themes. The researchers examined how individual categories were related to one another and whether the emerging themes adequately represented the evidence across the case. This process resulted in five overarching themes: (1) work engagement as a foundation for performance, (2) organizational culture as a behavioral compass, (3) loyalty and long-term commitment, (4) sustainability strategy as an intervening mechanism, and (5) contextual constraints rooted in post-merger heterogeneity.

Throughout the analysis, analytic memos were maintained to document interpretive decisions, emerging relationships among categories, and reflections on alternative explanations. The use of analytic memos provided an audit trail of the development of the findings and supported reflexive examination of how researcher interpretations evolved during the analysis. Conclusions were not treated as final until they had been repeatedly compared with the underlying interview, observation, and documentary evidence, consistent with the iterative logic of qualitative data analysis proposed by Miles et al. (2014).

The final analytical interpretation focused not on statistically testing relationships among the constructs but on explaining the processes and contextual conditions through which engagement, organizational culture, loyalty, and sustainability strategy were perceived to relate to employee performance within the post-merger case. This interpretive orientation is consistent with the qualitative case study design and the study's objective of developing a context-grounded analytical framework.

Several procedures were employed to strengthen the trustworthiness and credibility of the qualitative findings. First, methodological and source triangulation was conducted by comparing evidence obtained from semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and internal organizational documents. Interview accounts were examined alongside observed workplace practices and relevant organizational documentation to identify areas of convergence, complementarity, and potential discrepancy. This process reduced reliance on a single source of evidence and strengthened the contextual grounding of the analytical framework.

Second, member checking was used to assess the accuracy and plausibility of the researchers' preliminary interpretations. Selected informants were provided with preliminary interpretations of the emerging findings and were invited to confirm, clarify, or elaborate on the researchers' understanding. Feedback obtained through this process was considered during the refinement of the analytical themes and helped identify interpretations that required clarification or further contextualization.

Third, peer debriefing was conducted within the research team to challenge emerging interpretations and examine potential researcher bias. The researchers discussed coding decisions, thematic boundaries, alternative interpretations, and the relationship between empirical evidence and the developing analytical framework. Disagreements or uncertainties were revisited against the original interview material, observation notes, and documentary evidence before the final themes were established.

In addition, analytic memos and the iterative comparison of evidence provided an audit trail for the analytical process. These procedures helped ensure that the findings were not based solely on initial researcher interpretations but were repeatedly examined against the available empirical evidence. The combined use of triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and an analytical audit trail strengthened the credibility, dependability, and contextual validity of the findings (Creswell, 2018).

Given the bounded nature of the single-case design and the managerial composition of the participant group, trustworthiness in this study is understood in terms of the credibility and transparency of the interpretations within the case rather than statistical generalizability beyond the study setting. The findings are therefore presented as context-grounded analytical insights that may inform further research rather than as universally generalizable relationships.

## RESULTS

Findings are organized around five analytic themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of interview, observation, and document data: (1) work engagement as a foundation for performance, (2) organizational culture as a behavioral compass, (3) loyalty and long-term commitment, (4) sustainability strategy as an intervening mechanism, and (5) contextual constraints rooted in post-merger heterogeneity. Table 1 summarizes the profile of the key informants and the data sources associated with each. Consistent with the case study logic underlying this research, the themes below integrate informants' accounts with observation and document evidence to build an analytical framework of how engagement, culture, and loyalty are channeled into employee performance through sustainability strategy; this framework is intended to guide, and to be further refined by, subsequent rounds of data collection as fieldwork within the organization continues.

**Table 1.** Profile of key informants and data sources

| No. | Informant role                                       | Organizational unit                            | Data collection method(s)                       |
|-----|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Senior Manager, Human Capital                        | Human Resources Division                       | In-depth interview; document review             |
| 2   | Senior Manager, Terminal Operations                  | Operations Division                            | In-depth interview; non-participant observation |
| 3   | Senior Manager, Sustainability                       | Corporate Strategy and Sustainability Division | In-depth interview; document review             |
| 4   | Head of Human Capital Division                       | Human Capital Division                         | In-depth interview                              |
| 5   | Head of Corporate Strategy / Sustainability Division | Corporate Strategy Division                    | In-depth interview; document review             |

Note. All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and translated into English for reporting purposes. Document review included internal sustainability reports and human resource policy documents.

### Theme 1: Work engagement as a foundation for performance

Across informants, work engagement was consistently described as a precondition for, rather than an automatic outcome of, high performance. Managerial informants associated engaged employees with greater initiative in identifying operational bottlenecks, a willingness to go beyond formally assigned tasks, and sustained attentiveness during high-pressure terminal operations. This pattern resonates with the conceptualization of engagement as a persistent, positive, work-related state of vigor, dedication, and absorption (Tran, 2023; Tahir, 2025). However, informants also noted that engagement levels were uneven across divisions and tenure groups, with newer employees and those in units directly affected by post-merger restructuring reporting comparatively lower engagement. This unevenness suggests that engagement in the studied organization is not a uniform organizational attribute but a condition that varies with employees' proximity to organizational change and perceived job security.

Informants further distinguished between surface-level engagement, expressed as punctuality and procedural compliance, and deeper engagement, expressed as voluntary problem-solving and proactive communication with supervisors about operational risks. The Senior Manager for Terminal Operations observed that during peak vessel-handling periods, the presence or absence of deeper engagement was most visible in how quickly frontline teams escalated emerging bottlenecks rather than waiting for formal reporting cycles. This distinction suggests that measuring engagement solely through general attitudinal indicators may understate its practical significance for day-to-day port performance, and that engagement is best understood as a graded, behaviorally observable construct rather than a binary state.

### Theme 2: Organizational culture as a behavioral compass

Organizational culture emerged as a central reference through which informants interpreted appropriate behavior and expectations, particularly in the aftermath of the merger that created the current organizational structure. The findings indicate that organizational culture was not perceived as a fully unified system but as an evolving configuration in which newly promoted corporate values coexist with cultural orientations inherited from the organizations involved in the merger. Informants described ongoing efforts to reconcile these legacy cultures while simultaneously strengthening shared values related to operational

efficiency, safety, collaboration, and sustainability.

Where cultural integration was perceived as consistent and visibly supported by organizational leaders, informants associated the emerging shared culture with clearer behavioral expectations and a stronger sense of organizational belonging. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that organizational culture can function as a catalyst for employee engagement and performance-oriented behavior (Fiolita & Safaria, 2024; Kaur Bagga et al., 2023; Ahmad et al., 2023). In the present case, however, the influence of culture appeared to depend not only on the formal articulation of corporate values but also on the extent to which those values were communicated consistently and demonstrated through managerial practices.

The findings also reveal differences in the perceived effectiveness of cultural integration across organizational units. Where cultural integration was considered superficial or unevenly communicated, informants identified persistent silos between divisions with different organizational histories. These differences were associated with variations in how employees interpreted organizational priorities and implemented sustainability-related initiatives in their respective work environments. Thus, the post-merger context appears to have produced a layered cultural structure rather than an immediately unified organizational culture.

Evidence from the Human Capital function further illustrates this process. Internal culture-building initiatives introduced after the merger included cross-unit onboarding sessions and joint safety briefings intended to expose employees from previously separate organizational entities to common operational and sustainability values. Informants generally viewed these initiatives positively, but they also indicated that their effects varied according to employees' organizational backgrounds and tenure. Employees who had joined the organization more recently were perceived as more receptive to the emerging corporate culture, whereas longer-tenured employees from legacy organizations were more likely to interpret new cultural messages through the values and identities developed within their previous organizational environments.

These findings suggest that organizational culture in the studied case should be understood as a process of cultural integration rather than as a static organizational attribute. The coexistence of corporate and legacy cultures creates both opportunities and tensions for employee behavior. A shared culture can provide a behavioral compass when organizational values are consistently communicated, modeled by leadership, and connected with employees' everyday work. Conversely, unresolved cultural differences may create organizational silos and inconsistent implementation of strategic priorities, including sustainability initiatives.

Overall, Theme 2 indicates that organizational culture plays an important role in shaping the behavioral context within which employee engagement, loyalty, sustainability participation, and performance are expressed. The findings therefore suggest that cultural integration is not merely an administrative consequence of merger restructuring but an ongoing organizational process that can influence the consistency with which employees translate organizational values and sustainability priorities into workplace behavior.

### **Theme 3: Loyalty and long-term commitment**

Employee loyalty emerged as an important dimension of employees' commitment to the organization, particularly during periods of structural uncertainty and post-merger transformation. Rather than being described primarily as an emotional attachment to the organization, loyalty was more often understood by informants as a demonstrated willingness to remain with the organization, maintain commitment during periods of change, and support its long-term direction. This interpretation is consistent with the conceptualization of employee loyalty as a long-term commitment reflected in retention intentions and dedication to organizational goals (Kolibu et al., 2023; Ford et al., 2021).

Informants associated employee loyalty with greater organizational continuity and the retention of institutional knowledge. This was considered particularly important in technical and safety-critical operational roles, where accumulated experience and familiarity with organizational procedures were perceived as valuable resources for maintaining consistent performance. Senior informants also linked stronger loyalty with lower intentions to leave the organization, suggesting that loyalty may provide an important foundation for organizational stability during periods of structural and strategic change.

However, the findings indicate that loyalty should not be interpreted as an automatic predictor of high employee performance. Several informants noted that employees who remained loyal to the organization could still demonstrate passive compliance when they felt insufficiently involved in the development or implementation of new sustainability initiatives. In such situations, employees continued to fulfill formal responsibilities but were less likely to demonstrate proactive participation or contribute ideas beyond their assigned tasks. This distinction is important because it suggests that organizational retention and commitment alone are insufficient to ensure active performance-oriented behavior.

The findings further reveal a distinction between organizational loyalty and professional loyalty. Some employees were described as having a strong identification with their technical or maritime profession, even when their confidence in organizational leadership was relatively low. Professional identity appeared to provide an additional source of motivation for maintaining technical standards, safety practices, and performance expectations during periods of organizational uncertainty. In this sense, professional loyalty could



partially sustain performance even when organizational identification was less stable.

This distinction has important implications for understanding loyalty within the post-merger context. Organizational loyalty may be influenced by employees' perceptions of organizational stability, leadership, participation, and the direction of organizational transformation, whereas professional loyalty may remain relatively stable because it is rooted in occupational identity and professional standards. The coexistence of these two forms of loyalty helps explain why some employees may continue to demonstrate strong performance-oriented behavior despite uncertainty concerning the organization itself.

The findings also indicate that loyalty becomes more consequential when it is actively connected to opportunities for participation. Informants suggested that employees who were given opportunities to contribute to sustainability initiatives were more likely to translate their commitment into active organizational behavior. Conversely, when sustainability initiatives were perceived as externally imposed or insufficiently participatory, loyalty could manifest primarily as compliance rather than proactive contribution. Thus, the findings suggest that loyalty provides an important foundation for continuity and commitment, but its contribution to performance depends on whether the organizational environment provides meaningful channels through which that commitment can be expressed.

Overall, Theme 3 indicates that employee loyalty functions as a potentially valuable organizational resource during post-merger transformation, particularly through continuity, retention of institutional knowledge, and sustained commitment to organizational or professional standards. At the same time, loyalty alone does not necessarily generate higher performance. Its practical contribution becomes more visible when organizational mechanisms, including participation and sustainability-oriented practices, enable employees to convert commitment into proactive and performance-relevant behavior.

#### **Theme 4: Sustainability strategy as an intervening mechanism**

Sustainability strategy emerged as an important organizational mechanism through which employee engagement, cultural alignment, and loyalty could be translated into more visible and measurable performance outcomes. Across informants, sustainability was described not merely as an environmental or compliance-oriented function but as an organizational approach that integrates economic, social, and governance considerations into operational and human resource practices. This finding is consistent with the broader conceptualization of sustainability strategy as an integration of economic, social, and governance dimensions within organizational and human resource practices (Faeni et al., 2025; Al Mamun et al., 2024; Sampene et al., 2024).

Informants described several sustainability-linked initiatives that provided concrete channels for employees to express and demonstrate their organizational commitment. These included occupational health and safety programs, community engagement activities, and structured sustainability reporting. Such initiatives created opportunities for engaged and loyal employees to translate their attitudes and commitment into observable activities that were recognized within the organization. The findings therefore suggest that sustainability strategy becomes particularly meaningful when it is embedded in operational practices rather than treated as a separate corporate agenda.

A particularly important finding was the conditional nature of this relationship. Informants in strategic sustainability roles emphasized that positive employee attitudes did not consistently translate into documented performance improvements when sustainability structures were weak, fragmented, or inconsistently implemented. In other words, employees could demonstrate engagement, cultural alignment, and loyalty without these resources necessarily producing visible performance outcomes when organizational systems did not provide clear mechanisms for translating them into measurable activities. Sustainability strategy therefore appeared to function as an organizational bridge through which employee-related resources could be connected with formal performance expectations.

Documentary evidence supported this interpretation. Internal sustainability reports identified specific performance indicators associated with occupational health and safety incident rates, community engagement hours, and employee participation in sustainability training. These indicators were also cross-referenced with individual- and unit-level performance evaluations. The linkage between sustainability indicators and performance evaluation provided employees with a more tangible understanding of how their day-to-day activities and participation in sustainability-related programs were connected with recognized organizational outcomes.

The integration of sustainability indicators into performance evaluation also appeared to strengthen the visibility of sustainability within everyday organizational practices. Rather than positioning sustainability as an abstract corporate commitment, the organization provided measurable indicators through which sustainability-related activities could become part of performance discussions and evaluations. This linkage was particularly relevant in the post-merger context because it provided a common organizational framework through which employees from different legacy backgrounds could interpret sustainability expectations and their relationship to performance.

However, the findings do not suggest that sustainability strategy automatically improves employee

performance. Instead, the evidence indicates that its contribution depends on the extent to which sustainability priorities are translated into clear organizational structures, measurable indicators, participatory opportunities, and consistent implementation. Where these supporting mechanisms were present, engagement, cultural alignment, and loyalty were more readily connected with visible performance-related outcomes. Where they were weak or inconsistently applied, positive employee attitudes were less likely to result in documented performance improvements.

Overall, Theme 4 indicates that sustainability strategy serves as an integrative organizational mechanism that can connect employee-related resources with performance by providing structures, indicators, and practices through which employee commitment becomes operationally visible. The finding extends the preceding themes by showing that engagement, culture, and loyalty do not operate in isolation; their contribution to performance is shaped by the organizational systems through which these resources are activated and recognized. In the studied post-merger organization, sustainability strategy therefore represents not simply an organizational objective but a practical framework for aligning employee behavior, operational practices, and performance expectations.

### **Theme 5: Contextual constraints rooted in post-merger heterogeneity**

The fifth theme highlights the enduring influence of the organization's merger history as a contextual condition shaping the relationships identified in the preceding themes. Informants consistently described differences in legacy organizational cultures, uneven readiness across business units to adopt digital and sustainability agendas, and continuing uncertainty regarding long-term role clarity. These conditions were perceived as factors that could weaken the otherwise positive contribution of work engagement, organizational culture, and employee loyalty to performance. Rather than functioning merely as temporary difficulties associated with organizational restructuring, these differences were perceived as persistent contextual conditions requiring deliberate and sustained organizational intervention.

The findings indicate that cultural heterogeneity was particularly relevant because employees entered the post-merger organization with different organizational histories, values, routines, and expectations. Informants suggested that these differences influenced how employees responded to organizational change and how consistently new strategic priorities were interpreted across business units. Where employees experienced greater uncertainty regarding their roles or the direction of organizational transformation, engagement and willingness to participate in broader organizational initiatives could be reduced. Similarly, uneven readiness to adopt digital and sustainability agendas created differences in the pace and consistency with which strategic priorities were implemented across organizational units.

Informants further emphasized that change management and sustainability communication were critical to preventing these contextual differences from becoming structural barriers. Without sustained communication and deliberate efforts to integrate employees from different legacy organizations, the merger-related differences could continue to influence employee attitudes and organizational practices. The findings therefore suggest that cultural integration requires more than formal restructuring; it requires continuous organizational processes through which employees can develop shared understandings of organizational priorities and their roles within the transformed organization.

Observation data provided additional contextual evidence for this theme. During site visits, interactions among employees from different legacy units were generally cordial, but cross-unit interaction appeared functionally limited. Most task-related coordination occurred within individual unit boundaries rather than across them. This pattern was interpreted by several informants as a residual effect of the merger rather than an intentional organizational design feature. The persistence of these informal boundaries suggests that formal organizational integration does not necessarily eliminate legacy-based patterns of interaction and collaboration.

The findings further indicate that closing these cross-unit gaps requires collaboration mechanisms that are embedded within the organization's sustainability agenda rather than implemented as separate or temporary integration activities. By incorporating cross-unit collaboration into sustainability-oriented practices, the organization may provide employees with a common set of objectives and activities through which different legacy identities can be brought into a shared organizational framework. Such mechanisms may also provide opportunities for employees to interact across organizational boundaries while contributing to common performance and sustainability priorities.

Overall, Theme 5 demonstrates that post-merger heterogeneity functions as an important contextual constraint on the translation of engagement, culture, and loyalty into performance. The findings suggest that the relationships identified in the preceding themes are not uniform across the organization but are shaped by employees' exposure to organizational change, the degree of cultural integration, readiness to adopt new strategic agendas, and clarity regarding organizational roles. Consequently, cultural heterogeneity should be understood not simply as a background characteristic of the post-merger organization but as an active contextual condition that can strengthen or weaken the effectiveness of sustainability strategy as a channel for translating employee-related resources into performance.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a context-sensitive explanation of how work engagement, organizational culture, employee loyalty, and sustainability strategy are connected with employee performance within a post-merger state-owned port operator. Rather than treating these constructs as independent predictors of performance, the findings indicate that their contribution depends on how employee-related resources are translated into concrete organizational practices. In particular, sustainability strategy appears to provide an organizational structure through which engagement, cultural alignment, and loyalty can become visible in performance-related activities. This interpretation extends prior quantitative evidence concerning the positive relationships among work engagement, organizational culture, loyalty, and employee performance (Zanabazar et al., 2024; Firdaus et al., 2023; Siregar & Indrawan, 2024).

The findings also demonstrate that these relationships cannot be understood independently of the organizational context. The post-merger setting created differences in organizational culture, employee readiness, role clarity, and patterns of cross-unit collaboration that influenced how employees responded to organizational transformation. This supports previous research emphasizing the relevance of organizational culture and contextual conditions in shaping employee attitudes and performance (Kaur Bagga et al., 2023; Ruiz et al., 2024). The present study extends this perspective by showing how merger-related cultural heterogeneity can persist beyond formal organizational restructuring and influence the extent to which employee engagement, loyalty, and sustainability practices are consistently translated into performance.

An important implication of these findings is that positive employee attitudes should not automatically be interpreted as realized performance outcomes. Engagement, cultural alignment, and loyalty may provide important psychological, normative, and relational resources, but their contribution becomes more visible when organizational systems provide appropriate channels for participation, recognition, and implementation. This finding provides a useful bridge between the employee-focused literature and sustainability-oriented human resource management research, which increasingly emphasizes the integration of sustainability into organizational and human resource practices rather than treating it solely as an environmental or compliance function (Faeni et al., 2025; Ahmad et al., 2023; Al-Sabi et al., 2024).

### Employee Loyalty and Performance

The findings concerning employee loyalty provide a more nuanced interpretation of the conventional relationship between loyalty and performance. Previous studies generally associate employee loyalty with reduced turnover, organizational stability, and sustained performance (Kolibu et al., 2023; Ford et al., 2021). The present findings do not contradict these relationships but indicate that loyalty alone may be insufficient to generate proactive performance. Within the post-merger context, loyalty could be expressed through continued organizational attachment and compliance with formal responsibilities, while more proactive forms of contribution depended on whether employees were given meaningful opportunities to participate in organizational and sustainability initiatives.

This distinction suggests that loyalty should be understood not only as an organizational outcome or a relatively stable employee attribute, but also as a resource whose expression depends on the organizational environment. Employees may remain loyal and continue to perform their formal responsibilities while simultaneously adopting a relatively passive orientation toward organizational change. Such passive compliance becomes particularly relevant when employees perceive sustainability initiatives as externally imposed or when opportunities to contribute to decision-making are limited. The qualitative evidence therefore adds an important contextual dimension to previous studies that primarily emphasize loyalty as a determinant of retention and performance stability (Kolibu et al., 2023; Ford et al., 2021).

The distinction between organizational loyalty and professional loyalty further illustrates this contextual complexity. Employees may maintain a strong identification with their profession, technical responsibilities, or professional standards even when their confidence in organizational leadership or post-merger arrangements is less stable. Professional loyalty can therefore provide continuity in areas such as technical performance and safety practices, while organizational loyalty may depend more strongly on perceptions of organizational stability, participation, leadership, and cultural integration. This finding suggests that different forms of loyalty may coexist and may contribute differently to employee behavior during organizational transformation.

Accordingly, the managerial implication is not simply to increase employee loyalty but to create organizational conditions in which loyalty can be converted into active contribution. Participation in sustainability initiatives, cross-unit collaboration, and opportunities to influence organizational practices may provide such conditions. This interpretation is consistent with the broader finding that employee-related resources become more consequential when they are supported by organizational structures that enable employees to express and apply those resources in everyday work.

### Sequential and Conditional Logic among the Constructs

Taken together, the five themes suggest a tentative sequential and conditional logic through which employee-related factors become connected with performance. Work engagement and organizational culture appear to create the psychological and normative conditions that encourage employees to participate beyond formal role requirements. Employee loyalty contributes to the durability of this willingness to participate, particularly during periods of organizational disruption. Sustainability strategy then provides structures, indicators, and organizational practices through which this engagement and commitment can be translated into recognized performance outcomes. This interpretation extends previous research on engagement, culture, loyalty, and performance by specifying a plausible organizational process through which these relationships may unfold (Zanabazar et al., 2024; Firdaus et al., 2023; Siregar & Indrawan, 2024).

The proposed sequence should not, however, be interpreted as a rigid linear causal model. The qualitative evidence indicates that the relationships are iterative and conditional. Engagement and culture may encourage sustainability participation, while sustainability practices may subsequently reinforce employees' sense of engagement and cultural alignment when their contributions are recognized. Similarly, loyalty may facilitate sustained participation, but the extent to which loyalty is translated into proactive behavior depends on opportunities for inclusion and participation. This interpretation is consistent with research that positions sustainability and green human resource practices as important influences on engagement and pro-environmental behavior (Ahmad et al., 2023; Al-Sabi et al., 2024), while other studies have examined sustainability performance as an outcome of engagement and organizational commitment (Sampene et al., 2024; Badjeena et al., 2024).

The findings therefore suggest that sustainability strategy may occupy different analytical positions depending on the stage of the organizational process being examined. It may function as an organizational response to employee engagement and cultural conditions, as a structure that channels employee participation, and as a source of recognition that reinforces engagement and alignment over time. This interpretation provides a contextual explanation for the mediating role of sustainability strategy identified in variance-based studies (Al Mamun et al., 2024; Sampene et al., 2024), while avoiding the assumption that the qualitative case itself statistically establishes mediation.

Post-merger heterogeneity represents an important condition within this sequence. Where sustainability structures are consistently communicated and embedded across organizational units, engagement, culture, and loyalty are more readily translated into visible performance-related activities. Conversely, when sustainability practices are fragmented or unevenly applied across legacy units, the translation process may weaken. This finding is consistent with the argument that organizational context can shape the strength and consistency of relationships among engagement, culture, loyalty, and performance (Ruiz et al., 2024; Kaur Bagga et al., 2023).

The resulting framework can therefore be understood as a process-oriented rather than strictly linear model: engagement and culture create readiness, loyalty supports continuity, sustainability strategy provides organizational structure and recognition, and performance emerges when these elements are effectively aligned. Future quantitative research could formally examine this proposed sequence using longitudinal or panel designs, while future qualitative research could further investigate how these relationships evolve across different stages of post-merger integration.

### Sustainability Strategy as an Integrative Organizational Mechanism

One of the central contributions of this study is the finding that sustainability strategy operates as more than an environmental or compliance-oriented agenda. In the studied organization, sustainability provided a shared organizational framework through which employee engagement, cultural alignment, and loyalty could be connected with operational and performance expectations. This finding is consistent with the growing literature on sustainability-oriented human resource management, which emphasizes the integration of economic, social, environmental, and governance considerations into organizational and human resource practices (Faeni et al., 2025; Ahmad et al., 2023; Al-Sabi et al., 2024).

The findings extend this literature by highlighting the integrative function of sustainability strategy in a post-merger SOE. Sustainability provided a forward-looking organizational narrative that could partially bridge differences inherited from legacy organizations. By connecting sustainability priorities with occupational health and safety, community engagement, sustainability training, and performance evaluation, the organization provided employees with tangible mechanisms through which organizational values could be translated into everyday practices. This interpretation is consistent with studies showing that sustainability-oriented practices can strengthen the relationship between employee attitudes and organizational outcomes (Tran, 2023; Sheikh et al., 2024).

The integration of sustainability indicators into performance evaluation is particularly important. When sustainability-related activities are connected with recognizable performance indicators, employees can more clearly understand how their participation contributes to organizational objectives. This provides a

practical mechanism for transforming sustainability from an abstract corporate commitment into a set of observable expectations and activities. In this sense, sustainability strategy acts as an organizational bridge between employee attitudes and recognized performance outcomes.

At the same time, the findings indicate that the effectiveness of sustainability strategy depends on its degree of structural embedding and consistency across organizational units. Where sustainability initiatives were perceived as weakly integrated, fragmented, or insufficiently participatory, positive employee attitudes did not necessarily produce corresponding performance outcomes. This finding helps explain why sustainability strategy should not be considered an automatic mechanism through which engagement and loyalty generate performance. Rather, its effectiveness depends on whether organizational structures, communication, participation, and performance systems collectively support the translation process.

The findings also contribute to the ongoing discussion concerning whether sustainability should be conceptualized as an antecedent, moderator, mediator, or outcome of employee-related processes. Previous studies have positioned sustainability or green human resource practices as antecedents of engagement and pro-environmental behavior (Ahmad et al., 2023; Al-Sabi et al., 2024), whereas other studies have treated sustainability performance as a downstream outcome of engagement and organizational commitment (Sampene et al., 2024; Badjeena et al., 2024). The present findings suggest that these perspectives may represent different stages of an iterative organizational process rather than mutually exclusive theoretical positions.

From this perspective, sustainability strategy can simultaneously receive influence from employee attitudes and provide structures through which those attitudes are expressed and reinforced. Engagement and cultural alignment may encourage participation in sustainability initiatives; sustainability strategy then structures, measures, and recognizes that participation; and such recognition may subsequently reinforce engagement and cultural alignment. This iterative interpretation is consistent with the findings of Al Mamun et al. (2024) and Sampene et al. (2024), while adding a qualitative, process-oriented explanation of how sustainability-related mechanisms may operate within a post-merger SOE.

Overall, the findings suggest that sustainability strategy should be embedded within human resource and operational systems rather than managed as a separate organizational function. In post-merger organizations, this integration is particularly important because sustainability can provide a common strategic reference point for employees with different organizational histories. However, such a role requires consistent communication, participatory implementation, measurable indicators, and sensitivity to the cultural identities of legacy organizational units.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study concludes that work engagement, organizational culture, and employee loyalty contribute to employee performance when they are supported by appropriate organizational systems and practices. Sustainability strategy plays an important integrative role by providing a practical framework through which employee engagement, cultural alignment, and loyalty can be translated into performance-related activities.

The findings also show that post-merger cultural differences, uneven readiness across organizational units, limited cross-unit collaboration, and unclear roles can constrain this process. Therefore, improving employee performance requires not only strengthening individual commitment but also creating an organizational environment that supports collaboration, participation, and shared sustainability priorities.

From a practical perspective, organizations should integrate sustainability indicators into employee and unit performance evaluations, provide employees with opportunities to participate in sustainability initiatives, and strengthen cross-unit collaboration. Post-merger culture-building should also recognize existing organizational identities while gradually developing shared values and objectives.

Overall, sustainability strategy should be integrated with human resource management, operational practices, and organizational performance systems. This approach can help organizations transform employee engagement, cultural alignment, and loyalty into more consistent and sustainable performance.

## Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the research used a single-case qualitative design involving five key informants, so the findings are context-specific and cannot be statistically generalized to other organizations. Second, all informants held managerial or strategic positions, meaning that the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of frontline and non-managerial employees.

Third, the study relied partly on participants' retrospective accounts, which may be influenced by recall or social desirability bias. Although interviews were complemented by observations and internal documents, these sources cannot completely eliminate such limitations.

Future research should involve a broader range of employees, including frontline operational and administrative staff, to provide more diverse perspectives. Longitudinal, comparative, or mixed-method studies could also be conducted to examine how engagement, organizational culture, loyalty, and sustainability strategy develop over time and whether the proposed framework applies across other organizations undergoing post-merger transformation.

## DECLARATIONS

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**Author contributions:** KK conceptualized the study, led data collection and analysis, and drafted the manuscript. DS contributed to instrument development, data collection, and manuscript review. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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