

Work engagement: An emerging concept in occupational health psychology

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Occupational Health Psychology concerns the application of psychology to improving the quality of work life and to protecting and promoting the safety, health, and well-being of workers. Contrary to what its name suggests, Occupational Health Psychology has almost exclusively dealt with ill health and poor well-being. For instance, a simple count reveals that about 95% of all articles that have been published so far in the leading Journal of Occupational Health Psychology have dealt with negative aspects of workers' health and well-being, such as cardiovascular disease, repetitive strain injury, and burnout. In contrast, only about 5% of the articles have dealt with positive aspects such as job satisfaction, commitment, and motivation.

However, times appear to be changing. Since the beginning of this century, more attention has been paid to what has been coined positive psychology: the scientific study of human strength and optimal functioning. This approach is considered to supplement the traditional focus of psychology on psychopathology, disease, illness, disturbance, and malfunctioning. The emergence of positive (organizational) psychology has naturally led to the increasing popularity of positive aspects of health and well-being in Occupational Health Psychology. One of these positive aspects is work engagement, which is considered to be the antithesis of burnout.

While burnout is usually defined as a syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy, engagement is defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Engaged employees have a sense of energetic and effective connection with their work activities. Since this new concept was proposed by Wilmar Schaufeli (*Utrecht University, the Netherlands*) in 2001, 93 academic articles mainly focusing on the measurement of work engagement and its possible antecedents and consequences have been published (see www.schaufeli.com). In addition, major international academic conferences organized by the International Commission on Occupational

Health (ICOH) and the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP) include symposiums and workshops on work engagement, as does the APA-NIOSH interdisciplinary conference on work, stress, and health.

Although work engagement is currently a buzzword in consultancy, its academic pedigree is still rather limited. Thus, the international journal "Work & Stress" is now publishing a special issue on work engagement with guest editors including Arnold Bakker (*Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands*), Wilmar Schaufeli, Michael Leiter, (*Acadia University, Wolfville, Canada*), and Toon Taris (*Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands*). The issue called for papers that dealt with the following questions in particular:

1. Which personal and organizational resources contribute to work engagement?
2. Do engaged employees have better performance than unengaged employees?
3. Is work engagement a risk factor for burnout?
4. How does work engagement vary from day to day?
5. Does work engagement exhibited by leaders continue on to team members?
6. What is the difference between work engagement and workaholism?
7. Are there cultural differences regarding work engagement?

Because work engagement is an emerging concept, these questions and more must be resolved in future research. For instance, is there a relationship between engagement and biological factors such as gene, immune, and endocrine functions? What is intervention strategy is appropriate at improving engagement? To answer these questions and to improve workers' well-being, interdisciplinary and international collaboration are needed.

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