

Towards a Positive Occupational Health Psychology: The Case of Work Engagement

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Abstract

This article gives an overview of the recently introduced concept of work engagement: a positive, fulfilling, affective-motivational state of work-related well-being. We first define engagement in terms of vigor, dedication, and absorption, and then explain how engagement differs from related concepts (e.g., burnout). Work engagement is a unique concept that is best predicted by job resources (e.g., autonomy, supervisory coaching, and performance feedback) and personal resources (e.g., self-efficacy) and is predictive of psychological/physical health, proactive organizational behavior, and job performance. The most often used instrument to measure engagement is the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, a self-report instrument that has been validated in many countries across the world, including Japan. The paper closes with the practical implications of work engagement for modern organizations. More particularly, we discuss how organizational strategies such as personnel assessment and evaluation, job (re) design, leadership, and training can be used to increase work engagement.

Key words: Work engagement, Occupational health psychology, Positive psychology, Job resources, Personal resources

Work engagement: an emerging concept

Occupational Health Psychology (OHP) concerns the application of psychology to improving the quality of work life, and to protecting and promoting the safety, health and well-being of workers¹⁾. Contrary to what its name suggests, OHP has almost exclusively been concerned with ill-health and unwell-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 deals 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 deal with positive aspects such

as job satisfaction, commitment, and motivation²⁾.

However, it seems that times are changing. Since the beginning of this century, more attention is paid to what has been coined positive psychology: the scientific study of human strength and optimal functioning³⁾. This approach is considered to supplement the traditional focus of psychology on psychopathology, disease, illness, disturbance, and malfunctioning. Because of the emergence of positive (organizational) psychology, it is not surprising that positive aspects of health and well-being are increasingly popular in OHP. One of the most prominent positive aspects is work engagement, which is considered to be the antithesis of burnout⁴⁾.

While burnout is usually defined as a syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy⁴⁾, engagement is — in contrast — defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption⁵⁾. That means that engaged employees have a sense of energetic and effective

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connection with their work activities. *Vigor* is characterized by 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 and pride. Finally, *absorption* is characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work.

Antecedents of work engagement

Work engagement is found to be positively associated with job resources; that is, to those aspects of the job that have the capacity to reduce job demands, are functional in achieving work goals, and may stimulate personal growth, learning, and development⁶⁾. For instance, work engagement tends to be positively related to social support from co-workers and from one's superior, as well as to performance feedback, coaching, job control, task variety, and training facilities^{7)~16)}. Hence, the more job resources are available, the more likely it is that employees feel engaged.

Work engagement has also been found to be positively related to personal resources, such as self-efficacy¹⁷⁾, which according to Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) is the "belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainment"¹⁸⁾. Quite interestingly, it seems that self-efficacy may precede as well as follow engagement^{15) 19) 20)}. This may point to the existence of an upward spiral: self-efficacy fuels engagement, which, in turn, increases efficacy beliefs, and so on²¹⁾. This is in line with SCT²²⁾, which holds that there are reciprocal relationships between self-efficacy and positive affective-cognitive outcomes such as work engagement. This reciprocal relationship is also compatible with the notion of so-called "gain spirals" as described by the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory²³⁾.

Consequences of work engagement

The possible consequences of work engagement pertain to positive job-related attitudes, individual health, extra-role behaviors, and per-

formance. Compared to those who do not feel engaged, those who feel engaged seem to be more satisfied with their jobs, feel more committed to the organization, and do not intend to leave the organization^{7) 24) 25)}. Also, engaged workers seem to enjoy good mental^{25)~29)} and psychosomatic health^{24) 28) 29)}. Furthermore, they exhibit personal initiative, proactive behavior, and learning motivation^{30) 31)}, and engagement seems to play a mediating role between the availability of job resources and these positive organizational behaviors⁷⁾. Taken together, the results concerning positive organizational behavior suggest that engaged workers seem to be able and willing to "go to the extra mile."

Most importantly for organizations, those who are engaged seem to perform better. Recently, Salanova et al.³²⁾ showed that the levels of work engagement of contact employees from hotels and restaurants were related to service quality, as perceived by customers. More specifically, the more engaged the employees were, the better the service climate was, and the more loyal the customers were. In addition, a study in a fast-food restaurant found that the financial return of a particular shift was positively related to the level of work engagement of the employees who worked in that shift³³⁾. Finally, Harter et al.³⁴⁾ showed that levels of employee engagement were positively related to business-unit performance (i.e., customer satisfaction and loyalty, profitability, productivity, turnover, and safety) across almost 8,000 business units of thirty-six companies.

Measurement of work engagement

Based on the definition of work engagement, a self-report questionnaire (i.e., the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale; UWES) has been developed that includes the three constituting aspects of work engagement: vigor, dedication, and absorption^{5) 35)}. The empirical results confirm the factorial validity, internal consistency, and stability of the UWES. Although, psychometrically speaking, three factors of engagement (i.e., vigor, dedication, and absorption) can be distinguished, for

practical purposes the total scores of the UWES can be used since the three aspects are highly interrelated. Hardly any systematic differences in work engagement were observed between men and women, or across age groups. In some occupational groups, engagement levels were found to be higher than in other groups (e.g., executives versus blue-collar workers). Similar psychometric results were observed among different samples from various countries, such as Greece³⁰⁾, Japan²⁴⁾, the Netherlands⁵⁾³⁶⁾, Spain⁵⁾, Finland³⁷⁾, Sweden³⁸⁾, and South Africa³⁹⁾. This confirms the robustness of the findings.

**Implications for organizations:
building engagement**

How can Human Resource Management (HRM) and OHP be used to build engagement? Schaufeli and Salanova⁴⁰⁾⁴¹⁾ summarized five possible strategies:

1. *Assessment and evaluation of employees* may contribute to their identification with the job and to further personal and professional development, and hence stimulate engagement. *Wellness audits* inform employees (online) about their current levels of engagement and other associated factors so that they can take action when necessary. By drafting and monitoring a so-called "Employee Development

Agreement (EDA)", that includes personal goals for future development as well as organizational resources that are necessary to accomplish these goals, employee engagement is likely to be increased. In addition, *participative workshops* might be helpful in building engagement and increasing organizational effectiveness.

2. *Job (re) design* may enhance work engagement by making use of the motivating potential of job resources. According to the dual process model of employee well-being (Fig.1)⁷⁾, increasing job resources is likely to result in higher levels of work engagement. Hence, (re) designing jobs in order to promote engagement boils down to increasing job resources. In addition, *job rotation and changing jobs* might result in higher engagement levels because they challenge employees, increase their motivation, and stimulate learning and professional development⁴²⁾.
3. Since engagement seems to be contagious and may spread across members of work teams⁴³⁾, leaders have a special role in fostering work engagement among their followers by managing the social psychological processes involved. It is to be expected that considerate *leadership*, and more particularly transformational leadership, is successful in accomplish-

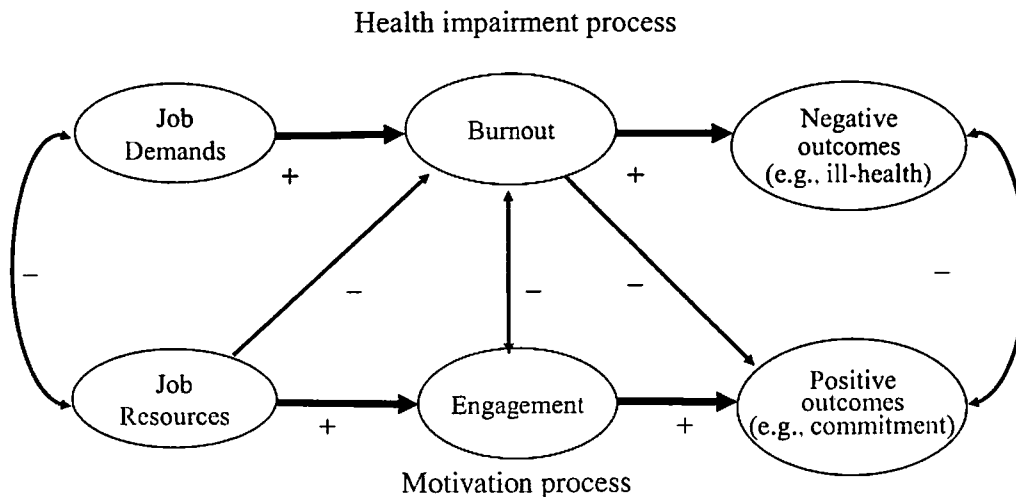


Fig.1 The dual-process model of positive and negative employee well-being Source: Schaufeli & Bakker (2004)⁷⁾

ing this⁴⁴⁾. Moreover, research suggests that leaders are key social resources for the development of employee engagement, for instance in their role as coach.

4. *Training program* in organizations that aim at increasing work engagement should focus on building efficacy beliefs that serve as a kind of self-motivating mechanism²²⁾. That is, high levels of self-efficacy set in motion an upward gain-spiral that boosts engagement and subsequent performance, which in its turn increases efficacy beliefs, and so on²¹⁾. Mastery experiences are the most powerful tools to enhance efficacy beliefs, followed by vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and positive emotions²²⁾.
5. *Career planning and development* in modern organizations basically boils down to increasing employability. This is achieved by ensuring continuous personal and professional development, whereby employees have to rely more and more on their own initiative. To the extent that employees are able to keep developing themselves throughout their careers, their levels of engagement are likely to remain high.

Conclusion

We believe that emerging concept of work engagement that results from a recent shift in OHP from a negative disease-oriented approach toward a positive wellness approach is a viable construct that is firmly rooted in empirical research. What is more, work engagement may play a crucial role in the development of the organization's human capital. Being an essential, positive element of employee health and well-being, it may help to create synergy between positive outcomes for organizations. This is expressed by the slogan, "A healthy employee in a healthy organization."

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ポジティブ産業保健心理学に向けて： ワーク・エンゲイジメントの視点から

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抄録：本論文は、近年、新しく紹介されたワーク・エンゲイジメント（仕事に関して肯定的で充実した感情および態度）について概観したものである。最初に、エンゲイジメントが、活力、熱意、没頭から構成される概念であることを定義したうえで、関連する概念（バーンアウト）との異同について言及した。ワーク・エンゲイジメントは、仕事の資源（自律性、上司のコーチング、パフォーマンスのフィードバックなど）や個人の資源（楽観性、自己効力感、自尊心など）によって予測されるとともに、心身の健康、組織行動、パフォーマンスを予測することができる。測定尺度として最も使用されているのがユトレヒト・ワーク・エンゲイジメント尺度であり、各国で標準化がなされている。最後に、近年の組織においてワーク・エンゲイジメントを実践で活用する方法について論じた。具体的には、人事評価、仕事の（再）デザイン、リーダーシップ、トレーニングなどの組織的な方略によって、ワーク・エンゲイジメントをいかに向上させるかについて論じた。

Key words: ワーク・エンゲイジメント, 産業保健心理学, ポジティブ心理学, 仕事の資源, 個人の資源

(Jap J Stress Sci 2009 ; 24 (3) : 181-187)

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