

A Conceptual paper: The Association between Traits and Work Engagement: Can HR elements be moderators?

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Introduction

Intensifying global competition and the rising demands for better quality services and products require organizations to engage in effective Human Resource Management (HRM) programmes. This ultimately influences the way employees are managed in organisations. In order to survive and create sustainable growth and development, new thinking and approaches are crucial to organisations (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008) . As a result, numerous articles that call for a more positive approach that builds on people at work rather than focusing on problem-coping strategies have been published (Avey, Luthans, & Mhatre, 2008; Luthans & Avolio, 2009; Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008; Luthans & Youssef, 2007; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). The proposed study responds to the call for more research on positive organisational behaviour by focusing on an emerging concept in organisational behaviour - employee engagement.

The emerging body of studies has attempted to establish the links between HR inputs and job engagement. Previous research has particularly focussed on the main affects of job engagement' antecedents (e.g. Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005; Bakker et al., 2007; Mauno, Kinnunen, & Ruokolainen, 2007). Job resources (e.g., opportunities for professional development, role clarity, and task variety) are important correlates of job engagement particularly in the presence of job demands (e.g., work overload) (Hakanen, Schaufeli, & Ahola, 2008; Saks, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). These antecedents do not fully explain the role of individual and environmental factors that affect job engagement. Thus, apart from focusing on its antecedents, this study seeks to understand how well job engagement is

predicated by social, organisational, and individual factors. Figure 1 shows that these three HR input, namely social (empowering leaders' behaviours), organisational (HPWP), and individual (personality) may lead to job engagement. There are however extensive research that shows the positive effect of job engagement (i.e. HR outcome) on organisational performance (see Bakker et al.,2008; Britt, Thomas, & Dawson, 2006; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Medlin & Green, 2009; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009). Due to the aforementioned research, this study will not examine the impact of job engagement on performance as numerous studies have proven that the impact is significantly positive.

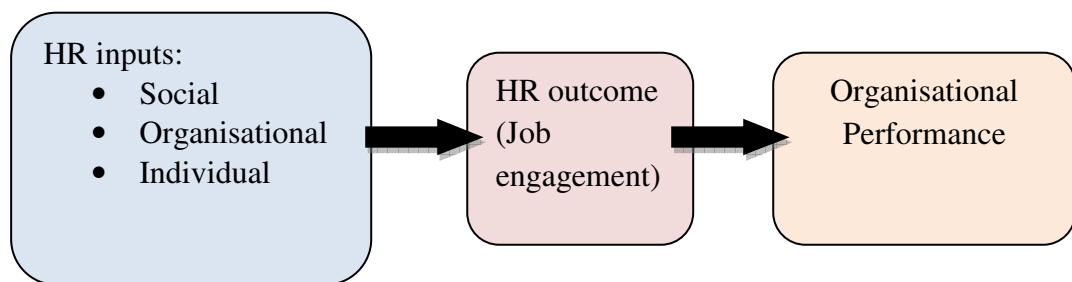


Figure 1 : Relationship between HR Input, HR Outcome and Organisational Performance

High Performance Work Practices (HPWP)

In the past two decades, there has been a shift in the understanding of human resource practices in organisations. A new model of organisational reform, HPWP, was popularised by Appelbaum and Batt (1994) encompassing 'post-Taylorist' practices, which denotes a set of management practices that embrace employee involvement and responsibility. Research on the effect of HPWP on organisations and employees has shown that it has mainly positive relationship to firm performance (see Appelbaum, 2002; Becker & Huselid, 1998), while the effect on employee outcomes are mixed and still unclear (see Kalmi & Kauhanen, 2008;

Ramsay, Scholarios, & Harley, 2000). The distinctive nature of HPWP stands on three grounds : (1) work organisation, (2) skills, and (3) motivation (Appelbaum, 2002).

First, the systematic nature of HPWP distinguishes it from previous approaches to work organisation (Harley, 2005) by an increased emphasis on participative decision making. The common aspects of work organisation suggested by Ramsay et al. (2000) are information sharing, management-employee meetings, employee surveys, formal teams and problem-solving groups. This new form of work organisation allows employees to voice their views, enabling employees to feel more empowered. Konrad (2006) proposes that participation generates engagement by affecting beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. The author further claims that the high-involvement in a job generates a positive attitude. When people participate in the new system, they become personally invested in making the system a success. Additionally, HPWP could produce behaviours that are indicative of highly engaged employees due to the fact that participation is encouraged. Employees seem to go beyond their job requirements in order to contribute to the organisation's success. Subsequently, it can be hypothesised that, as employees devote more effort, knowledge, and time to this system, it would over time generate a culture of highly engaging employees as claimed by Konrad (2006).

Second, increasing emphasis has been given to enhancing the skills of employees (Appelbaum, 2002; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990). In HPWP, workers are characterised as having high level of skills to facilitate participative work organisation. These skills are achieved by comprehensive training, induction programmes, and sophisticated recruitment and selection to hire appropriately skilled employees (Ramsay et al., 2000). When employees have the required skills to perform, it will induce how they are engaged at work. For instance, comprehensive training provides employees with the necessary skills to perform in their jobs in a more effective manner, probably causing them to become engaged.

Third, incentives are given as an aid to motivation to help prepare for a successful implementation of HPWP. In contrast to the 'old' reward systems that incorporate job-evaluated grade structures and seniority, the concept of reward systems in HPWP focuses on the notion of a 'fit' between rewards and the individual's effort, skills and contribution. Appelbaum (2002) argues that incentives should include intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, and give a long-term stake in the organisation. For example, high-discretion jobs could provide a form of intrinsic rewards and performance-related pay could provide extrinsic rewards. These rewards are most likely to induce job engagement as employees see the presence of HPWP as beneficial to them.

Combining these three components, usually termed a 'bundle of HR practices', is necessary to create HPWP within an organisation. Empirical evidence that establishes an association between HPWP and performance abounds (e.g., Becker & Huselid, 1998; Huselid, 1995; Luther, 2000; Zang, 2008). Nevertheless, the effects on employee outcomes have turned out to be mixed, with some researchers finding positive effects and others finding adverse effect (e.g., Danford et al., 2004; e.g., Kalmi & Kauhanen, 2008; Ramsay et al., 2000; White, Hill, McGovern, Mills, & Smeaton, 2003). The present study seeks to advance this discussion by acknowledging the association between 'the bundle of HR practices' and employee's experience. The assumption is that, if HPWP are properly configured, they may contribute significantly to employee job engagement.

As with the social exchange theory, it is proposed that employees will be motivated to engage in their jobs insofar as the latter are based on the foundation of a fair and balanced system of exchange (Blau, 1964). Due to HPWP, employees may find that their needs are being met by the opportunities and benefits that these practices provide (Huselid, 1995). In return, satisfied employees feel an obligation to put in more effort at work and to be more enthusiastic loyal to the organisation (Takeuchi, Chen, & Lepak, 2009). Enthusiasm and

loyalty reflect the concept of engagement in that the latter requires employees to be dedicated and enthusiastic about their job. Consequently, HPWP dimensions are expected to induce a higher level of engagement among employees since these ‘bundle of HR practices’ are regarded as being rewarding and fulfilling (See Figure 2). Specifically, it follows that:

Hypothesis 6: HPWP is significantly accountable for the variance in work engagement

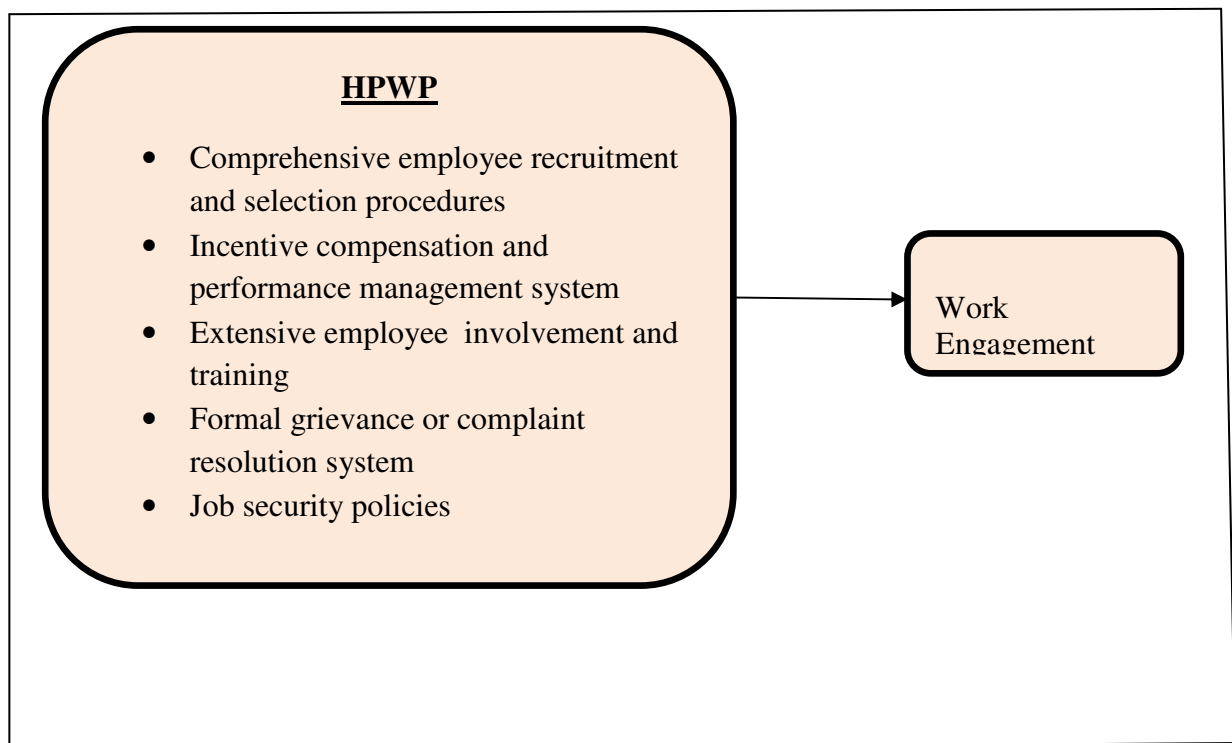


Figure 2 : The Relationship Between High Performance Work Practices (HPWP) and Job Engagement

Theoretical Foundation of Trait Activation

This section discusses the theoretical foundation of trait activation, which embraces the person-situation interactionist model. The section begins with the debate surrounding person-situation correspondence, then presents trait activation theory and ends with proposed hypotheses.

This study presents an interactionist model of job engagement that demonstrates the conditions in which a particular personality trait is likely to predict job engagement. This model offers a basis for improving personality measures in a person-environment fit. It does so by incorporating the Big Five personality and two socially and organisationally derived situational cues in the form of empowering leader behaviour and HPWP.

Allport (1937) first introduced the trait activation theory while discussing how behaviors are frequently inconsistent, given different situations. He argues that inconsistencies happen because different traits are activated to different degrees in different situations. This view has found support among many (e.g. Alston, 1975; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985; Kenrick, McCreath, Govern, King, & Bordin, 1990; McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953). The present study adopts the trait activation theory as articulated by Tett and Guterman (2000), who formalise the trait-situation relationship by contending that the behavioural expression of a trait requires arousal of that trait by trait-relevant situational cues. The thrust of this study is to determine in which situation a personality trait is likely to arise in behaviour. A situation is found to be relevant to a trait if it offer cues for the trait expression. For instance, there should not be much variability in aggression at a funeral service where aggressive behaviour is inappropriate. Such a situation is not relevant to aggression because it provides minimal cues for its expression.

Tett and Burnett's (2003) trait activation model integrates assertions about the process by which personality traits are linked to performance: First, traits are expressed in work behaviour as responses to trait-relevant situational cues. Second, sources of trait-relevant cues can be initiated at different levels, namely task, social, and organisational. The present research proposes two situational moderators of the personality-work behaviour relationship for job engagement. They are trait-relevant cues that are socially and organisationally

derived. I contend that the situational variables chosen for this study are relevant in identifying different personality effects of employees.

The Moderating Role of Organisational Cues (HPWP)

In relation to HPWP, the aim of this research is twofold: first, to determine whether or not HPWP (i.e., organisational facets) affect an employee's level of engagement (as discussed in Section 4.2); second, to fill the apparent void in past studies with respect to the heterogeneity of individual HPWP experiences. For example, some studies have concluded that not all employees participate in HPWP (Danford et al., 2004) and that employee characteristics may affect the probability of participating in HPWP (Kauhanen, 2009). The notion of individual heterogeneity in this research is central in advocating how best HPWP can be fully utilised and implemented for individual employees. An area that is relatively uninvestigated is whether contextual factors, such as the case of personality, represent a constraint to the effectiveness of HPWP (Camps & Luna-Arocas, 2009).

Trait activation theory suggests that, under appropriate environmental conditions, individuals will exhibit different behaviours as their specific trait propensities dictate (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Environmental conditions (e.g., climate and culture) can be inferred from a variety of macro level organisational characteristics, such as structure, policy, and reward systems (Schneider, Brief, & Guzzo, 1996). HPWP consists of a bundle of HR practices that encompass factors, such as comprehensive employee recruitment, incentive compensation and performance management systems, extensive employee involvement and training, and enhance the retention of quality employees (Huselid, 1995). There has been an increasing awareness that human resources are better managed by strategies that are oriented towards high-commitment (Walton, 1985) and high-involvement (Lawler, 1996). Rather than relying on compliance with rules and regulations, high-commitment management creates *conditions*

that encourage employees to identify with the organisational vision and to exert effort in their jobs to achieve the organisation's goals (Whitener, 2001). The presence of organisational cues created by HPWP could moderate the relationship between individual personality and job engagement.

No attempt so far has been made to look at the role of personality in the adoption of HPWP, even though the concept of HPWP has generated extensive and substantial discussion (e.g. Harley, Allen, & Sargent, 2007; Kauhanen, 2009; Liao, Toya, Lepak, & Hong, 2009; Martin-Tapia, Aragon-Correa, & Guthrie, 2009; Takeuchi et al., 2009). My study seeks to conduct initial research into the role that HPWP may play in affecting the relationship between personality and job engagement, as well as extending the debate around person-situation. If an employee's personality affects the level of engagement, then perhaps HPWP, representing organisational cues, could play a moderating role in the relationship.

The following section discusses the role of personality and its relationship to job engagement, while taking into consideration the HPWP as a moderator. I submit that, in the presence of organisational cues, the traits of conscientiousness, openness to experience, neuroticism, and extraversion will prove to be most relevant.

Conscientiousness

Conscientious individuals tend to outperform their less conscientious co-workers (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000) and have more positive attitudes towards the organisational mission (Fallon, Avis, Kudisch, Gornet, & Frost, 2000). Conscientious individuals are described as being responsible, dependable, organised, persistent, and achievement-oriented (Goldberg, 1993). HPWP are designed to enhance employees' competencies, motivation, and performance and involvement in a teamwork setting (Berg, Kalleberg, & Appelbaum, 2003; Kochan & Osterman, 1994; Liao et al., 2009). This work environment is deemed most

likely to favour conscientious individuals. It is supposed to activate trait expression of conscientiousness, which thrives on the availability of resources for planning and achievement of goals. The bundle of HR practices, such as increased training, appraisal and reward systems improvement, job security, and availability of a formal grievance system, may be seen as rewarding resources in a job. As employees view HPWP practices as beneficial to them, the more they will feel that the organisation or management is committed to them, and consequently the more engaged will they become at work. Further, the more that the employees see HPWP as an opportunity to strive for achievement, the more they will exert themselves for the organisation. Thus, HPWP create situations that provide cues for conscientiousness trait expression. As conscientious individuals thrive on 'order', the more explicit HPWP are, the more able the employees are to express their trait expressions.

I suggest that bundles of HPWP may serve as cues that activate the expression of conscientiousness and, consequently, enable conscientious employees to become engaged and perform effectively. For example, a conscientious employee who values achievement will be highly engaged at work when presented with training programs. Similarly, an individual who values being organised will be highly engaged when presented with a comprehensive performance management system. Thus:

Hypothesis 12: HPWP moderate the relationship between conscientiousness and employee engagement such that, under the conditions when superior 'bundles' of HPWP are offered (i.e., HPWP are high), an individual who is high on conscientiousness will experience a higher level of engagement.

Openness to experience

The importance of creative employees, workers who think intellectually and who 'think outside the box' - all characteristic of open individuals- cannot be over-emphasised.

This study seeks to determine if openness to experience has an effect on job engagement while taking into consideration the moderating role of HPWP. McCrae and Costa (1997) argue that individuals who are curious, imaginative, and original are highly motivated to actively seek out new and varied experiences. HPWP serve to provide the means for motivating employees. They may serve as the organisational cues to stimulate the trait expression of openness to experience. For example, employees who are open to experience are more likely to be engaged at work when there are adequate incentives (particularly a reward that is related to innovation and creativity) and comprehensive training (i.e., factors that stimulate innovation). Conversely, scarce resources and an inadequate appraisal system, coupled with few training opportunities (i.e., low HPWP) will violate the needs of open employees, and their engagement level might subside. Earlier research convincingly demonstrated that resource scarcity compromises creativity and innovation (Jones, Kalmi, & Kauhanen, 2010; Moss, McFarland, Ngu, & Kijowska, 2007), and inhibits the expression of openness to experience (Moss et al., 2007).

Individuals who are open to experiences are characterised by such traits as creativity, divergent thinking, imagination, and independence (McCrae, 1987). These individuals are open to change and new experiences and are more likely to find new opportunities (particularly in HPWP) and use unconventional methods to reach organisational goals (De Hoogh, Den Hartog, & Koopman, 2005). HPWP are achieved by encouraging practices of high quality training, sharing information, and participative decision-making; thus HPWP have been found to cause a range of positive outcomes (e.g. Berg et al., 2003; Harley, et al., 2007; Macky & Boxall, 2007). The openness trait may thrive in the presence of HPWP since it creates an environment that offers a high degree of challenge and greater opportunities for change. I predict that openness to experience may explain variations in job engagement, given more challenging conditions as offered by HPWP. Thus, it follows that:

Hypothesis 13: HPWP moderate the relationship between openness to experiences and job engagement such that, under the conditions when superior ‘bundles’ of HPWP are offered (i.e., HPWP are high), an individual who is high on openness to experiences will experience higher levels of engagement.

Neuroticism and Emotional Stability

Neuroticism involves individuals who often become irritable, anxious, vulnerable, unstable and discontent, in contrast to the characteristics of emotionally stable persons (Goldberg, 1990; Costa & McCrae, 1992; Digman, 1990). Uncertain that their efforts will be rewarded or their performance regarded as good, employees with high neuroticism may respond with lower levels of engagement. A study by Kim, Shin, and Swanger (2009) found that individuals who experience a high level of anxiety, insecurity and depression have a lower engagement level. The introduction of HPWP has been found to indirectly cause job stress as a new strategy speeds up the work pace, develops conflicting demands and intensifies conflicts between work and family (Kashefi, 2009; Macky & Boxall, 2007). Thus, the presence of HPWP, such as comprehensive training, a fair reward system, and an employee participation programme may heighten the experience of neuroticism. The emotion is often ascribed to an elevated sensitivity to stimuli that are potentially unpleasant (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985). The intensity of HPWP could strongly trigger neurotic expression and neurotics react strongly when in situations that can be perceived as containing a threat to oneself (Nettle, 2007). Hence, HPWP serve as the organisational cues that could assist in increasing that threat and reducing the level of engagement of employees who experience neuroticism. It follows that:

Hypothesis 14: HPWP moderate the relationship between neuroticism and employee engagement such that, under the conditions when superior ‘bundles’ of HPWP are offered (i.e., HPWP are high), an individual who is high on neuroticism will experience a lower level of engagement.

Extraversion

Adjectives used to describe extraversion include sociable, energetic, talkative, outgoing, enthusiastic, ambitious, and aggressive. These individuals also have a sense of urgency, and a tendency to seek stimulation in the company of others (Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001; Judge & Erez, 2007; Stewart, 1996). A meta-analysis study carried out by Barrick and Mount (1991) demonstrates that organisational factors may moderate the relationship between extraversion and performance of employees in sales or managerial positions. It was found that, having a reward system as the control mechanism, has a large effect on outcomes of those in sales and management. The expression of the extraversion trait will emerge in an environment that provides a great deal of opportunities to exert this trait, as in cases where HPWP prevail. A study by Stewart (1996) shows that extroverts, who have been shown to be sensitive to the situational influence of rewards (Gray, 1973), relate to higher performance only on those dimensions where rewards are explicit. Thus, a dimension of the organisational structure, such as the reward program, can be expected to elicit the expression of the extraversion trait. HPWP may be assumed to boost the potential for employees to receive rewards that motivate extraverted individuals to be engaged in their work, particularly in sales and managerial positions. Thus, the presence of good appraisal systems for promotional opportunities, a comprehensive training program, and selective recruitment, as offered by HPWP, can stimulate the expression of the extraversion trait in sales and management occupations. It follows:

Hypothesis 15 : HPWP moderate the relationship between extraversion and employee engagement such that, under the conditions when superior ‘bundles’ of HPWP are offered, an extraverted individual will experience a higher level of engagement, particularly in occupations that are related to sales and management.

Agreeableness

With reference to the discussion in the earlier section that dwells on agreeableness, this study does not expect HPWP to moderate the relationship between agreeableness and job engagement. This is because people who are high on agreeableness are warm and cooperative (Suls, Martin, & David, 1998) and individuals who are not argumentative will experience less excitement in responding to HPWP. Therefore, I do not expect HPWP to play a significant role as a moderator. It follows :

Hypothesis 16 : HPWP will not moderate the relationship between agreeableness and employee engagement such that, under the conditions when superior ‘bundles’ of HPWP are offered, an agreeable individual will not experience a higher level of engagement.

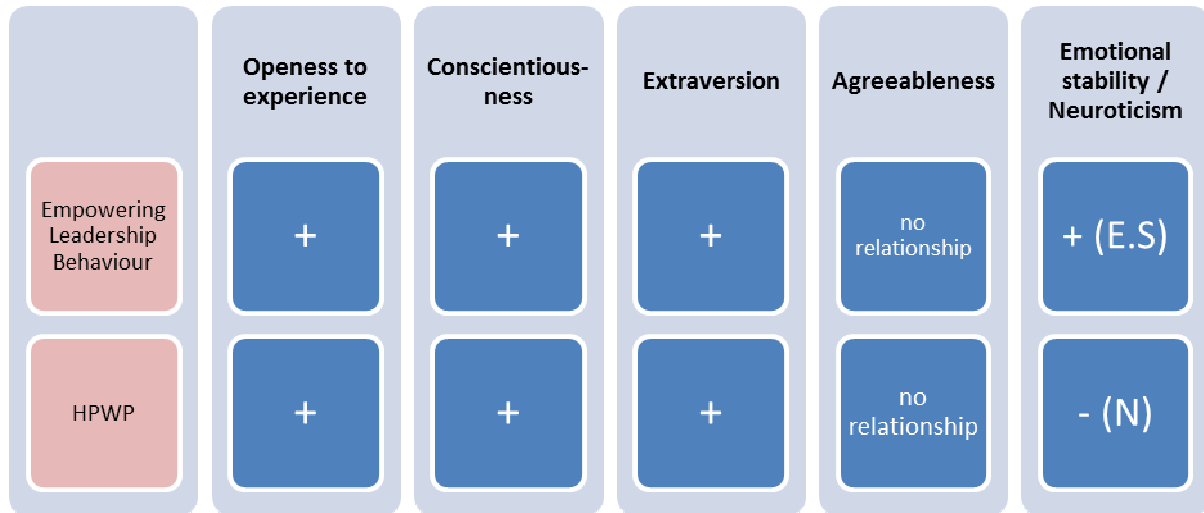


Figure 3 : Hypotheses Development from the Interactionist Job Engagement Model

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