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Work engagement in Europe: Relations with national economy, governance and culture

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is the first to analyze differences in work engagement across countries using a well-validated measure and representative samples from thirty-five European countries. Rather than *individual* levels of work engagement, mean levels of work engagement of the *country's* workforce are analyzed. So far, only international consultancy firms performed such national comparisons. However, these comparisons are either based on proprietary measures of engagement with unknown reliability and validity or on non-representative national samples, and mostly on both. Yet there is a great need for such cross-national comparisons since employee engagement is a priority in many internationally operating businesses. A deeper insight into cross-national differences in work engagement is therefore conducive for establishing and evaluating corporate engagement policies.

The current paper uses work engagement data from the *6th European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) – 2015*. The EWCS assesses and quantifies the working conditions of workers and the self-employed, analyses relationships between different aspects of working conditions, identifies groups at risk and issues of concern, and monitors progress and trends. A European agency called Eurofound carries out the EWCS and a market research company did the fieldwork between February and December 2015. In total 43,850 workers were interviewed in thirty-five countries, which include the twenty-eight member-states of the European Union, the five candidate countries for EU membership – Albania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Turkey – as well as Norway and Switzerland. The target population for the EWCS consists of all residents from these countries aged above 15 or older and in employment at the

time of the survey. A multi-stage, stratified, random sample was drawn in each country.

The aim of the current paper is to link work engagement at country level to economic and governance indicators, as well as to cultural values. To this end, data of multiple sources were used. For instance, economic and governance indicators were taken from the *World Bank*, *EUROSTAT*, and the *United Nations* and cultural values from the *European Values Survey* and from Geert Hofstede's national culture database.

The most often used definition of work engagement in the scientific literature is '*. . . a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption*'. Vigor refers to high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence also in the face of difficulties. Dedication refers to being strongly involved in one's work, and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge. Finally, absorption is characterized in terms of being fully concentrated on and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work. In short, engaged workers work hard (vigor), are deeply involved (dedication) and happily engrossed (absorption) in their work.

Multiple studies suggest that work engagement is beneficial for workers as well as for organizations. For instance, work engagement has been associated with better mental and physical health of workers in terms of low levels of depression and anxiety, healthy cardiac autonomic activity, lower systolic blood pressure, better sleep quality, and less psychological distress. In addition, research also suggests that work engagement is beneficial for employee performance, and hence for organizations. For instance, work

engagement is related to low sickness absence frequency, low risk of long-term sickness absence, task- and contextual performance, innovativeness, proactivity, creativity, financial returns, service quality, workplace safety, and last but not least, superior business outcomes, such as high productivity and profitability, and business growth.

Work engagement is usually measured with the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), which has excellent psychometric properties. Originally, it included 17 items, but recently, an ultra-short version has been introduced with only three items: (1) *'At my work I feel full of energy'* (vigor); (2) *'I am enthusiastic about my job'* (dedication); (3) *'Time flies when I am working'* (absorption). The psychometric reliability of the three items in the EWCS database is good as in no country it dropped below its critical value. In conclusion, work engagement is measured in a valid and reliable way in the EWCS-2015. For the current paper, mean work engagement scores for each of the thirty-five countries were computed.

WORK ENGAGEMENT AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH HAPPINESS AND JOB SATISFACTION

It is expected that in countries where workers feel engaged, people are also more happy and satisfied with their jobs. But how strong is this positive relationship? It appears that work engagement is moderately positively related with happiness and job satisfaction at country level, with correlation coefficients (r) of .47 and .61, respectively. This means that work engagement overlaps less strongly (22%) with happiness than with job satisfaction (37%). The reason for that is that happiness is a context-free measure that taps the subjective enjoyment of one's *life as a whole*. Clearly, this not only includes work but also other life domains, such as leisure and social relationships, as well as people's physical environment and financial situation. So happiness is a general, omnibus measure of well-being. Moreover, national levels of happiness were taken from the World Database of Happiness and refer to *all* inhabitants of a particular country and not only to the working population like work engagement and job satisfaction.

Job satisfaction, in contrast, is work-related and therefore stronger related with work engagement than happiness. Although job satisfaction and work engagement are both positive states of mind, they differ in levels of activation. Engaged workers are proactive, feel more challenged, and have a stronger drive than their satisfied colleagues, who are reactive, feel less challenged and more satiated. So work engagement is a high activation psychological state, whereas job satisfaction is characterized by low activation. For that very reason work engagement is stronger related to work performance than job satisfaction, which particularly applies to extra-role performance.

Conclusion

In countries where workers feel engaged, people also feel happy and satisfied with their jobs. As expected, and in line with previous individual-level research, relations are strong, particularly with job satisfaction, but not so strong that both concepts can be considered identical.

LEVELS OF WORK ENGAGEMENT ACROSS EUROPE

Do levels of engagement differ across Europe? Yes, they do, albeit that only a modest 3% of the variance in work engagement is explained at country-level. This means that many other factors may also play a role as well, such as type of profession, industry, and working conditions. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider these factors in greater detail.

As can be seen in Fig. 1, Dutch workers feel most engaged, whereas Serbian workers feel least engaged at work. Because of their economic similarity, Norway and Switzerland are clustered together with the EU-countries, thus constituting the EU+ group. The level of engagement is much higher among EU+ countries than among non-EU candidate countries.

As displayed in Fig. 2 most countries with high work engagement scores (i.e., equal to above 4) are located in Northwestern Europe (the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Ireland, Denmark, Norway) or in the Alpine region (Austria, Switzerland). Two exceptions exist: Malta (Southern Europe) and Lithuania (Eastern Europe) also have high engagement levels. In contrast, countries with low engagement scores (i.e., lower than 3.80) are located in Southern (Greece, Portugal) and Eastern Europe (Lithuania, Slovakia, Hungary), and on the Balkans (Croatia, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro). Also Turkish and German workers score relatively low on engagement. Particularly the low engagement score of Germany is puzzling, which might be caused by lower scores in eastern Germany, the former communist German Democratic Republic (GDR). Unfortunately this hypothesis cannot be tested because East German workers cannot be identified in the EWCS database. As most highly engaged countries are to be found in Western Europe and most little engaged countries in Southern and Southeastern Europe (particularly on the Balkans) it is likely that this has something to do with economic, governance and cultural differences. This will be explored below.

Another way of comparing work engagement between countries is to classify workers as 'engaged' or 'highly engaged'. Of course, any such classification is arbitrary as no objective and external criterion for high engagement exists. For our purposes we rank 'engaged' countries according to their proportion of workers with a score of 4.5 or higher, and 'highly engaged' countries according to the proportion of workers with the maximum score of 5. This means that 'engaged' workers indicate that they feel engaged *'most of the time'*, whereas the 'highly engaged' indicate that they *'always'* feel engaged.

Essentially the rank-order between countries does not change when percentages of (highly) engaged workers are used instead of mean work engagement scores. Notably, in both cases the top-3 and bottom-3 countries are quite similar. The Netherlands (33.4%), Ireland (33.3%) and Belgium (32%) boast the most 'engaged' workers, whereas the least engaged workers are found in Croatia (13.9%), Greece (13.6%), and Germany (11.4%). The most 'highly engaged' countries are the Netherlands (18.5%), Belgium (17.6%), and Slovenia (17.3%), whereas Sweden (6.1%), Greece (4.8%), and Germany (4.3%) have the least 'highly engaged' workers. Overall 21.1% of the EU+ workforce feels 'engaged' and

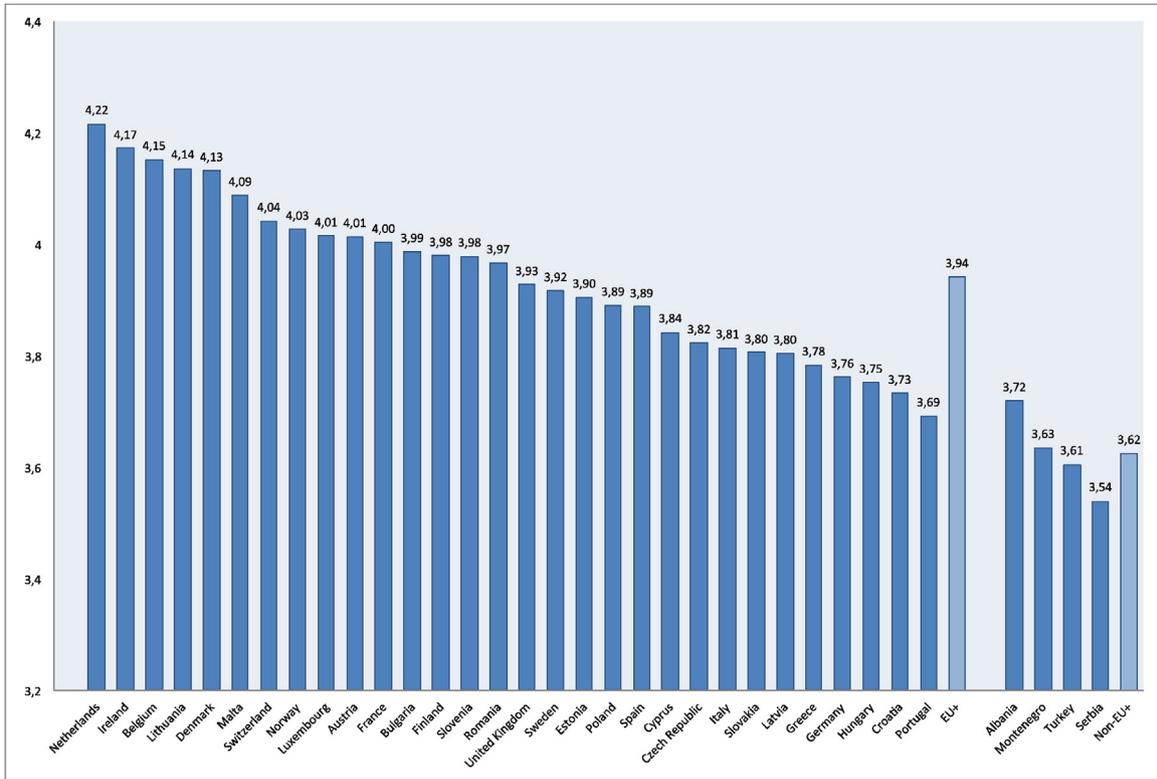


Figure 1 Mean Levels of Work Engagement Across Europe (Scale 1–5)

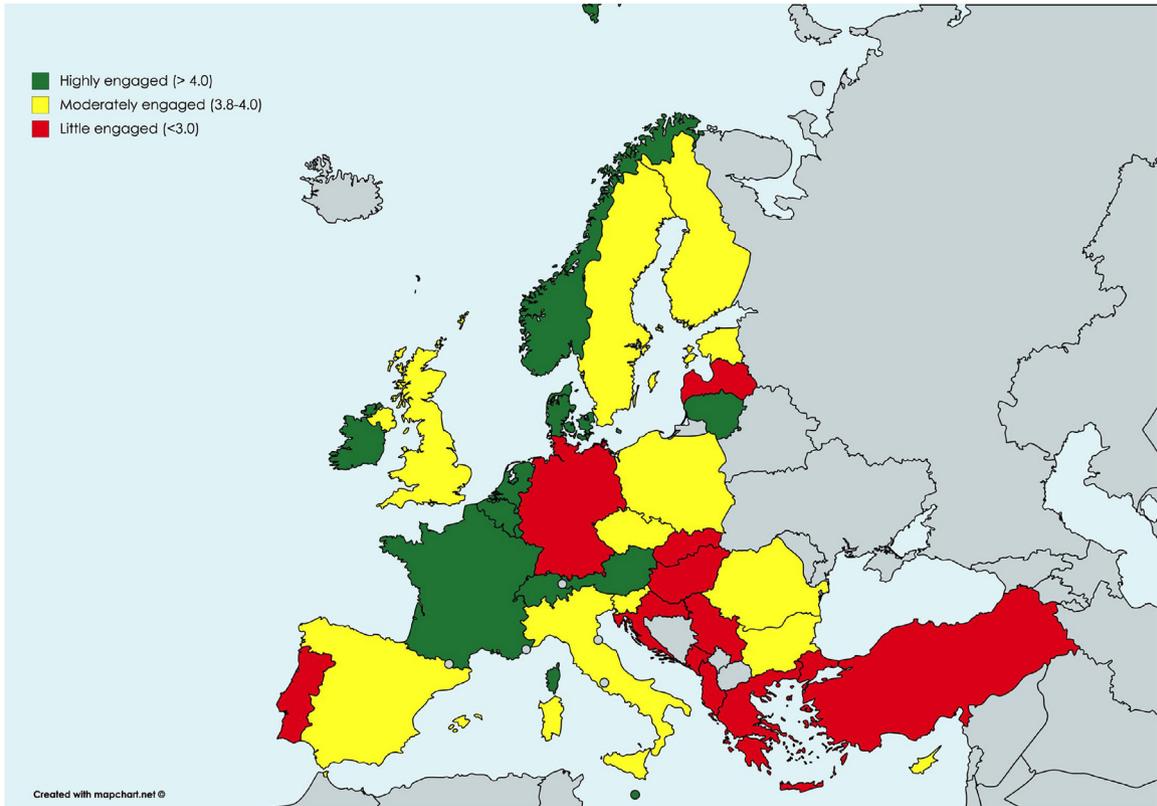


Figure 2 Mean Levels of Work Engagement Across Europe

10.8% 'highly engaged', against only 16.2% and 9% in the EU-candidate countries, respectively.

Conclusion

Levels of engagement differ across Europe, they are highest in Northwestern Europe and the Alpine region, and lowest in Southern Europe and on the Balkans and in Turkey. However, there are also some exceptions to this rule; for instance, Southern countries such as Lithuania and Malta score relatively high, whereas Northwestern such as Germany and Sweden score relatively low. The Netherlands and Belgium are the most engaged countries, whilst Greece and Germany are the least engaged. Roughly speaking, three to four times more workers feel 'engaged' or 'highly engaged' in the Netherlands and Belgium as compared to Greece and Germany.

WORK ENGAGEMENT AND THE ECONOMY

How is the level of engagement of a country's labor force related to its economy? Three economical indicators were considered: (1) *working hours* (i.e., the average number of hours a workers normally work, which covers all hours including extra hours, either paid or unpaid); (2) *economic activity* as indicated by the Gross Domestic Product (GDP; i.e., the monetary value of all the finished goods and services produced within a country's borders); (3) *productivity* (i.e., real output per unit of labor input, as measured by the total number of hours worked).

Work engagement at national level is negatively related with the number of working hours per week ($r = -.53$). This means that in countries where workers work longer, engagement levels are *lower*. In contrast, economic activity and productivity are positively correlated with work engagement with correlations of .49 and .51, respectively. Hence in more

economic active and productive countries, work engagement is *higher* than in less active and productive countries. Taken together, this means that in countries where people work most hours (predominantly in Eastern and Southern Europe), economic activity is low because of poor productivity. Contrarily, in countries with high productivity, such as in Northern and Northwestern Europe, workers work less.

Fig. 3 reveals that rather than linear, the relationship between work engagement and economic activity (GDP) is curvilinear. This means that the relationship between work engagement and GDP is rather strong for countries with low GDP, which are predominantly associated countries and EU-countries in Eastern and Southern Europe. However, the curve levels off when country's GDP increases. This is particularly true for Northwestern Europe and the Alpine region. Fig. 3 also illustrates the exceptional positions of Germany (high GDP, low engagement), and Lithuania and Malta (low GDP, high engagement).

Also, work engagement is curvilinear related with productivity, albeit that this relationship is somewhat less pronounced (the figure is not displayed for reasons of economy). By and large the same countries as in Fig. 3 appear at the right upper corner (highly productive and highly engaged) and the left bottom corner (low productive and low engaged).

Conclusion

Work engagement at country level is substantially and positively related to economic indicators such as economic activity and productivity. In more economically active and productive countries levels of work engagement are higher. Yet, this relationship is curvilinear instead of linear.

By definition, in productive countries workers work less to achieve a similar economic output as in less productive countries. This explains the findings that work hours and

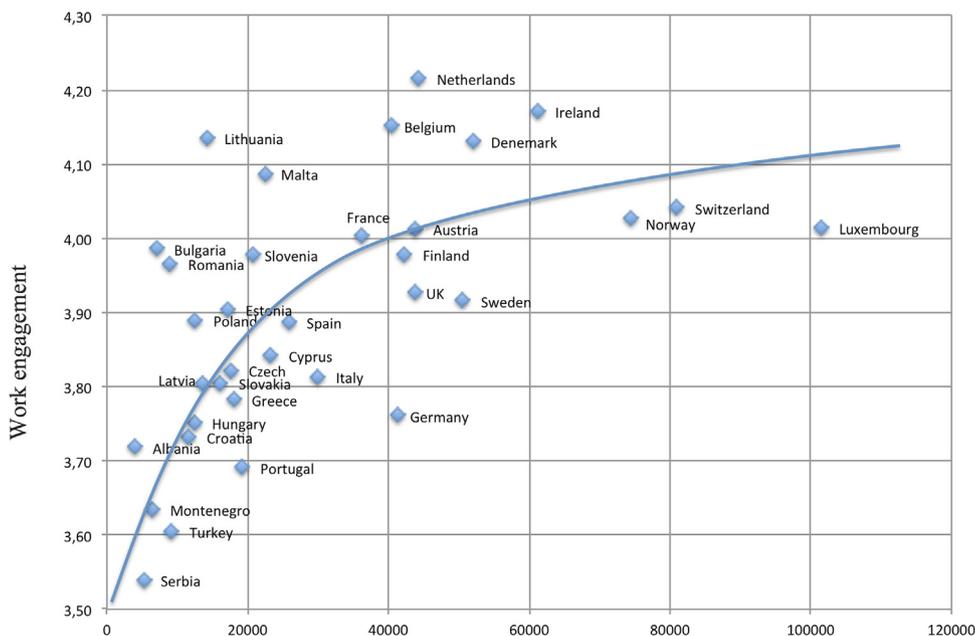


Figure 3 Work Engagement and Economic Activity (GDP/Capita)

work engagement are *negatively* related, whilst economic activity and productivity are *positively* related with work engagement. For instance, in the Netherlands, – the most engaged country – workers work least (30.5 h/week), whereas in Greece workers work most (42.2 h/week) but feel least engaged. Not surprisingly, compared to Greece, productivity is about 33% higher in the Netherlands.

The economic findings of the current paper agree with previous research that showed convincingly that happiness at country level is positively related to the nation's average income and GDP. And what is more, this relationship also appeared to be curvilinear with roughly the same countries that are both happy and economically active (Switzerland, Norway, Denmark, Luxemburg, the Netherlands) and countries, which are less happy and less economically active (Portugal, Greece). The fact that these (curvilinear) relationships were replicated for work engagement adds to the validity of the findings.

WORK ENGAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

How is the level of engagement of a country's labor force related to the way it is governed? Five governance indicators were considered: (1) *corruption*, as assessed by the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI; an aggregated measure of perceptions of business people and country experts of the level of corruption in the public sector); (2) *public integrity*, as assessed by Index of Public Integrity (IPI; a composite index consisting of six components: judicial independence, administrative burden, trade openness, budget transparency, citizenship, and freedom of the press); (3) *democracy*, as assessed by the Democracy Index (DIX; a measure of the state of democracy that is based on sixty indicators grouped in five different categories measuring pluralism, civil liberties, and political culture); (4) *gender inequality*, as assessed by the Gender Inequality Index (GII; a measure of gender inequalities in three important aspects of human development: reproductive health, empowerment, and economic status); and (5) *income equality*, as assessed by the Gini Index (a measure of income or wealth distribution of a nation's residents based on the inequality of levels of household income). Countries are well governed when corruption, gender inequality and income inequality are low, and integrity and democracy are high.

The country's level of work engagement is negatively related with corruption ($r = -.64$) and positively related with integrity ($r = .55$) and the country's state of democracy ($r = .45$). It should be noted, though, that these three indices are highly interrelated, meaning that the more democratic countries are, the higher their level of integrity, and the less corruption is perceived by its inhabitants. Please note that the corruption index is based on *subjective* perceptions, whereas the indices for integrity and democracy are based on *objective*, administrative and archival data. So obviously, at country level, subjective perceptions and objective indices of governance are closely related.

In contrast, work engagement is only weakly and negatively related with the country's level of gender inequality ($r = -.38$): the more gender inequality exists, the less engaged the workforce. Finally, *no* significant association was found for income inequality ($r = -.02$). Hence, the

national level of work engagement is independent from the country's income distribution.

Conclusion

Work engagement at country level is unambiguously related to governance; in well-governed democratic countries of integrity without corruption and gender inequality, the workforce is more engaged than in less well-governed countries. Tellingly, income inequality does *not* seem to be related to work engagement.

The findings above agree with studies on happiness and governance. For instance, it was observed that the happiest countries in the world are economically developed, but also democratic, and boast human rights and gender equality. In a similar vein, a seminal study among almost 1.5 million people from fifty-five countries around the globe found that in countries with happy people less human rights violation (e.g., detention without charge) occurred, and more civil (e.g., independent courts) and political rights (e.g., freedom of the press) existed. Interestingly, the relationships in this study are of similar magnitude as those found here between engagement and governance. Moreover, the study also included the same income inequality indicator as used in the current paper (Gini Index) and likewise found *no* significant association with national levels of happiness. The authors of this groundbreaking study conclude ' . . . *good societies are absolutely necessary for providing the supportive structure in which pursuing happiness can be successful. Living in a well-off, stable, and well-governed society helps happiness*'. The same seems to be true for work engagement.

WORK ENGAGEMENT AND CULTURE

How is the level of engagement of a country's labor force related to cultural factors? Two sets of culture indicators were considered: work values that reflect the importance and the centrality of work and leisure, and national culture. The country's work values were retrieved from the European Values Study that includes representative, stratified samples of the adult population of eighteen years old or older of forty-seven European countries. More specifically, four different work values were included: (1) *importance of work* ('Work is important in my life'); *importance of leisure* ('Leisure time is important in my life'); (3) *work as a duty* ('Work is a duty toward society') and *work centrality* ('Work should always comes first, even if it means less spare time'). Data about national culture were retrieved from the seminal work of Geert Hofstede, who identified six basic dimensions of national culture: *power distance* (i.e., the degree to which the less powerful members of a country accept and expect that power is distributed unequally), *individualism* (i.e., a country's preference for loosely-knit social frameworks in which individuals are expected to take care of only themselves and their immediate families), *masculinity* (i.e., a country's preference for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material rewards for success), *uncertainty avoidance* (i.e., the degree to which a country's inhabitants feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity), *long-term orientation* (i.e., the degree to which members a country's inhabitants take a more pragmatic approach and embrace

societal change), and *indulgence* (i.e., the degree to which a country allows relatively free gratification of basic needs which related to enjoying life and having fun).

As far as work values are concerned, only work centrality is negatively related to work engagement ($r = -.48$). That means that in countries with an engaged workforce, work does *not* come first and does *not* play a central role in people's lives. In a similar vein, the importance of work is also negatively – albeit not significantly – related to work engagement. Finally, the correlation with the importance of leisure is positive and just lacks significance. So taken together, in countries that value leisure more than work, the workforce in more engaged than in countries with a strong work centrality.

And what about national culture? Individualism ($r = .50$) and indulgence ($r = .49$) are positively, and power distance ($r = -.48$) and – to a somewhat lesser degree – uncertainty avoidance ($r = -.37$) are negatively associated with work engagement. This means that workers feel more engaged in countries with loosely knit social frameworks in which individuals take care themselves (individualism), and in countries where people are enjoying life and having fun (indulgence). In contrast, work engagement is low in countries where people accept a hierarchical order (power distance), as well as in countries that maintain rigid codes of belief and behavior (uncertainty avoidance).

When all cultural dimensions are considered simultaneously (using a regression analysis) it appears that only individualism contributes to the prediction of work engagement. Obviously, individualism is the most important cultural dimension that is related to work engagement at country level. Other dimensions such as indulgence, power distance and uncertainty avoidance also play a role, albeit not independently from individualism.

Conclusion

In addition to work centrality, three of the five national culture dimensions are significantly related to work engagement: individualism, masculinity and power distance. However, when all culture dimensions are simultaneously analyzed, only individualism appears to have a unique relationship with a country's level of work engagement.

A comparable study that used data from fifty-five countries found – like in the current paper – that individualism was as the strongest predictor for subjective wellbeing. In addition, power distance and uncertainty avoidance predicted subjective wellbeing. Interestingly, these two culture dimensions are also related significantly to work engagement. Hence, the results of the current study seem to agree with the findings of a large-scale study on wellbeing that was conducted two decades ago.

WRAP-UP

So far, the most important economic, governance, and cultural factors for a country's level of work engagement were identified in separate analyses. But what happens when all relevant factors are thrown into one basket? So by way of wrap-up, all relevant indicators from different domains were simultaneously considered in order to identify to most

important one(s). For the economic domain productivity was selected because it comprises economic activity per capita per unit and thus includes both other economic indicators (GDP and work hours). For the domain of governance a combined index (i.e., factor score) is used of corruption, integrity, democracy, and gender inequality as these are closely related. Finally, for the cultural domain, work centrality and individualism were selected, the latter being the only culture dimension that is uniquely related with work engagement.

Productivity emerged as the sole factor that is related to the country's work engagement level. The three remaining factors (i.e., governance-index, work centrality, and individualism) had no unique relationship with work engagement.

Conclusion

The more productive a country, the more engaged its workforce. This is independent from the nation's governance, work centrality, and individualistic culture. So it seems that, after all, also when it comes to work engagement '*it is the economy, stupid*'.

MAIN FINDINGS IN PERSPECTIVE

The current paper set out to uncover the relationships between work engagement at country level on the one hand, and a variety of economic, governance, and cultural indicators on the other hand. This paper is unique because for the first time a valid and reliable work engagement questionnaire is administered in a set of national representative samples across Europe. The most important findings are:

- Levels of work engagement differ between European countries. Northwestern European countries (Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Ireland, Denmark, and Norway) and countries in the Alpine region (Austria and Switzerland) possess the most engaged workforce. The lowest levels of engagement are found in Southern Europe (Portugal and Greece) on the Balkans (Montenegro, Serbia, Croatia, Albania), and in Turkey. Notably, also German workers are low in work engagement.
- In the EU+ countries on average 21% feels engaged and 11% highly engaged. The Netherlands is the most engaged country; one in three (33%) workers feels engaged and almost one in five (19%) feels highly engaged.
- In countries where workers are engaged, people also feel happy and satisfied with their jobs.
- In economically active and productive countries where people work less, engagement is high. Germany seems to be an exception to this rule, it has an active and productive economy, but yet its workforce is little engaged.
- The relationship of engagement with economic activity and productivity is curvilinear.
- In well-governed countries with a strong democracy, low corruption and gender inequality, and high levels of integrity the workforce is engaged.
- The workforce in more engaged in countries with lower work centrality that value leisure over work.
- Work engagement is higher in individualistic countries with less power distance and uncertainty avoidance

where the gratification of human needs is valued. Individualism stands out as the most significant culture dimension for work engagement.

- Overall, when taken all relevant indicators into consideration, productivity emerges as single most important factor that is associated with the country's level of work engagement.

Unfortunately, these results cannot be compared with other investigations because similar cross-national studies on work engagement do not exist. However, particularly the literature on cross-national differences in happiness and subjective well-being (often these terms are used interchangeably) is abundant. Although a thorough review of this type research is beyond the scope of this paper, it seems that – at least at first glance – the findings reported in the current paper corroborate previous results. For instance, (1) according to the *World Happiness Report 2016*, four out of the ten happiest countries in the world are also amongst the most engaged European countries (Denmark, Switzerland, Norway, and the Netherlands); (2) happiness is curvilinear related to the nation's GDP; (3) happiness is high in well-governed countries with less corruption and where people have trust in institutions; (4) subjective well-being is highest in individualistic countries that are low in power distance and uncertainty avoidance. These converging results add to the validity of the current findings on work engagement. It seems that, overall, similar relationships with economic, societal, and cultural indicators are found for engagement in the *working* population as for happiness in the *general* population.

CRITICAL NOTES

Some caution is also warranted when interpreting the current results. First, only European countries are included so that – strictly speaking – results cannot be generalized globally. A logical next step would be to add non-European countries, which is relatively easy. All is needed is the level of work engagement of a country's workforce as assessed by the UWES-3 in a national representative sample.

Second, using cut-points to distinguish 'engaged' from 'not engaged' or 'disengaged' workers is not without problems. Although it is very popular in business to quantify the number of 'engaged' workers, the use of cut points is – by definition – arbitrary because no objective criteria for engagement exist. In this respect, the question '*who is engaged?*' is similar to the question '*who is tall?*' Is a person of 6.0 feet, 6.2 feet or 6.5 feet 'tall'? Ultimately the answer depends on an arbitrary decision. So it is good to realize that any estimate of the number of engaged workers – be it in a country or in a company – is based on an arbitrary cut point.

Third, by classifying countries based on their engagement scores information is lost. For instance, with an engagement score of 4.0 France counts to the highly engaged countries, and Bulgaria with a score of 3.99 not. Yet, the difference in

engagement between both countries is very small and not significant. Obviously, a price has to be paid for classifying countries. This means that the classification of countries (Fig. 2) should not be taken too literally and that mean scores (Fig. 1) offer a more detailed understanding of national differences. Yet, on the positive side, by classifying countries geographical patterns are uncovered.

Fourth, since *associations* between work engagement and economic, governance, and cultural indicators have been examined no causal order can be established; correlation does not imply causation. For instance, the fact that work engagement is associated with economic activity can either mean that higher levels of work engagement drive economic activity or, alternatively, that economic activity through the prosperity that it generates promotes engagement. Based on the current information, it is not possible to determine which causal interpretation is correct.

And last but not least, when interpreting the results presented in the current paper one should be aware of the so-called *ecological fallacy*. This is a logical fallacy in the interpretation of statistical data where inferences about the nature of individuals are deduced from the group to which those individuals belong. Although this fallacy applies to all results, it is particularly important to keep in mind when interpreting counter-intuitive results. For instance, a negative relationship between work engagement and working hours has been observed in the current study, indicating that in *countries* where people work less, engagement levels are higher. However, it would be wrong – the ecological fallacy – to infer from this that *individual* workers who work less are more engaged. Quite to the contrary, they work *more* hours. The same applies for work centrality. The current study shows that in *countries* where work plays a less central role the workforce is more engaged. However, at the *individual* level work centrality is positively related with employee engagement.

In essence, the ecological fallacy points out that economic, governance, and cultural processes at country level differ fundamentally from psychological processes at individual level.

FINAL REMARK

The current paper illustrates that work engagement may not only be considered at the individual level, but also at the collective, national level. For international companies this means that differences in levels of work engagement between business units in various European countries echo national differences – at least to some extent. Instead of only reflecting disparities in management style or HR-policies, differences in engagement levels of business units across countries partly reflect cross-national socio-economic and cultural differences. This is important to realize when comparing engagement levels of business units from various European countries.



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Acknowledgement

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