

work engagement

Arnold B. Bakker and Wilmar B. Schaufeli

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Everyday connotations of engagement refer to involvement, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, absorption, focused effort, and energy. For instance, Merriam-Webster dictionary describes engagement as “emotional involvement or commitment” and as “the state of being in gear.”

ENGAGEMENT IN BUSINESS AND ACADEMIA

Engagement first emerged in business. The origin of the term “employee engagement” is not entirely clear but most likely it was first used in the 1990s by the Gallup organization. For management, engaging employees is one of the top-five most important challenges. Not surprisingly, therefore, international business consulting companies have developed their own engagement concepts and proprietary survey tools, and they claim that employee engagement drives business success. On the basis on large, international databases, covering various industries, these companies estimate that roughly 20% of all employees are highly engaged in their work, whereas another 20% is actively disengaged. The remaining group of about 60% is moderately engaged (Attridge, 2009).

Although the definitions that are used by consulting companies differ at first glance, employee engagement is essentially conceived in terms of: (i) *organizational commitment*, more particularly affective commitment (i.e., the emotional attachment to the organization) and continuance commitment (i.e., the desire to stay with the organization), and (ii) *extra-role behavior* (i.e., discretionary behavior that promotes the effective functioning of the organization). Conceptualized this way, employee engagement constitutes a blend of two existing psychological concepts.

The first scholar who conceptualized engagement at work was Kahn (1990), an ethnographic researcher, who described it as the “... harnessing of organization member’s selves to their work roles: in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, emotionally, and mentally during

role performances” (p. 694). In other words, engaged employees put a lot of effort in their work because they identify with it. In its turn, engagement is assumed to produce positive outcomes, both at the individual level (personal growth and development) as well as at the organizational level (performance quality).

Work engagement is also considered as the positive antithesis of burnout. Contrary to those who suffer from burnout, engaged employees have a sense of energetic and effective connection with their work, and instead of feeling stressful and demanding they look on their work as challenging. Accordingly, engagement is characterized by energy, involvement, and efficacy – the direct opposites of the three burnout dimensions (Maslach and Leiter, 1997). In this view, engagement and burnout are inherently linked and should therefore be assessed with the same instrument.

Alternatively, engagement is regarded as an independent, distinct concept, that is, negatively related to burnout. It is defined in its own right as “... a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002, p. 74). Vigor is characterized by high-levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one’s work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties. Dedication refers to being strongly involved in one’s work, and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Absorption is characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one’s work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work.

For Kahn (1990) the key reference of engagement is the work *role*, whereas for those who consider engagement as the antipode of burnout, it is the employee’s work *activity*, or the work itself. In business contexts, the reference is neither the work role nor the work activity but the organization. Furthermore, both academic conceptualizations that define engagement in its own right agree that it entails a behavioral-energetic (vigor), an emotional (dedication), and a cognitive (absorption) component.

In an attempt to integrate the business and academic views on engagement, Macey and Schneider (2008) used a very broad description

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of engagement as "... a desirable condition [that] has an organizational purpose, and connotes involvement, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, focused effort, and energy" (p. 4). Their comprehensive framework for understanding engagement includes: (i) positive views of life and work, or "trait engagement" (e.g., conscientiousness, trait positive affect, proactive personality); (ii) feelings of energy and absorption or "state engagement" (e.g., satisfaction, involvement, empowerment); and (iii) extra-role behavior or "behavioral engagement" (e.g., organizational citizenship behavior, personal initiative, role expansion).

Engagement research has focused on (i) the meaning and measurement of work engagement; (ii) antecedents of engagement; (iii) consequences of engagement; (iv) state work engagement; and (v) building work engagement.

MEANING AND MEASUREMENT OF WORK ENGAGEMENT

Work engagement can be assessed with brief self-report questionnaires. The most extensively researched questionnaire that is used in business contexts is Gallup's Q¹², which has been designed as a management tool. Rather than assessing the experience of engagement as a psychological state, the Q¹² taps its antecedents in terms of perceived job resources such as role clarity, social support, and feedback. On the basis of this information, managers may improve job resources.

The most often used instrument to measure enduring engagement is the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010; Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002) that includes a subscale for each of the three engagement dimensions: vigor, dedication, and absorption. The UWES has been validated not only in most European countries but also in North America, Africa, Asia, and Australia. Confirmatory factor analyses have repeatedly shown that the fit of the hypothesized three-factor structure to the data is superior to that of alternative factor models. In addition, the internal consistencies of the three subscales are sufficient in each study. Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova (2006) developed a short nine-item version of the UWES and provided evidence for

its cross-national validity. They showed that the three engagement dimensions are moderately strong and positively related.

Generally speaking, levels of engagement are higher among those with complex, professional jobs with high-job control (i.e., entrepreneurs, managers, farmers, teachers, artists) as compared to those with less skillful and autonomous jobs (i.e., blue collar workers, home care staff, and retail workers). Also, it seems that levels of engagement are lower in Asian countries (especially Japan) as compared to other regions. No systematic gender differences seem to exist, but older workers are slightly more engaged than their younger colleagues. Finally, enduring work engagement seems to be fairly stable across time, at least for periods up to three years.

Work engagement differs from other psychological states such as job satisfaction and workaholism. In contrast to engagement that connotes activation (enthusiasm, alertness, excitement, elation), satisfaction connotes satiation (contentment, calmness, serenity, relaxation). Research confirms that engaged employees outperform satisfied employees (Rich, Lepine, and Crawford, 2010). Although at first glance some similarities may exist between workaholics and engaged employees, their underlying motivation differs fundamentally. Engaged employees work hard because work is challenging and fun, whereas workaholics are motivated by a compulsive inner drive they cannot resist. Or put differently, the former are intrinsically motivated and the latter are extrinsically motivated; that is, they strive to meet external standards of self-worth and social approval, which they have internalized.

ANTECEDENTS OF WORK ENGAGEMENT

Previous studies have consistently shown that job and personal resources are positively associated with work engagement (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008; Bakker and Leiter, 2010). *Job resources* refer to those physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that may: (i) reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs; (ii) be functional in achieving work goals; or (iii) stimulate personal growth, learning, and development (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008;

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Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Personal resources are positive self-evaluations that are linked to resiliency and refer to individuals' sense of their ability to successfully control and have an impact on their environment (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2003). Job resources that predict work engagement may differ in each organization, but important resources are opportunities for development, performance feedback, autonomy, skill variety, transformational leadership, justice, and social support from colleagues and supervisors. In addition, it has been shown that personal resources like self-efficacy, optimism, organizational-based self-esteem, and the abilities to perceive and regulate emotions are antecedents of work engagement. Finally, engagement is not only easily positively related to job demands that are stressful but also appeal to employees' curiosity, competence, and thoroughness, the so-called job challenges, such as job responsibility, workload, cognitive demands, and time urgency (for overviews, see Albrecht, 2010; Bakker and Leiter, 2010).

The Job Demands – Resources model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008) is one of the most often used models to explain engagement. Accordingly, job and personal resources become more salient and gain their motivational potential when employees are confronted with high job demands. Such conditions represent the so-called “active jobs,” in which employees become motivated to actively learn and develop their skills. Thus, research has shown that job resources like variability in the required professional skills and appreciation from colleagues are most predictive of work engagement under conditions of high-job demands (e.g., high workload, emotionally demanding interactions with clients).

CONSEQUENCES OF WORK ENGAGEMENT

The possible consequences of engagement pertain to positive job-related attitudes, health and well-being, extra-role behavior, and job performance. Compared to those who do not feel engaged, those who feel engaged are more committed to the organization, are less often absent, and they do not intend to leave the organization. Also, engaged employees experience positive emotions, and enjoy very good mental

and psychosomatic health, particularly when compared with workaholics. Furthermore, they exhibit personal initiative and have a strong motivation to learn. Taken together, this suggests that engaged workers seem to be able and willing to go the extra mile.

Those who are engaged perform better. For instance, engaged employees deliver superior service quality, as perceived by their customers. They also report less errors, are less often involved in occupational injuries and accidents, show more innovative work behavior, and are better rated by their supervisors in terms of effectiveness and job performance than less engaged employees. A meta-analysis that included almost 8,000 business-units of 36 companies (Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes, 2002) showed that levels of engagement are positively related to business-unit performance (i.e., customer satisfaction and loyalty, profitability, productivity, turnover, and safety). This suggests that engaged workers can indeed offer competitive advantage to organizations.

There are at least four reasons why engaged workers perform better than nonengaged workers (Bakker, 2011). First, engaged employees often experience positive emotions, including happiness, joy, and enthusiasm. These positive emotions seem to broaden people's thought-action repertoire, implying that they constantly work on their personal resources. Second, engaged workers experience better health. This means that they can focus and dedicate all their energy resources and skills to their work. Third, engaged employees create their own job and personal resources so that they stay engaged. Finally, engaged workers transfer their engagement to others in their immediate environment. As in most organizations, performance is the result of collaborative effort; the engagement of one person may transfer to others and indirectly improve team performance.

STATE WORK ENGAGEMENT

Most studies to date have looked at differences between individuals regarding work engagement, and the possible reasons for these differences – for example, working conditions and personal resources (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). However, recent studies have shown

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that engagement may also fluctuate within persons from day to day. Depending on what happens during the day, employees show higher or lower levels of engagement in their work activities. State work engagement concerns within-person fluctuations of vigor, dedication, and absorption over short periods of time (e.g., days or weeks; Sonnentag, Dormann, and Demerouti, 2010). Within-person variations are commonly measured with diary designs that allow capturing the short-term dynamics of the experience. Research has shown that on an average about 40% of the variance in engagement may be attributed to within-person fluctuations. Although general engagement levels have a positive relationship with state work engagement, typically, most variance in engagement is explained by daily events, like supportive interactions with colleagues, the daily experience of autonomy, and positive feedback from clients. Daily fluctuations in personal resources have also been positively related to state work engagement.

BUILDING WORK ENGAGEMENT

Organizations can increase employee engagement by using particular HRM-strategies (for overviews, see Bakker, Oerlemans, and Ten Brummelhuis, (in press); Schaufeli and Salanova, 2008). For instance, employee engagement can be improved through better job design by using the motivating potential of job resources. Also, job rotation and changing jobs might result in higher engagement levels because it challenges employees, increases their motivation, and stimulates learning and professional development.

Because of the “contagious” nature of work engagement, leaders have a special role in fostering engagement. Particularly, transformational leadership that provides a clear vision, inspires and motivates, offers intellectual challenges, and shows interest in the needs of the employees, is successful in accomplishing this. In addition, management should focus on employee strengths instead of weaknesses.

Training programs in organizations that aim at increasing work engagement should focus on building efficacy beliefs. High-levels of self-efficacy set in motion an upward gain-spiral

that boosts engagement and subsequent performance, which in its turn increases efficacy beliefs and so on. To the extent that employees are able to keep developing themselves throughout their careers, their levels of engagement are likely to remain high. Career planning and development boils down to increasing employee’s employability by ensuring continuous personal and professional development.

Engaged employees are not passive but instead actively change their work environment, if needed. Employees may actively change the content or design of their jobs by choosing tasks, negotiating different job content, and assigning meaning to their tasks or jobs. This process of employees shaping their jobs has been referred to as job crafting (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). Engaged workers are most likely to engage in job crafting (Bakker, 2011). As a consequence of job crafting, employees may be able to increase their person–job fit and to experience enhanced meaning in their work – thus to further build their own work engagement.

See also *burnout*; *commitment*; *commitment*; *motivation*; *workaholism*•

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