

# Employee Engagement

New research at the individual level  
A summary



## The concept of engagement

The concept of engagement has been popularized by consultant organizations such as Gallup, the Corporate Leadership Council and others. However there is no shared definition of engagement. In their paper Bruce Rich and Jeffrey Le Pine<sup>1</sup> take up the definition proposed by Kahn some 20 years ago<sup>2</sup>.

Previous research has separately linked job involvement, (cognitive energy) job satisfaction (emotional energy) and personal motivation (for effort) with job performance.

Cognitive energy includes vigilance and attention; many studies across a variety of roles have found an increase in errors when mental focus reduces. Emotional investment - passion has also been found to be associated with better performance, in part through enlisting the co-operation of others. Those who work harder - make more physical effort - have been found to have higher output.

Kahn was looking for a single underpinning factor. Engagement according to Kahn is the use of the employees' full physical, cognitive and emotional energy in fulfilling their job role, **the simultaneous use of head, heart and hands.**

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1 Rich, B.L., Le Pine, J.A., Crawford E.R. 2010 Job Engagement: Antecedents and Effects on Job Performance

2 Kahn, W.A. 1990 Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. Academy of Management Journal 33

3. Judge, T.A., Erez, A., Bono, J.E., Thoresen, C.J. | 2003 The core self-evaluation scale Development of a measure. Personnel Psychology 56 303-331

He suggested that employees subconsciously ask themselves 3 questions;

- Is my work meaningful?
- Is it safe - emotionally and physically?
- Will I get fully involved?

The answer to the first question is provided by the kind of organisation, its products, processes, its employees and how they go about their activities.

The answer to the second question depends on the systems the organisation has in place to support, safeguard and guide workers.

The answer to the final question depends on self-confidence and feelings of personal efficacy.

Most engagement surveys focus primarily on the first two questions.

## The concept of Job Performance

Industrial and organizational psychologists make the distinction between task performance and citizenship behaviors in the fulfilment of job expectations.

Task performance is the set of activities that are specific to the role.

Citizenship behaviors, as their name suggests, are those that contribute more indirectly to the organisation. Examples are teamwork, co-operation, innovation, supporting the organisation.

In most research on engagement, and in this study, job performance is measured by assessment of task activity and citizenship behaviour, rather than the actual outcomes or results of that activity.

Since such assessments may often be more a measure of the supervisor/employee relationship, this is a major limitation in establishing a relationship between engagement and productivity.

## Engagement and Job performance

Rich et al.<sup>1</sup> studied 254 firemen employed by several local government bodies. They sought to establish the relationships between the factors that are thought to promote engagement, actual levels of engagement, and job performance.

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For the antecedents of engagement, the authors used the variables of *Value Congruence*, *Perceived Organisational Support* and *Core Self Evaluation*. They theorized these would be positively related to Kahn's concept of engagement, and that engagement would directly affect productivity - job performance.

**Value Congruence** means that an individual feels their work, including expected behaviors, is in alignment with their personal values.

**Perceived Organisational Support** is the management and co-worker support. Strong organisational support includes clear expectations, guidelines and appropriate training and support. A culture where mistakes are managed positively so that there is no fear of failure or threat to personal status or career opportunity.

**Core self-evaluation** is defined as the individual's sense of self confidence, the sense of worth they have in terms of their status, capability and effectiveness<sup>3</sup>.

Most quality personality tests also include measures that assess core self-evaluation. The more confident an individual is, the more they feel able to cope. It is thought that such individuals are relatively less prone to anxiety or self-consciousness, and therefore have more mental, emotional and physical resources to put into their work.

While there is plenty of research linking both Value Congruence and Perceived Organisational Support to engagement, there was previously no research linking Core Self Evaluation to engagement.

The authors built their own engagement scale measuring the 3 dimensions of cognitive, emotional and effort, with 18 questions. Other scales were used to assess participant perceptions of job involvement, job satisfaction, motivation, value congruence, organisational support and core self-evaluation. Supervisors gave their evaluations of task performance and organisational citizenship behaviors. All measures used 5-point agreement scales.

Results showed that where individuals reported they were more engaged, supervisors gave higher ratings of both task performance and organisational citizenship behaviour. Individuals who reported they perceived higher value congruence, better organisational support, and who had higher core self-evaluations, were more engaged. The degree of association of the three factors to engagement was very similar, varying between .35 to .37 on a corrected basis.

Statistical analysis established that whilst the three factors; Value Congruence, Perceived Organisational Support and Core self-evaluation were also positively related to job satisfaction, involvement and motivation, the association with job performance was primarily through the engagement pathway.

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## What does this research mean in practice?

The research certainly validates the effort that organisations now put into assessing levels of engagement.

It suggests that more effort should be devoted to evaluating the factors that predict engagement. In particular those practices involved in perceived organisational support.

Surveys are needed to better evaluate the workplace environment in terms of the dynamics of management and co-worker relations and the operation and perceived effectiveness of management and support systems.

Just as importantly, this study highlights the need to focus on the individual as well.

The tendency to evaluate oneself positively is a personality characteristic, a relatively enduring trait. The finding that core self-evaluation- or feelings of self-efficacy - is positively related to engagement and productivity has implications for HR practices in organisations.

There is potential for organisations to achieve greater productivity by selecting for individuals with strong positive self-evaluations.

Whilst this may not always be possible in a tight talent market, this research indicates that organisations could improve engagement and productivity by implementing personal development life skills programmes that improve an individual's coping skills, self-efficacy and confidence.

For more information and research on talent management related topics

Centranum Group

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