

Work Engagement: A Review of Some Antecedents and Consequences Meenakshi Gokhale*

Abstract

Work engagement is one of the highly studied variables in positive organisational psychology. The concept of engagement was first introduced by Kahn (1990) and it was popularised in organisations through surveys conducted by the Gallup organisation using their Q12. Maslach and Leiter (1997) proposed that burnout and engagement was a bipolar concept. Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) proposed that work engagement was a relatively stable attitude characterised by vigor, dedication, and absorption. This view of engagement has been extensively studied, and various antecedents and consequences have been the focus of study. Some of the antecedents include job characteristic, social support, job demands and resources, and similar attitudes. Some of the consequences include turnover intention, job satisfaction, organisational commitment, wellbeing and health, organisational citizenship behaviours.

Key words: Work Engagement, Antecedents, Consequences

The aim of this article is to provide a systematic review of one core concept in the field of organisational psychology: Work Engagement. The development of this concept is discussed first, followed by a review of the antecedents and consequences.

Work Engagement

The concept of 'personal engagement' was introduced by Kahn (1990), who proposed that employees consciously make a decision to invest themselves completely in their work-role on the basis of their previous experiences at work. Since the 1990s, Gallup has been conducting an annual survey to measure the amount of employee engagement using their Q12 Survey questions. Gallup's definition of engagement bordered on satisfaction and has been used in research in the management field. But there was a dearth of academic research on this topic in psychology. The research on engagement increased after Maslach and Leiter (1997) conceptualised it as the opposite pole of burnout, while Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) argued that it was a persistent and pervasive positive psychological state. Saks (2006) has conceptualised engagement as having two dimensions – job engagement and organisational engagement. Swanberg, McKechnie, Ojha and James (2011) have defined engagement to be multidimensional in nature having cognitive, behavioural and emotional dimensions.

Burnout has been studied in organisational psychology since Freudenberg (1974) first described the phenomenon of emotional depletion and loss of motivation. Maslach and Jackson (1981) measured the experienced burnout in human-services employees. Maslach and Leiter (1997) conceptualised that engagement had three dimensions which were directly opposite of the burnout dimension, viz. energy vs. emotional exhaustion, involvement vs. depersonalisation and efficacy vs. lack of personal accomplishment. Maslach and her colleagues theorised that the employees having low scores on the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) would be 'engaged' employees. But Schaufeli, Salanova,

Gonzalez-Roma and Bakker (2002) argue that engagement and burnout are not bipolar dimensions but separate concepts in themselves. A person high on burnout may not necessarily be engaged, nor would a person low on engagement be experiencing burnout.

Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) have defined work engagement as a "positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (p.4)". Vigor is conceptualised as a state of high energy at work with an enthusiasm to put in an effort at work and a determination to complete the task overcoming whatever hurdles faced. Dedication is conceptualised as being immersed in your own work and having zeal and motivation and experiencing a sense of importance and pride in your own job. Absorption is a state of mind where one is engrossed and fully concentrating on one's own work, without the sensation of time passing by. Further, it is conceptualised that work engagement is "more persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behaviour" (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003, p.4-5). The authors have suggested possible causes or antecedents as well as consequences of work engagement which have been extensively studied. This paper presents a summary review of such studies.

Antecedents of Work Engagement

Work engagement is one of the highly studied variables in positive organisational psychology. Some of the antecedents studied include job characteristics, job demands and resources, personality traits, and social support.

Job Characteristics

The Job Characteristics Theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) states that workers are motivated through job characteristics, viz. skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback. Therefore, Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) proposed that work engagement which is indicative of the motivation of employees would have a positive

correlation with the job characteristics. Various studies support this assumption. Schaufeli, Taris and Van Rhenen (2008) reported a positive association of the job characteristics with work engagement and a negative association of long working hours with work engagement. May, Gilson and Harter (2004) noted that perceived meaningfulness mediated the relationship between job enrichment and work engagement. Saks (2006) has reported that job characteristics predict work engagement for a sample of 102 employees. Further, a review conducted by Shuck, Reio and Rocco (2011) also noted that the job characteristics such as role clarity, job challenge, and supportive supervision have a positive association with work engagement. Christian, Garza and Slaughter (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 91 studies reporting 770 effect sizes. They noted that the job characteristics including task variety, task significance, feedback, and autonomy have a positive correlation with work engagement. A recent narrative synthesis of the antecedents of work engagement confirmed the same (Bailey, Madden, Alfes & Fletcher 2017). Further, it was noted by Khusanova, Kang and Choi (2021) that the relationship between meaningfulness of job and work engagement was negatively moderated by task interdependence among public sector employees.

Job demands and Resources

Apart from job characteristic, the most highly studied variable has been the Job Demands-Resources first proposed by Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner and Schaufeli (2001). In this study, it was noted that job control had a positive association with work engagement while job demands had an association with exhaustion and health complaints. They proposed that job characteristics can be classified into two categories – job demands and job resources. Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti and Schaufeli (2009) conducted a longitudinal study to examine the relationships between personal resources, job resources and work engagement. They noted that a reciprocal relationship existed between the variables resulting in a positive gain spiral where personal and job resources enhanced engagement which in turn further enhanced the personal and job resources. This was further confirmed in the study where job resources were positively related to work engagement and self-efficacy which in turn was positively related to the job resources (Llorens-Gumbau & Salanova-Soria, 2014).

In another study, it was noted that when an employee appraises job demands as challenges, they had a positive correlation with work engagement (Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010). Petrou, Demerouti, Peeters, Schaufeli, and Hetland (2012) also noted that job resources and challenges had a positive correlation with work engagement.

Demerouti, Bakker and Gevers (2015) studied the concept of job crafting where the employees seek out resources and try to reduce the job demands, and

noted that such behaviour had a positive relationship with contextual performance and creativity mediated by work engagement. Similar results have been noted by Ellis, Fritz and Demsky (2015) where job crafting behaviours aimed at increasing job resources were positively associated with daily work engagement.

Social Support

Social support is the extent to which an employee perceives that he/she has opportunities for help and guidance from supervisors and colleagues. Research has shown that work engagement is enhanced when employees receive coaching from their superiors and receive emotional support (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli & Salanova 2007). Saks (2006) noted that perceived organisational support had a positive association with work engagement. Lee (2012) also reported that the psychological climate of the organisation (managerial support, interdepartmental service and communication) have a positive correlation with work engagement. In the meta-analysis conducted by Christian, Garza and Slaughter (2011), it was noted that the average correlation between work engagement and social support was moderate ($M_p = .32$). In a second meta-analysis, Bailey et al. (2017) also reported a similar outcome, noting that perceived organisational support has an association with work engagement.

Personal Traits

Another set of antecedents could be put under the umbrella term of 'personal traits'. This would include the various individual characteristics such as personality, self-efficacy, commitment, and other work-related attitudes.

Core self-evaluations are one of the highly studied variables. Longitudinal studies indicated that three of the four aspects of core self-evaluations (resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy) are predictors of work engagement (Bakker, Gierveld, & Van Rijswijk, 2006; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007; Xanthopoulou, Heuven, Demerouti, Baker, & Schaufeli, 2008). Further, Lee (2012) found that core self-evaluations have a positive association with work engagement. Kong (2009) found that there were individual differences in work engagement. Male employees scored higher than female employees on absorption and vigor while females score higher on dedication. Married employees scored lower on all the dimensions of work engagement than unmarried employees, while it was noted that length of service did not show a single trajectory: there was a fall in engagement for employees working for 6-10 years, after which it kept rising. Shuck, Reio and Rocco (2011) reported that job fit and affective commitment were significantly related to work engagement.

In the meta-analysis reported by Christian, Garza and Slaughter (2011), it was noted that work engagement was significantly positively correlated with problem-solving ($M_p = .28$), transformational leadership ($M_p =$

.27) and leader-member exchange (LMX) ($M_p = .31$). They also noted that work engagement had a positive association with the personality trait of Conscientiousness ($M_p = .42$), Positive Affect ($M_p = .43$), and proactive personality ($M_p = .44$).

Consequences of Work Engagement

Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) have proposed that work engagement would have an effect on various consequences such as organisational commitment, job satisfaction, turnover intentions, organisational citizenship behaviours and wellbeing of the employee.

Work-related Attitudes

Job satisfaction is the feeling of contentment that an employee experiences at work, and organisational commitment refers to the feeling of belongingness that an employee experiences at work, or the psychological attachment to the job and organisation. Organisational citizenship behaviours (OCB) are a set of behaviours which may not be directly recognized by the formal reward system but are productive in nature.

Sonnetag (2003) studied the work-related consequences of recovery during leisure time over a period of five consecutive workdays. They noted that the day-level recovery had a positive association with day-level work engagement and day-level personal initiative and learning motivation. Work engagement has been found to be a significant predictor of both job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Saks, 2006; Lee, 2012). Saks (2006) also noted that work engagement significantly predicted organisational OCBs as well as individual OCBs. In the meta-analysis conducted by Bailey et al (2017), it was noted that a large number of studies have been conducted on the prediction of work-related attitudes from work engagement. A positive correlation was reported between work engagement and organisational commitment, life satisfaction and job satisfaction. Some of the work-related attitudes were labelled as extra-role performance and a positive correlation was noted between work engagement and constructs such as citizenship behaviour, personal initiative, innovative work behaviour, and knowledge sharing and creativity.

A recent meta-analysis on the outcomes of work engagement across public, semipublic and private sectors revealed that the relationship between work engagement and job satisfaction as well as commitment was stronger for the public sector as compared to the semipublic and private sectors (Borst et al, 2020).

Turnover Intention

Turnover intention is the intention of the employee to leave the current place of employment for better prospects. Studies have shown that engaged employees were more likely to stay engaged, will employees not experiencing work engagement had higher levels of turnover intention (Gubman 2004; Lloyd, 2008; Maslach et al., 2001; Saks, 2006;

Shuck, Reio & Rocco, 2011). This finding has been highlighted in the meta-analysis done by Bailey et al. (2017) where twenty-four studies reported a negative association of work engagement with turnover intentions. Borst et al. (2020) noted that the negative association between work engagement and turnover intentions was higher within the public and private sector in comparison to the semipublic sector.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing or wellness is the state of physical, mental and emotional fitness that individuals experience. Schaufeli, Taris and Van Rhenen (2008) reported that work engagement did have an association with perceived health. Gokhale (2015), as well as Thakaar and Gokhale (2016), reported a positive association of work engagement with the Work-Related Quality of Life (WRQoL). The meta-analysis of Bailey et al. (2017) reported that all studies reported a positive correlation between work engagement and life satisfaction and a negative correlation between work engagement and burnout.

Performance

Various aspects of employee performance have been studied. Shuck, Reio and Rocco (2011) reported that work engagement had a significant correlation with discretionary effort, i.e. the voluntary efforts an employee puts in towards the organisational goals beyond the minimum work required. Christian, Garza and Slaughter (2011) reported a positive correlation of work engagement with task performance ($M_p = .43$) and contextual performance ($M_p = .34$). The exhaustive meta-analysis of Bailey et al (2017) reported that although the studies report a positive association of work engagement with performance, most of the studies have focused on the employees' perceptions of performance rather than objective performance data. The studies using objective performance data using third-party ratings or diary methods did yield an association of individual task performance with work engagement. It was also noted that higher-level performance outcomes such as team performance, quality of care and customer loyalty were also positively correlated with work engagement.

Summary

Work engagement is a highly studied variable cited in over 3000 studies (according to Google Scholar). Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) have proposed various antecedents and consequences of work engagement which have since been extensively studied. One major antecedent studied has been the job characteristics (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) and results indicate that the various job characteristics of task variety, autonomy and feedback are having a positive association with work engagement. The positive association of work engagement with job crafting indicates that the job characteristics are indeed an important antecedent of work engagement. Perceived organisational support and other personal traits such as core self-evaluations, leader-member

exchange (LMX) relationships, proactive personality and Conscientiousness also predict work engagement. The consequences of work engagement have not been as extensively studied. Most of the studies have been cross-sectional in nature with very few studies being longitudinal in nature. Work engagement has a positive association with performance both at the individual task level as well as at the higher level such as team performance. One consistent finding has been that work engagement has a negative relationship with turnover intention. There has been a positive correlation reported of work engagement with job satisfaction, organisational commitment and organisational citizenship behaviours. Although these have been treated as consequences, their role as consequences through longitudinal studies has not been explored sufficiently. Wellbeing and health at work have been the least studied variables. Work engagement has a negative association with burnout and a positive association with life satisfaction. But a longitudinal study has not been conducted with other variables associated with health at work.

Work engagement is a variable which has been extensively studied. The next direction of study in this field would be to further explore how this variable is related to personality traits, leadership qualities, and conducting a longitudinal study to find the impact of work engagement on employees' performance. Another possible direction of study is to further explore the holistic concept of engagement given by Swanberg et al (2011) who have defined engagement to be multidimensional in nature having cognitive, behavioural and emotional dimensions. This goes beyond the construct conceived by Schaufeli and Bakker (2003).

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