How do Engaged Employees Stay Engaged?

¿CÓMO LOS EMPLEADOS MANTIENEN SU ENGAGEMENT EN EL TRABAJO?

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ABSTRACT

The present literature review focuses on what employees can do to stay engaged. After defining enduring work engagement, we review the literature on state work engagement. In addition, we discuss research on the relationship between engagement on the one hand, and (a) job performance, (b) proactive behavior, and (c) job crafting on the other. Finally, we review the evidence for reciprocal relationships between work engagement and job and personal resources. We conclude that engaged employees take care of their own work engagement by proactively shaping their work environment. As a result, engaged employees do not only make full use of the available job resources, but they also create their own resources to stay engaged.

Key words: JOB CRAFTING, JOB PERFORMANCE, PROACTIVE BEHAVIOR, WORK ENGAGEMENT

RESUMEN

Falta español

HOW DO ENGAGED EMPLOYEES STAY ENGAGED?

Most scholars agree that job resources are the most important drivers of work engagement. Research has confirmed that career growth opportunities, supportive relationships with coworkers, performance feedback, and employee skill development facilitate engagement[1], particularly when the job is challenging.[2,3] Given these findings, one may argue that the organization plays an important role in fostering engagement, through the provision of resourceful and challenging jobs.

We agree that managers can play a crucial role in employee engagement because they have the legitimate power to influence work conditions. Research indeed suggests that management influences the job demands and resources of their employees,[4,5]

and can indirectly influence employee engagement.[6] However, in the present theoretical article, we focus on what employees can do themselves. How do engaged employees stay engaged? We argue that engaged employees take care of their own work engagement by proactively shaping their work environment. We propose that engaged employees do not only make full use of the available job resources, but also create their own resources. Understanding the psychological processes that explain how engaged employees stay engaged contributes to the theoretical advancement of the work engagement concept, but also provides useful insights for sustaining or creating flourishing workforces. What is Work engagement?

Work engagement is most often defined as "... a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption".[7,8] Vigor is characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working. Dedication refers to being strongly involved in one's work, and experiencing a sense of significance and enthusiasm. Absorption is characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work.

In essence, work engagement captures how workers experience their work: as stimulating and energetic and something to which they really want to devote time and effort (the vigor component); as a significant and meaningful pursuit *(dedication)*; and as engrossing and interesting *(absorption)*.[9] Research has revealed that engaged employees are optimistic and self-efficacious individuals who exercise influence over events that affect their lives.[10] Because of their positive attitude and high activity level,

engaged employees create their own positive feedback, in terms of appreciation, recognition, and success.[11] Engaged employees are often also highly engaged outside work, for example in sports, creative hobbies, and volunteer work. However, engaged employees are not addicted to their work. They enjoy other things outside work and, unlike workaholics, they do not work hard because of a strong and irresistible inner drive, but because for them working is fun.[12]

In order to differentiate work engagement from related types of work-related well-being (e.g., job satisfaction, workaholism, and burnout), Bakker and Oerlemans[13] used Russell's[14] circumplex model of affect. According to this model, affective states arise from two fundamental neurophysiological systems, one related to a pleasure–displeasure continuum and the other to arousal, activation, or alertness. Each emotion can be understood as a linear combination of these two dimensions as varying degrees of both pleasure and activation (see Figure 1). Specific emotions arise out of patterns of activation within these two neurophysiological systems, together with interpretations and labeling of these emotional experiences. For instance, the degree of activation whilst experiencing positive (pleasurable) emotions varies considerably.[15,16] Feeling calm and content implies a lower level of activation compared to feeling happy, engaged, excited or enthusiastic. Similarly, unpleasant emotions may range from "feeling bored or depressed" to "feeling upset, anxious or tense".

Figure 1.
A two-dimensional view of work–related subjective well-being.[13,14]
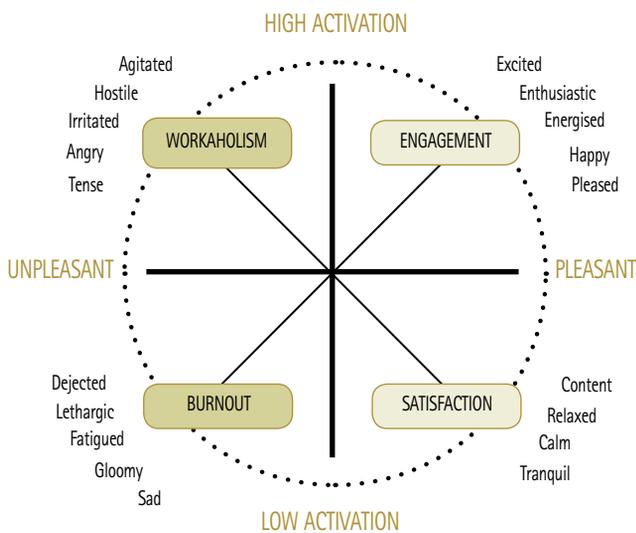
As can be seen in Figure 1, work engagement is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the circumplex model as it resemblances high levels of pleasure (i.e. dedication and absorption) and activation (i.e. vigor). Engagement is different from job satisfaction in that it is a much more active experience. Also, engagement is different from workaholism, in terms of the valence of the experience. Workaholics have a strong inner drive to work excessively hard[17], but this experience often goes along with low levels of pleasure. Finally, the positioning of burnout in the lower left quadrant of the circumplex model (low levels of pleasure and activation) is consistent with some studies suggesting that

burnout is conceptually the opposite of work engagement.[18,19] Initially, the concept of work engagement was developed to capture an overall state of employees with regard to their job. Schaufeli et al8, in one of their first articles on work engagement, emphasized that 'rather than a momentary and specific state, engagement refers to a more persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state' (p. 74). Later on, Sonnentag[20] was the first to challenge this view by introducing the concept of state-like, as opposed to trait-like, work engagement.

STATE WORK ENGAGEMENT

Trait-like work engagement (or the between-persons view) answers questions like why one person feels engaged at work while another does not. State-like work engagement (or the within-person view) answers questions like why one person feels more engaged at work on specific days and not on other days. If one aims at investigating the full phenomenological experience of work engagement, one has to focus on state work engagement as a rather momentary and transient experience that fluctuates within individuals within short periods of time (from hour to hour, or from day to day).[21] This approach enables us to examine – in addition to general predictors such as enduring resources as specified in the Job Demands-Resources model – the more proximal predictors of the work engagement experience. Thus, this approach promises answers to the question: when do persons feel work engagement? Are there specific situational features that have to be present during a specific day in order to feel engaged? Knowledge about the more proximal situational and person-related predictors of work engagement is crucial to create a setting that optimally supports work engagement during critical times and periods.

Diary studies have indeed demonstrated that work engagement fluctuates substantially within individuals, thus supporting the state-like view. For example, Sonnentag[20] assessed work engagement in public service employees over the course of five working days and found that 42 percent of the overall variance was at the day (i.e., within-individual) level and 58 percent of the overall variance was at the between-individual level. Similarly, Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Heuven, Demerouti, and Schaufeli[22] who studied flight attendants during three trips to intercontinental destinations reported that 41 percent of the overall variance in work engagement was attributable to within-person variation. Furthermore, in the study of Bakker and Xanthopoulou[23] among dyads of colleagues within-person fluctuations in work engagement were found to explain 44 percent of the total variance. Slightly smaller but still substantial was the percentage (31%) in the study by Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, and Schaufeli[24], who studied daily work engagement among fast-food restaurant employees. Taken together, these studies show that at least one third of the total variance in daily work engagement can be attributed to within-person fluctuations. Although persons clearly differ in their overall level of work engagement (also expressed in the 58 to 69 percent of total variance that is attributable to between-person variation), day-level[20,24] and week-level[25] studies suggest that persons do not engage in their work every day to the same extent; work engagement shows substantial variation across short periods of time.

With respect to predictors of state work engagement, findings

parallel but do not overlap with findings about trait work engagement supporting the distinctive status of the state experience. Specifically, Sonnentag[20] found that state work engagement was significantly higher on days that employees felt recovered in the morning, compared to days when they did not feel well recovered. Furthermore, diary studies have shown that on days that employees feel more self-efficacious, more optimistic and have a stronger sense of organization-based self-esteem, they experience higher levels of work engagement.[22,24] With respect to job characteristics, the studies that addressed within-individual variation in state work engagement[24,25] consistently suggest that autonomy plays an important role. In contrast, social job resources like daily supervisory coaching, team climate, and social support were found to be important predictors in some occupations, but not in all. Although job demands were rarely addressed as potential predictors of state work engagement, the study by Bakker, van Emmerik, Geurts, and Demerouti[26] found that day-level workload was positively related to day-level state work engagement – suggesting that workload acted as a challenge. To conclude, research on state work engagement indicates that there are not only people who are more engaged in their work than others but the level of engagement differs from day to day within the same person. Importantly, the situational predictors of state work engagement seem slightly different from those of trait work engagement.

ENGAGEMENT AND JOB PERFORMANCE

The main reason for the growing interest of both academics and managers in the concept of work engagement is its predictive value for job performance. The positive association between engagement and performance may be explained by at least four distinct psychological mechanisms.[11] First, engaged employees often experience positive emotions, including joy and enthusiasm. These positive emotions seem to broaden people's thought-action repertoire[27], implying that they constantly learn and acquire new skills and thereby work on their personal resources.[28] These resources can be used during task performance. Second, engaged workers experience better health.[29] This means that they have the ability to focus on their tasks and dedicate all their energy to their work. Third, engaged employees create their own resources as engagement has been found to positively predict job resources over time.[25,10] If needed, they ask for performance feedback or they ask colleagues for help. Finally, engaged workers transfer their engagement to others in their immediate environment.[23,30] Since in most organizations performance is the result of collaborative effort, the engagement of one person may transfer to others and indirectly improve team performance.

The number of studies supporting the positive relationship between employee engagement and (task and extra-role) performance is increasing.[31] For example, Halbesleben and Wheeler[32] in their study among American employees, their supervisors, and their closest coworkers from a wide variety of industries and occupations showed that work engagement made a unique contribution (after controlling for job embeddedness) to explaining variance in job performance. Salanova, Agut, and Peiró[33] conducted a study among personnel working in Spanish restaurants and hotels. Service employees (N=342) from 58 hotel front-

desks and 56 restaurants provided information about organizational resources, engagement, and service climate, while customers (N=1,140) from these units provided information on employee performance and customer loyalty. Structural equation modeling analyses showed that organizational resources and work engagement predicted service climate, which, in turn, predicted employee performance and then customer loyalty. Bakker and Xanthopoulou[34] showed that engaged school principals were rated as more creative (i.e. a specific aspect of task performance) by their subordinate teachers. It was proposed that engagement adds to creativity because a person who is not engaged is less likely to use his/her skills and expertise in the service of creative performance, even if he/she holds the expertise and ability to perform creatively. In contrast, energetic, dedicated and absorbed employees are more inclined to use their skills or to acquire new skills in order to be creative. Saks[35] supported the positive relation between engagement and organizational citizenship behavior. In a survey study among employees working in a variety of jobs and organizations, he found that engaged individuals were more likely to attend functions that were not required by the organization in order to improve the overall image. Finally, Bakker and Demerouti[30] in their study among 175 working couples supported the crossover of work engagement from women to men. In turn, men's work engagement related positively to their in-role and extra-role performance, as rated by their colleagues.

Similar results have been reported for the relationship between state work engagement and job performance episodes. Forty-four flight attendants were followed-up over consecutive flights to three intercontinental trips, three times per trip: after the outbound flight, and before and after the inbound flight.[22] Results suggested that colleague support during the outbound flight related positively to flight attendants' self-efficacy before the inbound flight, and work engagement during the inbound flight. Consequently, work engagement related positively to self-reported in-role and extra-role performance during the inbound flight. These findings are quite striking because they imply a cyclical effect. When employees receive sufficient support from their colleagues, they feel more efficacious and they are more engaged. As a result, they reciprocate this support by being good citizens (i.e. by supporting their colleagues). In a similar vein, Bakker and Bal[25] performed a study among 54 Dutch starting teachers. Teachers filled in short questionnaires every Friday for five consecutive working weeks. Results of this study revealed that weekly engagement related positively to weekly (in-role and extra-role) self-rated performance. Importantly, teachers' self-ratings of performance were strongly related to supervisors' ratings of teachers' performance that were collected during the first week of the study.

Furthermore, Bakker and Xanthopoulou[23] in a diary study among 62 dyads of coworkers who worked closely together, found that colleagues influenced each other's level of engagement, and indirectly influenced each other's daily performance. Specifically, this study revealed that daily work engagement crossed over from one colleague to the other on days they had more business and informal contacts (phone, e-mail, face-to-face) than usual; on these days, particularly vigorous coworkers facilitated each other's performance. In a similar diary design among 78 dyads of coworkers, Bakker and Xanthopoulou[36] found evidence for the daily crossover of job performance from one person to the other,

particularly on days that one of the two colleagues was highly engaged. This interaction effect remained significant after controlling for daily availability of job resources, and the degree to which colleagues liked each other.

Finally, work engagement has also been found to relate positively to productivity. In a study among Greek employees working in fast-food restaurants, a compelling case was made of the predictive value of work engagement for financial turnover, on a daily basis.[24] Consistent with hypotheses, results showed that employees were more engaged on days that were characterized by more job resources than usual. Daily job resources, like supervisor coaching and positive team atmosphere contributed to employees' day-levels of optimism, self-efficacy, and self-esteem, which, in turn, explained daily work engagement. Importantly, on days employees were more engaged, restaurants reported higher financial returns.

To conclude, there is substantial empirical evidence for the positive relationship between work engagement and job performance – both at the between-person and at the within-person level.[31] Support for this relationship is substantial and adds to our understanding of why engaged employees stay engaged. While engagement facilitates high levels of performance and profit for the organization, employees who perform at a high level are also likely to stay engaged in their job. At the organizational-level of analysis, a possible reason for this is that a flourishing organization is more likely to provide the means (i.e. resources) to employees that facilitate engagement. This is in line with Schneider, Hanges, Smith, and Salvaggio[37], who showed that financial and market performance predicted overall job satisfaction more strongly than the reverse (although some of the reverse relationships were also significant). However, of more importance here is a reason that stems from the person-level of analysis. Employees performing at a high level are more likely to feel confident and believe that they have control over the environment.[10] As Gist and Mitchell[38] argued, positive, self-directed performance feedback may retain or enhance employees' self-efficacy, which in turn keeps them engaged at work.[28] This kind of proactive behavior that characterizes engaged employees may be another explanation of why they stay engaged.

ENGAGEMENT AND PROACTIVE BEHAVIOR

Proactivity at work has been defined as a special type of goal-directed behavior that it is self-starting, anticipatory and change-oriented.[39-42] According to Bindl and Parker[39], "employees can be proactive in initiating better ways of conducting their tasks (individual task proactivity), they can be proactive in developing methods to help their team perform better (team member proactivity), or they can actively suggest how to improve performance of the organization (organization member proactivity)".

Several studies have focused on the relationship between work engagement and proactive behavior at work. Salanova and Schaufeli[43] found in a cross-sectional survey study among managers of a Dutch telecom company and Spanish technology employees a positive relationship between engagement and self-reported personal initiative at work. Specifically, multi-group analyses showed that work engagement fully mediated the relationship between job resources and proactive behavior at work in both samples. In a similar vein, Schaufeli et al.[12] in their survey study among Dutch employees from a wide range of occupations, reported a positive relationship between engagement on the one hand, and innovativeness on the other. Specifically, engaged employees were more likely to invent new solutions for problems at work. Consistently, in a longitudinal study among Finnish dentists, Hakanen, Perhoniemi, and Toppinen-Tammer[44] found a positive link between engagement on the one hand, and personal initiative and innovation on the other hand. They found that engaged dentists were more likely to do more than they are asked to do, and tried to be actively involved in organizational matters. In addition, engaged dentists constantly made improvements in their work and gathered feedback and ideas for improvements from clients. Furthermore, Sonnentag[20] showed in her diary study that day-level recovery was positively related to day-level work engagement. Daily engagement was, in turn, positively related to day-level proactive behavior (personal initiative and pursuit of learning) during the workday.

In line with these findings, Bakker and Demerouti[45] showed that engagement is positively related to active learning behavior. Employees from a wide variety of occupations who scored high on vigor, dedication, and absorption scored also high on supervisor-ratings of active learning. Engaged workers were more likely to learn new things through their work activities, and to search for task-related challenges. They were also more likely to ask their colleagues for feedback about their performance. Finally, a recent study among almost 750 young Finnish managers[46] showed that engaged managers were most eager to develop themselves in the job and to increase their occupational knowledge. They were also most likely to have positive attitudes towards modernization and increased productivity. Taken together, these findings imply that engaged employees are not passive actors in work environments, but instead actively change their work environment if needed.

ENGAGEMENT AND JOB CRAFTING

Employees may actively change the design of their jobs by choosing tasks, negotiating different job content, and assigning meaning to their tasks or jobs.[47] This process of employees shaping their jobs has been referred to as job crafting.[48] Job crafting is defined as the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in their task or relational boundaries. Physical changes refer to changes in the form, scope or number of job tasks, whereas cognitive changes refer to changing how one sees the job. Berg, Wrzesniewski and Dutton[49] offer some examples of making 'physical changes' to one's job. For instance, they interviewed a maintenance technician who told that he crafts his job in the form of taking on additional tasks. After being for some time in the organization, he started to proactively help newcomers to learn the job. Because he turned out to be good at this, he became formally responsible for the training of new employees. Berg and colleagues[49] also cite a customer service representative who reframed the perception of the job as a meaningful whole that positively impacts others rather than a collection of separate tasks (i.e. cognitive change as a form of job crafting): "Technically, [my job is] putting in orders, entering orders, but really I see it as providing our customers with an enjoyable experience, a positive experience, which is a lot more meaningful to me than entering numbers" (pp. 167).

Changing relational boundaries means that individuals have discretion over whom they interact with while doing their job. According to Wrzesniewski and Dutton[48], job crafting focuses on the processes by which employees change elements of their jobs and relationships with others to revise the meaning of the work and the social environment at work. Thus, job crafting is about changing the job in order to experience enhanced meaning of it. As a consequence, employees may be able to increase their person-job fit.

However, before employees can start crafting their job, they must perceive they have the opportunity to make changes. This refers to the autonomy employees have in what they do in their job and how they do it. For example, when employees perform tasks that are interdependent, there is not much room for changing how and when to perform the tasks and relational boundaries. Also, support from supervisors seems very important in perceiving opportunities to craft. A supervisor who understands the employee may offer the employee autonomy to impact upon his/ her job tasks, and thereby encourages self-initiation.[50]

Tims and Bakker[51] adopt the view that employees are active in changing their job tasks and relational boundaries. However, they argue that not every employee may have room and motivation for changing the job. Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, and Schwartz[52] suggested that employees who view their work as a calling (i.e., focus on enjoyment or fulfilling) are more likely to engage in job crafting, because work is more central in their lives. Consistent with this view, Tims, Bakker, and Derks[53] showed that engagement has a positive relationship with colleague-ratings of job crafting. Engaged employees were most likely to increase their job resources, for example, ask for feedback from their supervisor and mobilize their social network. Additionally, engaged employees were most likely to increase their own job demands in order to create a challenging work environment. For example, they proactively volunteered to be involved in a project if possible. Additionally, if it is quiet at work they see this as an opportunity to start new projects.

Petrou, Demerouti, Peeters, and Schaufeli[54] examined the situational conditions influencing job crafting on a daily basis, as well as the relationship between job crafting and state work engagement. Their study was conducted among 95 employees from several organizations who filled in a diary for five consecutive days. Job crafting was operationalized as "resources seeking", "challenges seeking" and "demands reducing". Findings not only confirmed the validity of the job crafting conceptualization including the three specific behaviors of resources seeking, challenges seeking and demands reducing, but also showed that job crafting behaviors varied significantly from one day to another (within-person variance ranged between 31% and 45%). Moreover, it was found that on days that work pressure and autonomy were both high (i.e. active jobs) individuals showed higher resources seeking and lower demands reducing behaviors. Interestingly, it was shown that the more employees sought resources and challenges on a specific day the more engaged they were in their job. In contrast, the more employees simplified their work on a specific day, the less engagement they experienced on that day. These findings suggest that job crafting may occur on a daily basis, it is predicted by a work context that is characterized by high work pressure and high autonomy, and it has both beneficial (in case of resource and demands seeking) and detrimental (in case of demands reducing) effects on work engagement.

CYCLES OF ENGAGEMENT

The finding that job resources are the most important drivers of work engagement[29], and that engaged employees proactively mobilize their own job resources, seems to suggest that resources are reciprocal with engagement. This assumption of reciprocity actually implies that engaged employees are more likely to craft their job, which in turn helps them to sustain their engagement. Is there evidence for the existence of such 'cycles of engagement'? Some longitudinal and diary studies indeed suggest that such cycles do exist.

First, in their three-year panel study among 2,555 Finnish dentists, Hakanen and his colleagues[44] examined how job resources and work engagement may start a gain cycle. Drawing on Hobfoll's[55] conservation of resources (COR) theory, a reciprocal process was predicted: (1) job resources lead to work engagement and work engagement leads to personal initiative (PI), which, in turn, has a positive impact on work-unit innovativeness, and (2) work-unit innovativeness leads to PI, which has a positive impact on work engagement, which finally predicts future job resources. The results generally confirmed these hypotheses. Positive and reciprocal cross-lagged associations were found between job resources and work engagement and between work engagement and PI. In addition, PI had a positive impact on work-unit innovativeness over time. This suggests that job resources fueled engagement and initiative, but also that engagement and personal initiative led to more resources over time.

Second, Xanthopoulou et al.[10] examined the role of personal resources (i.e. self-efficacy, self-esteem, and optimism) and job resources (i.e. job autonomy, supervisory coaching, performance feedback, and opportunities for professional development) in explaining work engagement. They carried out a two-wave longitudinal study among technical specialists with a time interval of one year and a half. It was hypothesized that job resources, personal resources, and work engagement are reciprocal over time. Results showed that not only (job and personal) resources and work engagement, but also job and personal resources were mutually related. These findings support the assumption of COR theory[55] that various types of resources and well-being evolve into a cycle that determines employees' successful adaptation to their work environments. Importantly, these results indicate that engaged employees are more likely to be efficacious (i.e. have control over the environment), optimistic and to feel valued by the organization that increases the chances of impacting on their work environment. Put differently, engaged employees are characterized by high levels of personal resources (and particularly self-efficacy) that broaden their autonomy to change tasks or relational boundaries.

Third, Schaufeli et al.[56] in their study among Dutch managers of a telecom company hypothesized that work engagement would have a positive impact on changes in job resources over a one-year time period. The results showed that changes in job resources predicted engagement, and that engagement was predictive of increases in social support, autonomy, opportunities for development, and performance feedback. Finally, in their study among starting teachers Bakker and Bal[25] found that weekly changes in work-related resources (autonomy, supervisory coaching, performance feedback, and opportunities for development) predicted week-levels of engagement. In addition, they found a reversed causal effect: engaged teachers were best able to mobilize their own job resources.

Taken together, these results show that employee engagement and behavior can have a positive effect on the available resources. Engaged employees seem to create or mobilize their own personal and job resources – in other words, they engage in job crafting.[48] In this way, engaged employees seem to sustain and manage their own vigor and dedication.[25,28] This dynamic, reciprocal relationship between resources and engagement as described by COR theory is compatible with and partly supports the notion of a gain cycle of engagement.

CONCLUSION

So far, the main concern of scholars and managers interested in work engagement was to figure out what is the best way to design a job in order to enhance employee engagement. Research of the past decade boils down to the significance of job and personal resources in creating engaged workforces.[1,29] The present conceptual paper has gone one step further, and examined how engaged employees stay engaged based on their own initiative. With the help of theory and previous findings the main purpose was to find out how engaged employees stay engaged in their work.

A thorough examination of the literature suggests that engaged employees are likely to work in an environment that stimulates autonomy, and believe that they have control over this environment (i.e. self-efficacy;[28]). The role of control, as a situational factor and as personal characteristic both at the between- and within-person level of analysis, is highly significant in explaining why engaged employees stay engaged. The reason is that this perceived control gives more freedom to employees to actively shape (i.e. craft) their work environment.[48] As a result, engaged employees are likely to create a resourceful (by seeking for or creating more resources) and more challenging (by seeking demands) work environment. Next to control, engaged employees behave proactively and reach high performance standards that may also contribute to retaining and even enhancing work engagement. Both behavioral manifestations create positive cycles with engagement. On the one hand, proactivity is, by definition, closely related to job crafting that enhances engagement. On the other hand, successful performance initiates self-directed positive feedback.[38] Self-directed feedback helps employees to understand the optimal outcomes of engagement. Consequently, this helps not only to retain engagement, but also to enhance it.

To conclude, this conceptual paper suggests that engaged employees stay engaged because they have the autonomy to impact upon their work in a way that it becomes not only more resourceful, but also more challenging. This insight is important for practice because it indicates that engaged employees need active jobs (characterized by high resources and high challenges) in order to stay engaged. The competitive advantage of engaged employees though is that they do not rely only on management to get their ideal job. Instead, they are able and willing to initiate the required changes themselves.

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