

Worthwhile Concept or Old Wine? A Review of Employee Engagement and Related Constructs

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Employee engagement is still in its infancy as a concept. Employee engagement, broadly defined as a state of vigor, dedication, and absorption in one's work role, is purported to be a critical tool for today's business success. However, the concept is subjected to criticism and is said to overlap with other well-known and established constructs such as commitment and job satisfaction to the point where the concept may be redundant. This study was to present a review of engagement and related constructs and to show the limited research that had been done to empirically discriminate the concept from these established constructs. In light of the review presented, this study finds that there is a dearth of literature that have tried to separate engagement and therefore implore future researchers to focus on elucidating the value of engagement as a worthwhile concept or risk continuous criticism as being "old wine in a new bottle".

Keywords: Employee engagement, job satisfaction, commitment, involvement, organizational citizenship behavior

Introduction

The popularity of the term "employee engagement" over the past decade has been shown to be a critical area for organizational competitiveness and success. This does not mean that the construct is not without its criticism. While scholars utilize specific definitions and measures such as the that popularized by Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma and Bakker (2002), the concept remains inconsistently defined and conceptualized (Kular, Gatenby, Rees, Soane, & Truss, 2008; Ludwig & Frazier, 2012; Van Rooy, Whitman, Hart, & Caleo, 2011). Can it be differentiated from other similar attitudinal constructs? In the academic literature, engagement is purported to be similar yet distinct from other positive organizational behavior constructs such as organizational commitment, job involvement, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behavior (Freeney & Tiernan, 2006; Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Shuck, 2010).

There appear to be an overlap with the fields of employee satisfaction, employee commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, and employee involvement (Bhatnagar, 2007). When a new concept has evolved it is often challenging to prove its value. As such, rigorous tests using different methods and under different protocols are necessary. Since the concept of engagement is still in its relative infancy,

trying to unravel its worth should be a principal activity of scholars and researchers in the field. Van Rooy, Whitman, Hart and Caleo (2011) posit that much more needs to be done so as to comprehend antecedents, process mechanisms and outcomes of engagement. Researchers and scholars studying the concept are focusing particularly on antecedent and consequences of engagement. There is a need for this critical integrated literature review in order to present engagement researchers with a better understanding of the concept and its relationship with related constructs. Moreover, the study is needed to show the lack of meaningful studies aimed to empirically discriminate the relationship between engagement and related constructs. One of the onlystudies that have provided an empirical discrimination between the concepts was conducted by Hallberg and Schaufeli in 2006. This review is warranted because scholars need to understand these relationships in order to create meaningful research, while practitioners need to effect appropriate measurements of engagement to impact policies and programs that may create an engaged workforce.

Evolution of Employee Engagement

The concept of engagement was presented initially by Kahn(1990). Kahn (1990) defined personal engagement as "the simultaneous employment and

expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional), and active, full role performance" (Kahn 1990, p.700). Kahn further defined personal disengagement as "the simultaneous withdrawal and defense of person's preferred self in behaviors that promote a lack of connections, physical, cognitive, and emotional absence, and passive, incomplete role performances" (Kahn 1990, p.701). To withdraw preferred dimensions is to remove personal, internal energies from physical, cognitive, and emotional labors. Kahn conceptualized that meaningfulness (sense of return on investments of self in role performance), safety (sense of being able to show and employ self without fear of negative consequences to self image, status, or career), and availability (sense of possessing the physical, emotional, and psychological resources necessary for investing self in role performance) were important to understand the development of engagement.

The most used definition in academic literature (Attridge, 2009; Slåtten & Mehmetoglu, 2011) was provided by Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, and Bakker (2002, p. 74) who defined engagement as "a persistent and positive affective-emotional state of fulfillment in employees characterized by *vigor, dedication, and absorption*". Individuals who are vigorous will have high energy and will persist at their jobs, even when the jobs are difficult. Individuals expressing dedication will be enthused about their job, be very involved, have pride and be inspired even if the job is challenging. Absorbed employees experience a pleasant state to the point where they are happily engrossed in the task, finding it hard to be detached from the task at hand. Due to this immersion in the job, time passes quickly without the worker realizing it.

Many organizations are now measuring employee engagement because of the positive outcome it has purported to bring to organizations. Why is this so? This is due to the fact that engaged employees have been shown to perform better than disengage employees. Bakker and Demerouti (2008) indicate that engaged workers perform better because they experience positive emotions, happiness, joy and enthusiasm, better health, and they may even transfer their engagement to others in the organization. One of the seminal studies on engagement that has help to inspire organizations in creating an engaged workforce was that conducted by Harter, Schmidt and Hayles (2002). This was an extensive study involving over 8000 business unit in more than 36 organizations. This infamous study showed how engaged employees lead to profit. Business units that had more engaged employees experienced fewer

turnovers, higher productivity, and decreased absenteeism and had more satisfied customers.

Many other researchers have continued to provide evidence of the importance of engagement in impacting organizations. Similarly, many organizations are now contracting consulting companies to measure engagement levels and to provide advice on how to create an engaged workforce. Many businesses are reporting success in this regard. For example, Caterpillar, the firm that manufactures construction equipment, developed an employee engagement and commitment initiative that has given the company positive outcomes. The company had \$8.8 million annual savings from decreased turnover, absenteeism and overtime. Output increased by 70 percent in fewer than four months. The company also had a \$2 million increase in revenue and a 34% increase in customer satisfaction (Vance, 2006). Furthermore, JC Penney, department store, reported that stores in the top quartile of employee engagement had approximately 10% higher sales volume as opposed to stores of similar size that fell in the bottom quartile of engagement (Attridge, 2009). These reports would indicate a need for having engaged workers in organizations. Since the concept is considered beneficial in practice, it therefore warrants further and deeper analysis by academics to bridge the gap between academics and practice. One of the first steps therefore, is to have a better understanding of the concept and its relationship to other similar concepts so that it is engagement that is indeed being measured and not something else.

Engagement and Established Related Constructs

Organizational commitment and engagement

Organizational commitment can be considered a component of engagement; it is considered to be a key lever of engagement. Commitment is a worker's feelings and attitudes about the entire organization (Riggio, 2003, p. 225). The level of emotional commitment-the extent to which the employee gets enjoyment, meaning, pride, or inspiration from the organization is important in engagement and eventual performance (Lockwood, 2007). Christian and Slaughter (2007) found that dedication and vigor (dimensions of engagement) were related to organizational commitment. Robinson et al. (2004) indicate that engagement is a step above commitment. Additionally, Saks (2006) attempted to show the difference by purporting that organizational commitment differs from engagement in that it deals with a person's attitude and level of attachment with the organization. Engagement is not merely an

attitude, but the attentiveness and absorption of a worker when performing his/her job task. Furthermore, organizational commitment deals with a worker's loyalty to the company where he is employed, indicating a focus on the organization; engagement focuses on the work itself (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

One of the only studies to differentiate empirically the engagement construct from job involvement and organizational commitment was conducted by Hallberg and Schaufeliin (2006). In their empirical article 'Same Same but Different?' the authors tested whether work engagement, organizational commitment, and job involvement could be separated. They found that the concepts were closely related but only shared variances between 12 and 21 % indicating a relationship though not to the extent that any of the constructs are redundant. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) found that the three-dimensional model of work engagement, commitment, and job involvement was a significantly better fit than the one-dimensional model of general work attachment. Hallberg and Schaufeli (2006) indicated that the one-dimensional model failed in both absolute and comparative fit measures to reach the required cut off value. Additionally, they found that work engagement was related significantly to all health complaints, a differentiating factor from the other constructs (Freeney & Tiernan, 2006; Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006). Only engagement was related to all the health outcomes: symptoms of depression, somatic complaints, and sleep disturbances. Engagement was also a better negative predictor on health outcomes than job involvement or organizational commitment.

Job involvement and engagement

Job involvement is viewed as a facet of engagement but not equivalent to it (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Job involvement was defined by Cooper-Hakim and Viswesvaran (2005) as "the degree to which an employee psychologically related to his or her job and the work performed therein" (p. 244). Kanungo's (1979) definition of job involvement as a cognitive, psychological identification with work was described as the clearest and most exact definition of the construct (Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006). In their study to discriminate between job involvement and work engagement, no correlation was found between job involvement and health complaints, one of the main distinguishing outcomes of lack of engagement (Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006). May, Gilson, and Harter (2004) posited that job involvement is the result of a cognitive judgment about the ability of the job to satisfy needs, and is tied to one's self-image. Engagement concerns how individuals employ

themselves in the performance of their jobs. Furthermore, engagement involves not only the use of active emotions but behaviors and cognition. May et al. also suggested that engagement may be an antecedent to job involvement; persons who are deeply engaged in their roles come to identify with their jobs. Maslach et al. (2001) posited that engagement is characterized by energy, involvement, and efficacy but different from job involvement in that it more broader taps employees' energy and efficacy.

Job satisfaction and engagement

Job satisfaction refers to an overall assessment that an employee makes about the job. Riggio and Porter(2003) described job satisfaction as "the feeling and attitude one has about one's job". Pitt-Catsouphes and Matz-Costa (2008) indicated in their study that engagement is above and beyond simply being satisfied with the employment or the basic loyalty to the employer. Engagement is about employees' passion and commitment as well as the willingness to invest oneself and extend discretionary effort to aid the organization to be successful. Macey and Schneider (2008) contended that "though there may be room for satisfaction within the engagement construct, engagement is about activation, whereas satisfaction shows satiation". While job satisfaction may assess the conditions that cause engagement; job satisfaction does not directly tap the concept itself. MacLeod and Clarke (2009) advanced that employee satisfaction and engagement differ in their predictive power over outcomes. Assessing job satisfaction does not explain how employees behave. However, measuring engagement helps analyze behavior. Macey and Schneider (2008) further indicated that job satisfaction assesses the degree of employee satisfaction with the employment arrangement or basic loyalty to the company. This is, in contrast, to how employees feel (i.e., happy, sad, energetic, excited) as experienced within one's work role (Simpson, 2009). Employee satisfaction and employee engagement also were shown to have different organizational antecedents in a study by Forum for People Management and Measurement (n.d). One striking debate regarding job satisfaction and engagement is which actually comes first. Does employee job satisfaction lead to engagement? Or is it that when engaged, employees become satisfied with their job? Van Rooy, Whitman, Hart and Caleo(2011) indicate that most managers believe that a satisfied employee is likely to be engaged and the engaged worker satisfied.

Organizational citizenship behavior and engagement

Organizational citizenship behavior is extra role work behavior that exceeds formally required work expectations (Organ, 1988). Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) is considered in three broad contexts: support for others, organizational support, and conscientiousness (Borman, 2004; Koys, 2001). Behaviors that indicate conscientiousness refer to doing ‘something extra’ which, according to Macey and Schneider (2008) is consistent with a common conceptualization of engagement (e.g., “going the extra mile”). The authors indicated that it present a challenge conceptually, to consider OCB as engagement because “doing something extra” required an understanding of whether employee engagement refers solely to going “above and beyond”. Also the authors proposed that engagement includes actions that go beyond what typically is usual, ordinary, typical, and/or ordinarily expected. Engagement is inclusive of behaviors characterized as OCB; however, engagement consists of other facets (Macey & Schneider, 2008).

In an attempt to distinguish organizational citizenship behavior from engagement, Robinson et al. (2004) indicated that OCB is not perfectly matched with employee engagement. OCB does not reflect two parts of engagement- the two way nature and the extent to which engaged employees displays business awareness (Saks, 2006). What distinguishes the two concepts is that employee engagement is concerned with the employee’s main responsibilities at work while OCB deals primarily with extra-role behavior outside one’s main area of responsibility (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). While it seems that some overlap exists, engagement distinction is that, it has a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components linked with employees’ role performance (Saks, 2006).

Motivation

In the extant literature, motivation is not considered one of the *main* constructs with which employee engagement overlaps. However, job resources play a motivational role that causes employees to be engaged at work. Therefore, it is worthwhile to consider the importance of motivation and motivational theories in relation to the construct of engagement. People are motivated by a large variety of needs which may vary in importance over time or in different situations (Lundberg, Gudmundson, & Andersson, 2009). Riggio and Porter (2003) defined motivation “as the force that energizes, directs, and sustain behavior”. To begin an analysis of this relationship, understanding basic theories of motivation and their significance regarding employee engagement is noteworthy. These theories have the

possibility to impact an employee’s job performance by comprehension of his/her motives, such as need. Creating staff morale and increasing workers’ motivation at work can be accomplished if organizations provide work environments or job conditions that meet the employee’s needs (Siu, Tsang, & Wong, 1997).

Work engagement is related positively to job characteristics referred to as resources, motivators, or energizers. These include social support from co-workers and one’s supervisor, performance feedback, coaching, job autonomy, task variety, and training facilities (Demerouti, Bakker, De Jonge, Janssen, & Schaufeli, 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003). These characteristics are linked to various motivational factors discussed in basic theories of motivation. For example, supervisor and co-worker support are hygiene factors of Herzberg’s two-factor theory. The link is evident for the importance of motivational factors in understanding how employees engage in their jobs. Various studies have found positive relationships between job resources and engagement (Koyuncu, Burke, & Fiksenbaum, 2006; Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). For example, a positive relationship was found between social support, supervisory coaching, and feedback on work engagement among different samples of workers (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Furthermore, Gill (2007) emphasized the job characteristics model by Hackman and Oldman (1980), which showed availability of job resources may lead to positive work experiences, similar to the outcome of engagement. When more resources are available, employees feel more engaged which impacts performance levels (Gill, 2007).

Job resources play intrinsic and extrinsic motivational roles. In the intrinsic role, they impact employees’ growth, learning, and development. Extrinsically, they may assist to achieve work goals (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008). Intrinsically, for example, giving feedback may improve learning which will increase job competence. Similarly, giving control and social support may fulfill the need for autonomy and the need to belong. As an extrinsic motivational role, job resources create employees’ willingness to invest their efforts and abilities to the task. Support and feedback, for instance, may enable employees to be successful in achieving their work tasks (Bakker, et al., 2008).

Implications

Based on findings from the literature it seems that there may be value in having engaged employees in organizations. However, most of the literature seems to focus on addressing the conceptual differences

rather than empirically discriminating among the constructs. There is a dire need for more research similar to Hallberg and Schaufeli (2006), to provide a more compelling and valid analysis of the real need to accept the term engagement as a valuable construct in itself. One of the main things that appear to set engagement apart is its impact on health outcomes. This is just one aspect that has helped to discriminate the concept from the likes of commitment, and job involvement. However, more extensive research is needed to identify other possible areas of differentiation and similarities. Future studies need to establish what positive outcomes this construct impact beyond the other known constructs, how is it similar, how is it different, is it impacted by the same antecedents as the other constructs? With which construct is it most closely related? These are some possible questions that may need to be answered in future research so the concept can be more useful and be better understood. These extensive studies will help to strengthen the value for the adoption of the newer construct of employee engagement without it being seen as “old wine in a new bottle”.

Conclusion

This paper presented a review of literature surrounding the emerging construct of employee engagement. While it is evident that having engaged employees may be useful in impacting business success much more work needs to be conducted regarding its contribution to the field of positive psychology. This is because of its seemingly overlap with other established attitudinal constructs. While engagement may be unique in its own right more studies need to focus on delineating its true purpose. It is hope that this research will be useful to scholars interested in engagement research and will contribute to future studies on employee engagement as it tries to find a place among other established constructs.

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