



The conceptualization of employee engagement and its distinction from related constructs

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Abstract. Employee engagement has become a very popular and powerful concept receiving attention in both the academic literature and business industry. However, this concept still remains inconsistently conceptualized and often seems to overlap with other well-researched and established concepts. With the above considerations in mind, the present study critically examines the existing literature regarding the conceptualization of employee engagement and its distinction from other related psychological constructs such as job satisfaction, job involvement, organizational citizenship behavior, and organizational commitment. The findings in this study suggest that it is meaningful to refer to employee engagement as a distinct construct.

1. Introduction

In nowadays demanding business environment, higher productivity and enhanced efficiency are necessary in order for companies to increase their performance and achieve a competitive advantage. Organizations, in an attempt to survive, result in solutions like cutting costs, redesigning business processes and downsizing the number of employees. Assuming that there is a limit to the aforementioned strategies, new inevitable approaches to human resource management should be explored. Towards that direction, employee engagement has been lauded by many as a key factor that can lead to an organization's success (Macey et al., 2009; Rich et al., 2010). It has been argued that organizations with engaged employees have higher shareholder returns, profitability, productivity and customer satisfaction (Harter et al., 2002; Rich et al., 2010).

The notion of employee engagement has reached notable popularity among Human Resource managers, practitioners and consulting firms (Robinson et al., 2004) with dozens of studies and metaanalyses being published in the last decade (Saks and Gruman, 2014). Moreover, organizations seem to be ranked on the basis of engagement as the best employer of the year. In an attempt to better comprehend the concept, one has a lot of choices on the internet and on several social networking sites but for the last 25 years, although the term has gained in popularity, it remains inconsistently conceptualized, with a little rigorous academic research done (Shuck and Wollard, 2010). With engagement having been operationalized and measured in many disparate ways, it is not surprising that there is still a lack of a universal definition. Unless the latter is resolved and employee engagement can be universally defined and measured, it cannot be managed, nor can it be known if efforts to improve it are working (Ferguson, 2007).

The current study aims to address this issue by drawing together several areas of literature to critically present the conceptualization of engagement. Additionally, an attempt is made to reveal the possible distinction between employee engagement and other related constructs such as job satisfaction, job involvement, organizational citizenship behavior, and organizational commitment.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the concept of employee engagement. Section 3 unfolds with a review of the literature on employee engagement models and theory. Section 4 explains the distinction between employee engagement and other related constructs. Section 5 concludes.



2. The concept of employee engagement

Companies seek to benefit from the positive outcomes of employee engagement by developing a culture of engagement at work. In order for HR departments to work in this direction, it is important that they have a good understanding of the term and its various approaches. Through the years, the majority of what was written about employee engagement was coming from practitioner's publications rather than from academic theory and empirical research. Furthermore, many of the different definitions given to engagement had numerous similarities with other more known constructs. Different researchers have defined engagement both attitudinally and behaviorally. It has been both defined as the amount of discretionary effort exhibited by employees in their jobs (Frank et al., 2004) and the emotional and intellectual commitment shown towards the organization. Initially, in academic research, an attempt to define engagement was made by Goffman (1961) with his work on individuals' attachment and detachment from their work roles. Goffman in his book "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" proposed a definition of engagement being a "spontaneous involvement in the role" and a "visible investment of attention and muscular effort". Later on, Katz and Kahn (1966) emphasize the general need employees express to engage with their organization and their work, although the term "employee engagement" is not actually used in their study. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) thought of employee engagement as a "flow" concept, a moment-by-moment experience that employees feel like a holistic sensation helping them to get totally involved in their work ("vital engagement"). Kahn's individual study started with the work of Goffman (1961), taking also into account other disciplines like psychology, sociology, and group theorists as they all documented the natural resistance of an individual to become a member of on-going groups and systems.

W.A. Kahn, who is considered as an academic father of the term, concluded that employees experience personal engagement when they can be their "preferred selves" and express themselves freely when performing a certain role (Kahn, 1990). His observations suggested that through the behavioral investment of personal physical, cognitive, and emotional energy into work roles, employees became engaged and enhance their role performances (Kahn, 1992). Therefore from his perspective, personal engagement is a multidimensional motivational construct bearing similarities with vital engagement as they both involve a form of personal involvement or self-employment (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). May et al. (2004) tested Kahn's model and reported significant positive relationships between the psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability, and engagement. Building also on Kahn's work, Rich et al. (2010) argued that engaged individuals invest their complete and full self, thus making engagement a more complete concept when compared to job satisfaction and job involvement.

Based on the Burnout concept, Maslach and Leiter (1997) positioned engagement as a pervasive state of being; as the positive antithesis of burnout. Maslach et al. (2001) stated that "engagement is characterized by energy, involvement, and efficacy". Their definition is not that different from Kahn's as they both involve the employees' sense of meaning found in work and the confidence they gain from being proficient at their job. Further research on burnout has shown that its core dimension, exhaustion, and cynicism, is positioned on the opposite pole of this of engagement, vigor, and dedication (Gonzalez-Roma et al., 2006). Schaufeli et al. (2002) defined engagement as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind" which is not specific but is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Additionally, their definition of engagement includes being fully absorbed in a role and resembles a lot with what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls "flow". The difference though lies in the fact that work is a persistent work state while "flow" includes momentary peak experiences that can occur outside of work. Kahn's and Schaufeli's are the most widely cited definitions of engagement. The two definitions overlap in terms of engagement being a motivational state but also present differences in various aspects. Kahn's conceptualization pertains to placing the complete self in a role and deciding the extent to which an individual will put oneself into the performance of a role.



On the other hand, Schaufeli et al. (2002) definition is not so substantial and calls into question its distinctiveness from burnout's definition.

In their review, "The Meaning of Employee Engagement", Macey and Schneider (2008) researched engagement's definition on the basis of "psychological state", the attitude produced towards one's work (trait) and the behavior it causes with folk theory as a foundation. They defined it as "discretionary effort or a form of in-role or extra role effort or behavior beyond preserving the status quo and instead focus on initiating or fostering change in the sense of doing something more and/or different" (Macey and Schneider, 2008).

In more recent literature, engagement has been defined as "an individual employee's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral state directed toward desired organizational outcomes" (Shuck and Wollard, 2010) as well as a broad construct that "involves a holistic investment of the entire self in terms of cognitive, emotional, and physical energies" (Christian et al., 2011). The term has also been defined as the simultaneous presence of three behaviors in employees, namely, their performance in job, citizenship behavior and involvement (Newman and Harrison, 2008). Cook (2008) defines engagement as "how positively the employee thinks about the organization, feels about the organization and is proactive in relation to achieving organizational goals for customers, colleagues and other stakeholders".

Apart from the definition provided from academics, also well-known organizations in the human research field have offered their definitions on the concept in question. Their focus seems to be on the usability of the construct and the positive outcomes of engagement leaving out the organization's role (Macey and Schneider, 2008). Although their perspective is important it can result in a definition blended with that of other related organizational concepts. According to Towers Perrin, the willingness and ability to contribute to company success by putting discretionary effort is a sign of engaged employee. This concept is supported also by other consultancies that emphasize the financial benefits of engagement, like increased productivity and profit (Harter et al., 2002). According to Aon Hewitt's definition, engaged employees "say, stay and strive": they positively advertise their organization to others, have high intention to stay with their current employer, and are motivated by their organizations' leaders, managers, culture, and values to go "above and beyond" to contribute to business success (Aon Hewitt, 2015). For the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) engagement is a "positive attitude held by the employee towards the organization and its values" (Robinson et al., 2004). Another significant definition is the one from Hewitt Associates who defined employee engagement as the state in which individuals are emotionally and intellectually committed to the organization or group (as cited by Anitha, 2014). Gallup considers engaged employees to be psychologically committed to their work, willing to go the extra mile, work with passion, and feel a profound connection to their company, drive innovation and want to play a key role in fulfilling the mission of their organizations (Gallup, 2014).

Employee engagement is a complex concept, influenced by various factors. Therefore analyzing both academic and consultancies understandings of the construct could help comprehend it better and conclude if it is a meaningful concept and warrants further academic research to strengthen its theoretical foundations and practical application (Tessema, 2014).

3. Employee engagement models and theory

The numerous definitions of employee engagement have led to a number of models and theories related to the construct and although both academic and commercial research provides valuable insights into building this construct, the gap created among them lead to a disjointed maze of models and frameworks.

The first application and use of engagement theory to the workplace is attributed to Kahn (Harter et al., 2002; Rich et al., 2010). In his ethnographic study on the psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work, Kahn (1990) interviewed 16 summer camp counselors and 16 organizational members of an architecture firm and concluded that the degree of engagement a



person feels depends on experiencing three psychological conditions: meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Additionally, he argued that an employee could be physically, emotionally, and cognitively engaged (Rich et al., 2010). Meaningfulness is influenced by job characteristics like challenging and creative work and by the reputation and status it offers to the person holding this position. The more value and significance the employees receive as feedback from the organization the more they add back. Safety revolved around the ability to employ and express one's self freely without the fear of negative consequences. An environment that is predictable and consistent favors the sense of psychological safety. Finally, availability refers to the belief that employees have the tools to complete their work and in general the physical, emotional, and psychological resources required to perform in their role. In the first study to examine Kahn's theory, May et al. (2004) found that all three conditions mentioned above are positively related to engagement.

Until 2001, only Kahn's theory existed in the literature and it was at that point that the second conceptualization of employee engagement originated from 'burnout' theory. Burnout is a psychological syndrome manifested by fatigue, vulnerability, and inefficiency defined by Maslach and Leiter (1997). It is considered to exist in a continuum, with engagement on one end and burnout on the other (Maslach et al., 2001). Burnout depends on the gap between a person and six major organizational antecedents of burnout: workload, control, rewards and recognition, community and social support, perceived fairness, and values. The greater the mismatch the bigger the likelihood for the person to experience the three burnout dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy (Shuck and Wollard, 2010). On the contrary, in engagement, there is a physical and emotional absence of the above-mentioned factors and employees are full of energy, enthusiasm in their job and with competence in what they do (Maslach and Leiter, 1997). Schaufeli et al. (2002) used a sample of Spanish university students and employees from private and public companies in their empirical research and concluded in a slightly different perception of the engagement-burnout theory. Their model conceptualized engagement as "a positive fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli et al., 2002). The view of these authors, who renamed the state of engagement to work engagement, is also that engagement is an independent and distinct state compared to burnout, a view that is in agreement also with recent studies (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010; Cole et al., 2012).

Based on the positive psychology framework, Harter et al. (2002) conducted a meta-analysis, using data from 7939 business units gathered from the Gallup Organization, in attempt to explore the benefits and positive outcomes of engagement. In their work, they agreed with Kahn (1990) perspective of emotionally and cognitively engaged employees and further suggested that engagement also occurred when employees knew exactly what it was expected of them at work, perceived themselves as being significant and had the chance to improve and develop themselves. Using these antecedents, Harter et al. (2002) provided evidence for the positive relationship between employee engagement and several important business outcomes like customer satisfaction-loyalty, heightened profitability, productivity and retention levels. Their conclusions acted like a catalyst for the great interest huge for-profit organizations showed towards employee engagement. These firstly cited engagement-profit linkage made Corporate Leadership Council and Towers Perrin and other similar firms consider engagement as a profitability driver and start focusing on the construct's conceptualization. Various researchers continued to release updates on Harter et al. (2002) satisfaction-engagement approach. For example, Luthans and Peterson (2002) extended the model and their findings suggest that "the most profitable work units of companies have people doing what they do best, with people they like, and with a strong sense of psychological ownership".

Based both on Kahn (1990) and Maslach et al. (2001) and also on Social Exchange Theory, Saks (2006) tested the three-component model (i.e. cognitive-emotional-behavioral) and was the first to present separate states of engagement: job engagement and organizational engagement. Social Exchange Theory is built on the premise of mutual commitment that evolves out of reciprocal interdependence and helps explain why employees that belong to an organization and receive the same "economic and socio-emotional" resources, decide to engage more or less in their work. His



research was the first academic research to test the antecedents and consequences to employee engagement and find a meaningful difference between the psychological presence in one's organization and job. In accordance with Schaufeli et al. (2002) model, Saks viewed the development of engagement as an absorption of a person's resources into the work they performed which is also in parallel with Kahn (1990) and Harter et al. (2002) theory. According to Saks (2006), the antecedents of work engagements are job characteristics, rewards and recognition, supervisory/organizational support, and organizational justice. The outcomes consist of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, and absence of intent to quit the organization. Macey and Schneider (2008) extended this model suggesting each proceeding state of engagement (i.e. cognitive-emotional-behavioral) built on the next, eventually leading to complete employee engagement.

The last model is Job Demands-Resources (JD-R henceforth) model established by Demerouti et al. (2001), which examines how various job aspects and characteristics influence employees and affect an individual's motivation and well-being. Job resources can be either intrinsically motivating by fostering personal learning and growth, or extrinsically motivating by facilitating goal achievement (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004) and can occur at different levels (organizational, interpersonal, job, and task levels) (Bakker et al., 2002). Research made on specific job resources like personal initiative (Hakanen et al., 2008), autonomy and learning opportunities (Van den Broeck et al., 2011), job control and variety (Salanova and Schaufeli, 2008), supervisory coaching (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004) and financial rewards (Maslach and Leiter, 1997) resulted that they could be considered as antecedents of work engagement. This framework also postulates that excessive and strenuous job demands can mediate exhaustion and are related to burnout while lack of job resources can lead to disengagement. However, Schaufeli (2013) notes that same job demands can increase engagement but this is true for those job demands that have the potential to promote mastery, personal growth, learning and goal attainment. The variety of researchers and practitioners studies contributed to engagement having a number of definition and background theories as we presented above.

Engagement was perceived as a momentary or pervasive experience and such examples are Kahn's personal engagement and Nakamura and Ciscskentmihalyi (2003) vital engagement. It was also defined via the various subconstructs that make it up or as a relationship between employees on one hand and their organization, their work role and their colleagues on the other. Macey and Schneider (2008) distinguished three facets of employee engagement, namely psychological state (e.g. commitment, job involvement, and mood), trait (e.g. positive affectivity) and behavioral engagement (e.g. discretionary effort). Bakker and Schaufeli (2008) categorized engagement as a set of resources that are motivational, as behavior like organizational citizenship and finally, as an affective/cognitive state also in agreement with Maslach et al. (2001).

In a different perspective, Saks distinguishes between two distinct, as he postulates, types of engagement, namely job engagement, and organization engagement. Finally, as far as the employees are concerned there can be three types related to engagement, namely engaged, moderate or not engaged and actively disengaged (Gallup, 2014). Engaged employees are passionate and deeply connected to their organization. They drive innovation and contribute to the betterment of their organization. Not engaged employees participate in work in a time serving manner, putting no energy or passion in it. Furthermore, actively disengaged employees are unhappy and act out their unhappiness.

4. Employee engagement distinction from related constructs

Engagement has been associated with two other concepts that have academic pedigrees, namely organizational citizenship behavior and organizational commitment (Robinson et al., 2004). In addition, engagement overlaps with other constructs, known as job attitudes, such as job satisfaction and job involvement (Leiter and Maslach, 2003). The distinction of employee engagement from the abovementioned psychological constructs is presented in the following subsections.



4.1 Job involvement

Job involvement is similar to the involvement aspect of engagement with work but includes neither the energy and effectiveness dimensions nor the emotional and physical elements of engagement (Brown, 1996; Van Wyk et al., 2003). Lawler and Hall (1970) argued that job involvement is a concept focusing on how a person's identity can be defined through job; whereas May et al. (2004) indicated that it is also the result of a cognitive judgment about the need-satisfying abilities of the job. The construct is highly related to individuals and one's self-image and when an employee exhibits high job involvement he or she thinks about the job even when outside of work (Kanungo, 1982), finds his or her work motivating and commits to the organization (Brown, 1996). This may result in employees' also experiencing "flow", defined as the "holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When in this state, external rewards or goals are not required as motivating factors, since the work itself presents constant challenges. Engagement differs from job involvement, as the latter involves emotional, behavioral and intellectual components (May et al., 2004) and thus Hallberg and Schaufeli (2006) argued that it should be considered as an antecedent in a research model. However, Christian et al. (2011) in their meta-analysis of engagement and performance concluded that the two constructs were moderately correlated in support of discriminant validity while Rich et al. (2010) in a study on the antecedents of engagement and job performance discovered that engagement fully mediated the relationship in question even when job involvement was included in the model.

4.2 Job satisfaction

Engagement's definition overlaps also with job satisfaction term, used to describe an individual's attitude towards his or her work environment, pay, benefits, etc. (Brayfield and Rothe, 1951). Job satisfaction, although positively relates to favorable perceptions of job characteristics, supervisors, and co-workers (Russell et al., 2004), it depends on differences in individual personality (Judge et al., 2002). While linked to motivation or aptitude it is not identical since it is considered by many a voluntary emotional commitment influenced by numerous factors such as supervisor-organizational support, mutual trust and personal enthusiasm (Schaufeli et al., 2006; Saks, 2006). Companies frequently measure job satisfaction and seek ways to promote it as it is related to commitment and performance. Two most common measures used are the job descriptive index (Smith et al., 1969) and the Minnesota satisfaction questionnaire (Weiss et al., 1967). Both measures share common factors with various employee engagement scales but the relation between the two constructs is still scarce. A number of researchers consider engagement as an antecedent of job satisfaction (Orgambidez-Ramos et al., 2014; Moura et al., 2014; Saks, 2006) while others, like Andrew Brown from Mercer Delta Consulting, view engagement as a combination of satisfaction, motivation, and commitment.

4.3 Organizational commitment

Employee engagement has been defined as the emotional and intellectual commitment to the organization (Shaw, 2005) differing from organisational commitment to the sense that the latter refers to a person's attitude and attachment towards their organization and its goals and values. Meyer and Allen (1991) concluded in a three-component conceptualization of organizational commitment that includes affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment. Affective commitment measured by a six-item scale, also used by Rhoades et al. (2001), was proven to be positively related to engagement as the latter explained a significant amount of the variance in commitment, in Saks (2006) research. For Christian et al. (2011), engagement was moderately correlated with organizational commitment but explained incremental variability in task and contextual performance over job attitudes. Another difference between the two constructs is that



according to Maslach et al. (2001) commitment focuses on the organization, while the engagement focuses on the tasks. Commitment as a psychological state is regarded as an antecedent of various organizationally relevant outcomes and an important facet of engagement when conceptualized as a positive attachment to the organization and willingness to have a personal identification with it. On the other hand, continuance commitment, through “intention to state” was positioned as an engagement driver or antecedent (Buckingham and Coffman, 1999).

4.4 Organizational citizenship behavior

Organizational citizenship behavior refers to a universal set of behaviors exhibited by employees that are supportive and go beyond normal job requirements and contributes to the effective functioning of an organization (Organ 1988). Most of organizational citizenship behavior components align particularly well with engagement (Robinson et al., 2004) and can be defined as discretionary ‘extrarole’ behavior (Barkworth, 2004 as cited in Robinson et al., 2004). This means that the employee can choose if he or she will perform such behavior as the latter are not formally defined as part of the job and therefore not explicitly rewarded. To this extent, the term is consistent with a folk definition of employee engagement. Only five categories of organizational citizenship behavior are frequently recognized (LePine et al., 2002), although several measures and organizational citizenship behavior domains have been developed so far. Rurkkhum and Bartlett (2012) found support for positive relationships between engagement and these five organizational citizenship behavior categories, namely altruism, conscientiousness, sportsmanship, courtesy, and civic virtue. Further research has also argued that organizational citizenship behaviors are a potential outcome of engagement (Saks, 2006; Soane et al., 2012).

Literature research concludes that numerous elements of both commitment and organizational citizenship behavior are encompassed in employee engagement’s definition, as engagement behavior is inclusive of organizational citizenship behaviors. Furthermore, it is argued that engagement is built on the foundation of earlier concepts like job satisfaction and employee commitment. Nevertheless, none of the above can fully relate to the two-way relationship between employer and employee that characterizes employee engagement (Robinson et al., 2004; Rafferty et al., 2005) thus further supporting the statement that “work engagement is unique although it shares conceptual space with job attitudes” (Christian et al., 2011).

5. Conclusion

In this study, a review of past and recent thinking about defining and measuring employee engagement was presented. Employee engagement is the individual’s positive attitude to make a discretionary effort in an attempt to heighten the level of ownership and interest he/she feels for the organization as a whole. It is regarded as the barometer that determines the association of the employee with the organization. Thus, employee engagement has proven to be a key success factor for any company and a way through which employees devote themselves to the organization and act with their full eagerness. This holistic view of employee engagement resulted that the latter is closely linked with organizational performance outcomes. Increased employee’s level of engagement can positively contribute to enhanced satisfaction, encouraging organizational commitment, and reducing turnover rate. Companies with disengaged employees suffer from a lower level of commitment and customer orientation, are less productive and have low talent retention rates and additionally, face high absenteeism. Thus, engagement should be viewed as a cultural strategy with continuous and clear communications (Kress, 2005), involving all levels of management (Frank et al., 2004) in fostering a continuous process of learning and a series of actions (Shaw, 2005).

In the last decade, the concept of employee engagement gained significant importance but despite the increasing interest, there is not yet a single agreed definition or measurement for it. Kahn (1990)



provided one of the very first definitions of employee engagement as "the harnessing of organizational members' selves to their work roles" and others followed providing considerable variations in defining this concept. Although the concept lacks a unanimous definition, it is considered distinguishable from related constructs (i.e. job satisfaction, job involvement, organizational citizenship behavior, and organizational commitment), as denoted in this study. Only fairly recently some theoretically grounded definitions and measures were developed to describe and assess the construct (Macey and Schneider, 2008; Rich et al., 2010). Evidence from both academic and practitioner studies around the world revealing that only a small percentage of the employees are fully engaged, along with Anitha (2014) findings confirming that nearly 65% of employee performance is influenced by employee engagement, provide grounds for companies to build strategies that will nourish and evolve employee engagement. This ascertainment opens interesting avenues for further research.

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