

THE ROLE OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL COMPETENCIES AND EMPLOYEE INTENT TO QUIT: A CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Employee engagement has been hotly debated among academics, practitioners and consultants, with each of them giving their own definitions of the concept. Though the consultants and the business press have carried out many studies, little is known about the antecedents and consequences of the concept in the academic literature. The construct of employee engagement is still evolving, and it is widely recognized that engaged employees do not quit the organization easily. It is also clear that some emotional and social competencies of employees have a significant positive relationship with employee engagement. This paper attempts to examine the role of employee engagement as a mediating variable in the relationship between employees' emotional and social competencies and their intention to quit.

Keywords: Emotional and social competencies, employee engagement, employee intent to quit.

INTRODUCTION

Global Employee Engagement

Only 13% of employees worldwide are engaged at work, according to Gallup's 2013 country study (total: 142 countries) on the *State of the Global Workplace*. In other words, about one in eight workers -- roughly 180 million employees in the countries studied -- are psychologically committed to their jobs and likely to be making positive contributions to their organizations.

The bulk of employees worldwide -- 63% -- are "not engaged and 24% are "actively disengaged," indicating they are unhappy and unproductive at work and liable to spread negativity to co-workers. In rough numbers, this translates into 900 million not engaged and 340 million actively disengaged workers around the globe.

According to a Towers Watson 2014 study, only four in 10 employees are highly engaged, close to a quarter (24%) are disengaged, and another 36% can be described as either unsupported or detached. A full 60% of employees lack the elements required to be highly engaged.

This year, employee engagement and culture issues exploded onto the scene, rising to become the No. 1 challenge around the world (Deloitte Global Human

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Capital Trends Survey, 2015). An overwhelming 87 per cent of the respondents believed the issue is “important,” with 50 per cent citing the problem as “very important”— double the proportion in last year’s survey.

AHay Group Research (2014) predicts that by the end of 2018 almost a quarter (23.4 per cent) of people worldwide will have changed jobs. That’s some 192 million workers due to hand in their notice over the next four years. According to this study, “To succeed, businesses must rethink how they engage and enable their people and earn the loyalty of their employees. This is a critical time to reshape your engagement strategy and develop an innovative new talent management approach that responds to the changes happening around us”.

OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Employee Engagement

Employee Engagement is one of the few constructs and areas of research that have captured the interest of both researchers and practitioners alike in the recent past. A major reason why employee engagement has received so much attention is because it is believed to be associated with important employee and organization outcomes (Saks & Gruman, 2014). For example, engagement has been found to be positively related to job attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction, organizational commitment) (Hakanen et. al., 2006; Saks, 2006), job performance and organizational citizenship behavior (Bakker & Bal, 2010; Rich et. al., 2010; Saks, 2006), and health and wellness outcomes (Cole et. al., 2012; Crawford et. al., 2010), and negatively related to turnover intentions (Saks, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

In the literature, there is little consensus on the meaning of employee engagement as well as concerns about the validity of the most popular measure of employee engagement. In fact, some researchers argue that it should be called ‘job engagement’ or ‘work engagement’ (Saks & Gruman, 2014). This is not surprising because employee engagement is still a relatively new construct, and research is still in its infancy (Saks & Gruman, 2014). The problem also is due in part to the conceptual overlap of engagement with other, more established constructs such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job involvement (Cole et. al., 2012; Saks, 2006; Shuck, Ghosh, Zigarmi, & Nimon, 2012).

Hallberg and Schaufeli (2006) demonstrated that engagement, job involvement, and organizational commitment are three empirically distinct constructs, and correlations with various antecedents and outcomes provided support for the conceptual uniqueness of work engagement.

In the academic literature, there are four major models available for the study of employee engagement:

- Kahn's (1990) model of personal engagement
- Maslach *et. al.*, 's (2001) Burnout/ Engagement model
- Schaufeli *et. al.*, 's (2002) Three-factor model of engagement
- Macey and Schneider's (2008) multidimensional framework

Kahn's (1990) Model of Personal Engagement

Kahn (1990) first used the term "Personal Engagement". According to him, it is the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's "preferred self" in task behaviours that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional), and active, full role performances. On the other hand, Personal disengagement is the simultaneous withdrawal and defence of a person's preferred self in behaviours that promote a lack of connections, physical, cognitive, and emotional absence, and passive, incomplete role performances. Thus, according to Kahn (1990), engagement means to be psychologically as well as physically present when occupying and performing an organisational role. Through an inductive analysis, he identified three psychological conditions, namely, meaningfulness, safety and availability which dealt with the questions: (1) How meaningful is it for me to bring myself into this performance? (2) How safe is it to do so? (3) How available am I to do so?

Kahn (1992) later differentiated the notion of psychological presence and engagement behaviour. He suggested that a true psychological presence and identity with work go beyond questions of simple task motivation. Rather, true identity with work reflects an "authenticity" that results in employees connecting with work and addressing difficult issues (i.e., the engagement behaviour). It is from the experience of being psychologically present in the work—that the work is a part of one's identity—that employee development and productivity follow. Such behavioural engagement follows because when psychologically present, employees are attentive and focused, connected (including the connotation of absorption), and integrated. The "experience" of being integrated would entail simultaneously drawing upon all of one's skills, abilities, and other personal resources in order to respond to the demands of a role. Kahn's (1992) description of psychological presence clarifies the distinction between the experiential state (psychological presence) and personally engaging behaviours that may accompany that state.

Building on the above Kahn (1990) definition, Rich *et. al.*, (2010), state that 'job engagement' happens when individuals invest their hands, head, and heart in their performance. They argue that engagement is a more complete representation of the self than other constructs such as job satisfaction and job involvement, which represent much narrower aspects of the self. They also found that engagement fully mediated the relationships between antecedents and performance even with the three other constructs included in the model.

Maslach et. al.,’s (2001) Burnout/Engagement Model

A second influential definition of engagement has its basis in the literature on job burnout and defines engagement as the opposite or positive antithesis of burnout (Maslach *et. al.*, 2001). According to Maslach and Leiter (2008), engagement is “an energetic state of involvement with personally fulfilling activities that enhance one’s sense of professional efficacy”. Engagement is characterized by energy, involvement, and efficacy—the direct opposites of the burnout dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. Further, burnout involves the erosion of engagement with one’s job (Maslach *et. al.*, 2001). Research on burnout and engagement has found that the core dimensions of burnout (exhaustion and cynicism) and engagement (vigor and dedication) are, indeed, opposites of each other (Gonzalez-Roma *et. al.*, 2006).

Schaufeli et. al.’s (2002) Three-factor Model of Engagement

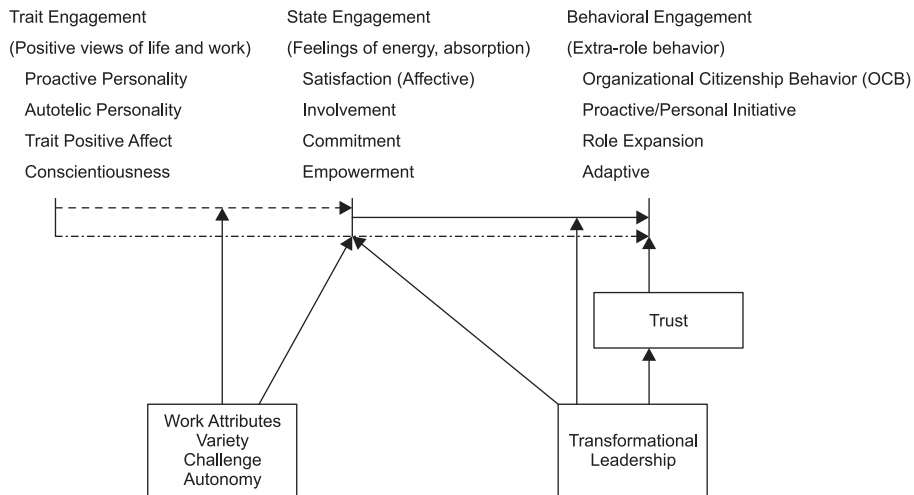
Schaufeli *et. al.*, (2002) argued that burnout and engagement are independent states while still maintaining that engagement is the opposite of burnout. They defined engagement as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (p. 74). *Vigor* involves high levels of energy and mental resilience while working; *dedication* refers to being strongly involved in one’s work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, and challenge; and *absorption* refers to being fully concentrated and engrossed in one’s work. According to Schaufeli *et. al.*, (2002), engagement is not a momentary and specific state, but, rather, it is “a more persistent and pervasive affective, cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual or behavior” (p. 74). Thus, “engaged employees have high levels of energy and are enthusiastic about their work” and “are often fully immersed in their work so that time flies” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008).

To add to the concerns about the distinctiveness from similar constructs (Christian *et. al.*, 2011; Newman & Harrison, 2008; Saks, 2008), a related problem has been the tendency by some researchers to view engagement as the opposite of burnout. This has raised questions as to whether it is really a different and unique construct. As a result, some researchers have attempted to show that engagement is unique by comparing it to other constructs. For example, Christian *et. al.*, (2011) and Hallberg and Schaufeli (2006) described how engagement is distinguishable from job satisfaction (an attitude about one’s job or job situation), organizational commitment (an emotional attachment to one’s organization), and job involvement (the degree to which one’s job is central to one’s identity) and consider it to be a higher order motivational construct.

Macey and Schneider's (2008) Multidimensional Framework

Macey and Schneider's contribution is from the practitioners' point of view. They were of the view that there is conceptual confusion surrounding the term, since some of the researchers linked it with attitudinal components (e.g., Saks, 2006), while others linked it with behaviours (e.g., Dvir *et. al.*). According to them, "employee engagement is a desirable condition, has an organizational purpose, and connotes involvement, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, focused effort, and energy, so it has both attitudinal and behavioral components." It is used at different times to refer to psychological states, traits, and behaviors as well as their antecedents and outcomes. Their work provided a significant link between engagement and job characteristics theory, and particularly between engagement and leadership theory, suggesting the importance of the role of leadership behaviours in mediating employee engagement.

A diagrammatic representation of their multidimensional model is given below:



This framework has been criticized by academics (Newman & Harrison, 2008. Saks, 2008) who have focused their criticism on the behavioural aspect of engagement, as well as the distinctiveness and the stability of the construct.

Intention to Quit

Intentions are the most immediate determinants of actual behaviour (Igbaria & Greenhaus, 1992). Turnover has been an important topic of research in many disciplines, most of which have focused primarily on identifying antecedents for and developing models of the turnover process. Turnover and retention are referred

to interchangeably in the literature. Ensuring retention of knowledge workers refers to those actions involved in getting employees to stay with the organisation and minimise voluntary turnover (Jackson & Schuler, cited in Pienaar & Bester, 2008). To achieve this requires an understanding of what causes turnover so that effective measures can be taken to prevent it. The most important and immediate antecedent of turnover is intention to quit (Elangovan, 2001). Intention to quit is the strength of a person's view that he/she wishes not to stay with a specific organisation and represents a cognitive manifestation of the behavioural decision to quit (Boshoff et. al., 2002; Elangovan, 2001).

Employee Engagement as an Antecedent to Intention to Quit

According to Gubman (2004), disengaged employees are more likely to actively look for another job. Ellis and Sorensen (2007) described that employees who reported higher levels of engagement also reported lower levels of turnover intentions. Low employee engagement results in intention to leave (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002). Based on data collected from a sample of Indian managers (N = 1302), it was found that work engagement mediated the relationship between job characteristics and intention to quit (Agarwal and Gupta. 2015).

Emotional and Social Competencies

Salovey and Mayer (1990) argued in their first article that there is another kind of intelligence called Emotional Intelligence that might help understand better who succeeds and who does not in business.

Goleman (1995) published his first book on EI and popularized the concept to the whole world. Goleman (1995) described emotional intelligence in five domains: knowing one's emotions, managing one's emotions, motivating oneself by marshaling emotions, recognizing emotions in others, and managing emotions in others so as to handle relationships. Leaders who are self-aware, who manage themselves, and associate with others are able to nurture a work climate where people feel great and do more and better work. In "working with emotional intelligence," Goleman reported that 80-90% of the competencies that differentiate top performers are in the domain of EI. The many pressures on leaders today make emotional intelligence particularly important.

Emotionally intelligent leaders are thought to perform better in the workplace (Goleman, 1995), be happier and more dedicated to their organization, take advantage of emotions and use them to foresee major improvements in organizational functioning, improve decision making, solve problems, instill a sense of enthusiasm, excitement, trust and co-operation in other employees through interpersonal relationships (George, 2000).

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is about understanding and accepting emotions as assets as they convey something. When managed intelligently, leaders gain incredible value from emotions and develop real self-efficacy. Emotional Intelligence helps leaders make better decisions and gain the full commitment and energy of those they lead (Freedman, 2007).

Emotional and Social Competencies as an Antecedent to Employee Engagement

According to Pittenger (2015), the emotional and social competencies of employees are an antecedent to employee engagement. She argues that when employees are emotionally invested in the success of one another, as well as that of the organization, they will be more engaged. This is also suggested by Seppala et. al., (2013) and supported by Boyatzis (2013).

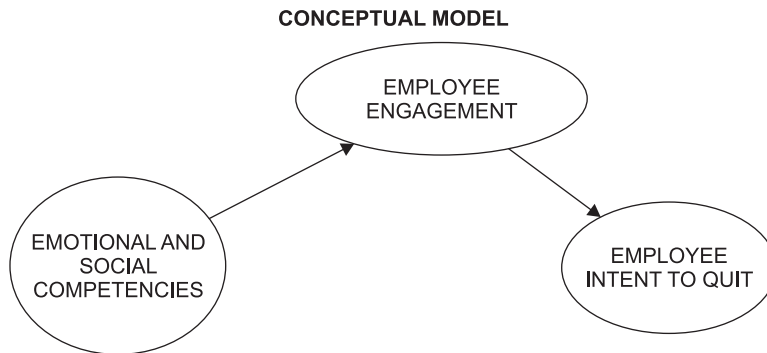


Figure 1: Role of Employee Engagement in the Relationship between Leaders' Emotional and Social competencies and employee intent to quit

CONCLUSION

From the literature review, it becomes clear that employees' emotional and social competencies have a significant positive relationship with Employee engagement. Similarly, it is also well established that if employees are engaged, then their intention to quit is weak. In this conceptual model, Employee engagement is suggested as a mediating variable between employees' emotional and social competencies and their intention to quit. It will be interesting to find out if the conceptual model can be tested empirically.

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