

Employee Engagement: What is it and how do we go about it?

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Abstract— Although numerous scholars has improved our understanding of the implications of engagement, relatively little attention has been paid to its conceptual definition. This paper provides a conceptual review of its definition and examined the contextual characteristics that define engagement. Specifically, the paper discusses some debatable meaning of engagement that yields inconsistent views from scholars. Based on the review, this paper found that engagement focuses upon the positive and fulfilling aspects of doing work. For a person to be engaged, he or she must be vigorous, dedicated and absorbed in their job. This positive reflection is in line with the movement of positive organizational behavior in seeking to understand how individuals thrive at work..

Keywords— Employee engagement, dedication, vigor, absorption.

I. INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement is a relatively new concept in the academic community but has been heavily promoted by consulting companies [1]. Scholars and practitioners in the HRM field tend to agree that the fundamental concept of engagement may help explain behavior at work, but they present different definitions of it. Thus, while the concept of employee engagement seems on the surface to be compelling, the concept lacks clarity in its definition. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the conceptual disparities among different schools of thought on the definition of employee engagement in order to develop a conceptual foundation for engagement.

Using Kahn's [2] seminal work as the point of departure, the concept of engagement was first introduced by him to explain how people are personally engaged and disengaged at work. He defined 'job engagement' as 'the harnessing of organizational members' selves to their work roles where people express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances' (Kahn 1990, p. 694). This definition clarified the concept of engagement as the manifestation of being 'present at work'. Being 'present at

work' requires a particular mental state. In order to be engaged, an individual has to think, feel and act on their job. In other words, this mental state constitutes a driving force which requires physical, cognitive and emotional resources. These resources can be enhanced in certain psychological conditions: meaningfulness (feeling that one is receiving a return on the investment of the self in the work role performance), safety (a sense of being able to show and employ oneself without fear of negative consequences to one's self-image or status at work) and availability (a sense of possessing the physical, emotional and psychological resources needed for investing oneself in the work role). These psychological conditions serve as the mechanism by which individuals connect to their role performance. In contrast, disengagement refers to withdrawal from the work role. The dominant contribution by Kahn is the identification of the conditions in which engagement would be likely to exist.

However, Kahn's conceptualization has a weakness. When he explored the psychological conditions, he did not take into account a theoretical conceptualization of engagement. One of the reasons for this is the lack of literature on employee engagement at that time, i.e. 1990s, and a dependency on other psychological constructs such as job involvement and commitment at work. The issues relating to job involvement and commitment identified by Kahn help explain personal engagement and disengagement at work. However, personal engagement at work in this context focuses on the 'role' of the individual at work. Kahn expressed engagement as the role people bring to work, and he proposed that how they behave at work is attributable to certain conditions. This school of thought lacks the comprehensiveness required to address what employee engagement truly is. Despite Kahn's work, researchers did not explore the construct until research into burnout contributed to a reintroduction of the idea.

Maslach and Leiter [3] reintroduced the concept of engagement as an energetic state of involvement that is posited to be the opposite of burnout. Engaged employees who are seen as energetic and take their work as a challenge appear as the opposite to burnt-out employees who are stressed and see their work as demanding (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter & Taris 2008). Maslach and Leiter (1997) added to their argument by asserting that, if an employee is not engaged, he or she will be

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more likely to move to the other end of the continuum and experience burnout. The state of engagement is characterized as having high energy (as opposed to exhaustion), high involvement (as opposed to cynicism) and efficacy (as opposed to lack of efficacy). Gonzalez-Roma, Schaufeli, Bakker and Lloret (2006) supported this view and further characterized it by activation, identification and absorption. Activation refers to having a sense of energy, identification is a positive relationship towards work, and absorption is being fully immersed in one's job. This school of thought improved on Kahn's (1990) definition of engagement as being 'present at work' by adding these three dimensions.

Nevertheless, this school of thought supported the notion that if an employee is not engaged, he or she will be likely to move to the other end of the continuum and experience burnout. The argument that engagement is the antithesis of burnout is this school's main weakness. Engagement is not the antithesis of burnout. When an employee is not engaged, it does not signify that he or she will be experiencing burnout. For example, an employee who does not have a good 'fit' with his or her job might find their job uninteresting and thus do their work routinely just to complete their tasks. However, he or she may not be suffering from exhaustion or burnout. The issue of whether burnout and engagement lie at the extreme ends of a continuum contributes to the theoretical foundation of this study. Although a study by Gonzalez-Roma and colleagues [4] yielded empirical evidence supporting the conceptualization that the core burnout and engagement dimensions are conceptual opposites, the theory only supports two dimensions (i.e., vigor is the conceptual opposite of emotional exhaustion, and dedication is the conceptual opposite of cynicism). First, it must be emphasized that although burnout and engagement are conceptual opposites, they are still distinct concepts that do not lie on a continuum, and so different measures are required for assessing the construct. Secondly, by excluding 'absorption', these two dimensions do not provide a comprehensive meaning for 'job engagement'. Thus this approach is not the best approach for explaining employee engagement.

Other scholars such as Britt [5] have used the concept of 'self-engagement', which involves feeling a sense of responsibility for and commitment to a performance domain so that performance 'matters' to the individual. Britt's approach is practical in defining engagement at work by using the Triangle Model of Responsibility (i.e., engagement is feeling responsible at work), but the definition is not a sufficient one because of the overlapping issue with the commitment construct. Britt, Castro and Adler (2005) later argued that self-engagement involves a psychological state where individuals are committed to perform and put much effort into work. This school of thought emphasized the utility of the Triangle Model of Responsibility developed by Schelenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy and Doherty (1994). Thus, an employee is engaged

according to the responsibility they feel for work, which is dependent upon three elements: event, prescriptions and identity images.

Similar to Kahn's view, this school of thought emphasized the elements in which engagement exists and gave little consideration to the theoretical foundation of engagement. This study argues that a commitment to perform should not be mistakenly equated to engagement as they are distinctly different constructs. Thus, there is an overlapping definition of engagement and commitment in Britt's notion of self-engagement. Commitment focuses on the long-term effect of behavior at work while engagement focuses on the short-term effect (i.e., daily behavior at work). Another weakness is that solely referring engagement to feeling 'responsible' for work does not explain the whole perception of being engaged at work. A person could feel responsible for work but not enthusiastic or positive about doing the work. When a work-related experience is neither positive nor characterized by enthusiasm, it cannot be called engagement. Thus, the definition produced by this school of thought does not clarify the concept of engagement and is therefore not appropriate to be adopted by potential studies in engagement.

Engagement has also been defined as an individual's involvement, satisfaction and enthusiasm for work [see 6]. This definition was derived from items in the Gallup Workplace Audit (GWA 1999), developed by the Gallup organization, which were based on employee perceptions of work characteristics. Perceptions of work characteristics resulted in this definition having conceptual overlaps with job involvement and job satisfaction. First, job involvement is a concept that focuses on how a job helps define a person's identity (Lawler & Hall 1970). A person who is involved in their job: (a) finds their job motivating, (b) is committed to their work and organization and (c) engages in professional relationships with co-workers (Brown 1996). Thus, as Hallberg and Schaufeli [7] argued, job involvement is a function of the individual and should be seen as an antecedent in a research model, whereas engagement, on the other hand, should be seen as a dependent variable in a research model. Furthermore, this definition overlaps with the term 'job satisfaction'. Job satisfaction explains how content an individual is with his or her job; it is a pleasurable emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job (Locke 1976). Twelve of the thirteen items used in the GWA explain the variance in job satisfaction. Concepts derived from the literature on satisfaction were used in explaining engagement. Clearly, there are conceptual overlaps with both of these constructs describing engagement.

This school of thought captures only one domain of employee engagement, i.e., being enthusiastic about work. Being strongly engaged in one's work does require a considerable sense of significance and enthusiasm at work.

However, due to the fact that the definition of engagement was not theoretically developed and relied too much on perceptions of work characteristics, the definition from this school of thought is inadequate in explaining what engagement is. Perceptions of work characteristics, job involvement and satisfaction could be factors that affect employee engagement and not the concept itself. Clearly, there are conceptual overlaps in the constructs used by Harter, Schmidt and Hayes [6] to describe engagement.

Recently, employee engagement was recategorized as vigor [see 8]. According to this school of thought, to realize that employee engagement is a different construct, the only non-confounding construct that should be measured is vigor. 'Vigor' as defined by Shirom (2003) refers to an individual's feeling that they possess physical strength, emotional energy and cognitive liveliness. This definition refers to an affective state that individuals attribute to their job and workplace. Vigor in this respect focuses on the notion of having 'energy' at work. It does not refer to behavioral responses to events at work such as dedication to work, which is a significant characteristic of employee engagement. Thus, adopting the concept of vigor (i.e., energy) does not capture a holistic concept of engagement. Clearly, this school of thought only covers one facet of engagement. For this reason, this school of thought's definition of engagement cannot be used to conceptualize employee engagement.

Having presented all the arguments, this paper contends that engagement does not lie along the same continuum tangentially opposite burnout but is, in fact, an independent concept. If an individual does not experience burnout (at one end of the continuum), it does not mean that he or she is experiencing engagement (at the other end of the continuum). Employee engagement is a state of mind which is a pervasive affective-cognitive state requiring a person's attention and immersion in their job. In order to give full attention to one's job and to be fully immersed, one needs to be positive and enthusiastic about it. As an independent concept, employee engagement can best be defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption [9]. These three dimensions seem to provide the most precise, valid and comprehensive conceptualization thus far [see 10; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli, Martinez, Pinto, Salanova & Bakker, 2002, 11-14]. From the psychological perspective, engagement is a state-like phenomenon which is portrayed as an affective-cognitive state-like condition. It is not a temporary state such as mood nor as relatively non-malleable as fixed characteristics such as personality traits [15]. It is deemed quite stable.

The first element of employee engagement, vigor, is a positive affective response to an employee's interactions with the elements of the job as well as the environment. The concept of vigor is drawn from the view that individuals share

a basic motivation to obtain, retain and protect the things that they value, such as resources (in this case, energetic resources) [16]. Energetic resources refer to physical strength, emotional energy and cognitive liveliness. According to Schaufeli et al. (2002), vigor is characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in the work and persistence even in the face of difficulties. Vigor relates to psychological capacities for exercising will power and developing alternative ways to achievement, optimism in expecting future success, and resilience to persist in the pursuit of goals. A person who is vigorous at work distinctly represents an engaged employee.

The second element of employee engagement is dedication. This refers to being strongly involved in one's work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge (Schaufeli et al. 2002). Being dedicated to one's job includes motivated acts such as working hard and giving the best that one can at work. Work not only seems to be important but also requires self-disciplined behavior, as demonstrated by following rules, taking the initiative to solve a problem at work and exceeding one's personal job requirements [17]. A person who is dedicated to work is veritably engaged to his or her job.

The third element of employee engagement is absorption. This describes the feeling of contentment while performing work. Absorption represents a state of being fully concentrated on and happily engrossed in work, a state in which time passes quickly and one has difficulty in detaching oneself from work. This domain of employee engagement concerns the hedonic aspect of work. For a person to be engaged, he or she should enjoy the work and find pleasure in performing it. Thus, a happy and focused employee embodies an engaged employee. A study using 30 in-depth interviews confirmed that absorption is a relevant aspect of engagement [Schaufeli & Bakker, 18]. The study argued that this facet of engagement relates to individual efficacy through having the confidence to be absorbed and the resilience to be persistently absorbed in a task.

To sum up, different school of thoughts have conceptualized employee engagement in various ways. The lack of agreement among scholars in establishing a solid foundation for the definition of employee engagement has caused many gaps in the research area. Some have defined engagement as being present at work, some as the opposite to burnout on a continuum, and some have overlapped it with other constructs such as job satisfaction and job involvement. The arguments presented in the above sections justify why Schaufeli et al.'s (2002) conceptualization of engagement is most thorough and precise. Employee engagement focuses upon the positive and fulfilling aspects of doing work. For a person to be engaged, he or she must be vigorous, dedicated and absorbed in their job. This positive reflection is in line with the movement of

positive organizational behavior in seeking to understand how individuals thrive at work. For this reason, Schaufeli et al.'s (2002) view on engagement is seen as more dominant and comprehensive than others. Given these key attributes and following Schaufeli et al.'s [13] conceptualization, this paper supports the view that employee engagement is a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption. This definition distinguishes it from other established measures of positive employment states such as job satisfaction and job involvement.

II. CONCLUSION

Employee engagement is a concept with numerous definitions. In order to reduce the ambiguity, each potential research needs to clarify the uniqueness of its definition. Organizations that measure employee engagement should proceed with caution due to concept crossover and overlaps with other concepts such as job involvement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. An accurate and validated definition of its measures will help organizations assess employees fairly and precisely determine what thrives employees at work.

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