Managerial competencies, innovation and engagement in SMEs: The mediating role of organisational learning

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ABSTRACT

According to job demands-resources theory, resources promote positive attitudes, which results in several positive behaviors at work. However, there is little research that examines the effect of managerial competencies on positive attitudes at work. Our research proposes a scale of 7 managerial competencies that evidence to be connected with a particularly relevant attitude at work, namely, engagement. We find that the proposed managerial competencies scale overcomes the required psychometric properties, on the basis of a sample of 204 managers of Spanish SMEs. Following job demands-resources theory, our study confirms a direct and positive effect of the 7 managerial competencies on engagement. The implications of the study are that managerial competencies should be considered by managers to promote engagement at work.

1. Introduction

To develop sustainable and competitive advantages firms have to manage knowledge (Hine, Parker, & Ireland, 2010). Our research aims to measure and conceptualise the knowledge managerial competencies, which are defined as characteristics that lead to better performance (Boyatzis, 1982). Bailey et al. (2015) claim the need of examining areas of particular interest related to engagement antecedents, such as the effect of strategies to promote engagement levels. However, very little empirical research analyzes the relationship between managerial competencies and positive attitudes. Engagement antecedents have traditionally been focused on psychological states, perceived leadership or individual perceptions of organisational characteristics (Bailey et al., 2015). Our first objective is to close this gap by suggesting the managerial competencies that might enhance manager’s engagement at work. Through job demands-resources theory (JD-R), which states that job resources (physical, psychological, social, or organisational characteristics of a job) stimulate positive attitudes such as engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), our second objective is to determine if the knowledge managerial competencies affect managers’ engagement. We know that resources enhance employees energy and increase engagement, fostering performance (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006), while job demands might lead to fatigue and tiredness as a result of expending additional effort. Following JD-R theory, when employees have enough resources, they are more engaged with their work. We consider the knowledge managerial competencies as a job resource that may explain engagement levels. Our research is framed in Spanish SME’s managers. Higher job levels require higher capabilities and abilities. In that context, the knowledge managerial competencies might further increase engagement under those conditions that promote learning, namely organisational learning capability (OLC). Although previous research examines the mediating role of OLC in the relationship between transformational leadership and positive attitudes, such as happiness at work (HAW) (Salas-Vallina, López-Cabrales, Alegre, & Fernández, 2017, one key gap that requires to be filled in the management literature is the role of OLC between managerial competencies and engagement. Our second objective is to examine the mediating role of OLC in the relationship between managerial competencies and engagement. If we can better explain engagement antecedents, we will be able to achieve a better performance (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). Our research also provides a new measurement scale, namely, the managerial competencies scale, which contributes to further research on managerial competencies.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

Our research presents a framework for the influence of the managerial competencies on managers’ engagement, considering the mediating role of OLC, based on the dynamic capabilities view of the firm (Helfat & Peteraf, 2003). Capabilities are dispositions of routines and resources that facilitate a firm achieving its goals (Nelson & Winter, 1982). Dynamic capabilities are the organisational and strategic
routines by which managers modify their firms’ resource ground by obtaining and recombining resources to produce new value-creating strategies (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). Dynamic capabilities allow the organization to reconfigure its capabilities to adjust them to its context. We build both on the basis of the dynamic capabilities view and the job demands-resources (JD-R) theory. Job demands-resources theory states that job resources (physical, psychological, social, or organisational characteristics of a job) stimulate positive attitudes such as engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), while job demands promote burnout. Resources enhance employees’ energy and increase engagement, fostering performance (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Job demands might lead to fatigue and tiredness as a result of expending additional effort.

2.1. Engagement

The scientific study of human strength and optimum functioning presents increasing attention in our century (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), in contrast with the negative perspective focused on disease, illness or disability. Luthans (2002) stated that these positive human strengths could be measured and managed for performance improvement. Later, he defined PsyCap as a core construct that predicts performance and positive attitudes (Luthans, 2002). PsyCap refers to confidence, optimism, hopes and resiliency (Luthans, 2002). Engagement is one of this positive states widely consolidated in literature that reflects the opposite to burnout.

It was Kahn (1990) who claimed that concepts such as job involvement were too alienated from day-to-day work, and defined personal engagement as ‘the harnessing of organization member’s selves to their work roles: in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, emotionally and mentally during role performances’, stating that it is ‘the behavior by which people give themselves to their work’ (Kahn, 1990). He identifies two intrinsic components of engagement: first, the personal energies at work, and second, the work that allows one to express oneself. Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter (1997) argued that engagement is characterised by energy, involvement, and efficacy, corresponding to the three opposite dimensions of Maslach’s burnout inventory, namely, exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness. Macey and Schneider (2008) understand positive engagement as ‘feelings of persistence, vigor, energy, dedication, absorption, enthusiasm, alertness and pride’. The fact is that there is a lack of consistency and agreement in the concept of engagement (Zigarmi, Nimon, Houson, Witt, & Diehl, 2009).

Engaged employees make an extra effort to achieve organisational success (Meyer & Janney, 1989). Salanova, Agut, and Peiró (2005) showed a connection in the relationship between work engagement and customer loyalty. Following Schuck (2011) it is necessary to differentiate the concept of engagement from others such as job satisfaction, in order to elucidate and differentiate them. Despite the diversity of measures for employee engagement, in our research we take Schaufeli et al. (2002) scale with the aim of clarifying the concept. Schaufeli et al. (2002) define engagement as ‘a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigor, dedication and absorption’. Vigor is characterised by high levels of energy and the ability to cope with adverse situations at work, including perseverance in difficult times. Dedication involves experiencing enthusiasm, significance and challenge. Absorption implies experiencing difficulties in disconnecting from work because the employee is at ease, deeply devoted to his/her work, and does not notice the passing of time. We understand engagement in the same way as Schaufeli et al. (2002), related to Zigarmi et al. (2009) engagement concept of ‘Employee Work Passion’. Engagement is a special feeling of energy and motivation related to thrill and passion at work. Therefore we circumscribe engagement in the field of feelings as a result of meaningfulness at work.

2.2. Knowledge managerial competencies and engagement

2.2.1. Measuring knowledge managerial competencies

Firms need to create and manage knowledge to develop sustainable and competitive advantages (Hine et al., 2010). Knowledge is a resource that generates added value to a business (Grant, 1966). For companies it becomes essential to examine the knowledge managerial competencies and its outcomes. Managerial competencies are defined as characteristics that lead to better performance (Boyatzis, 1982), which can be evaluated on the basis of behavioral measures. Constable and McCormick (1987) initially analyzed for specific industries the managerial competencies patterns. Cheng, Dainty, and Moore (2005) stated that besides competencies, it is necessary to consider the social interaction with other employees at work. It is due to the importance of managing perceptions and expectations of other.

Cardona and Lombardía (2005) developed a three-dimensional measure of managerial competencies, namely: (i) external competencies (capacity to perform strategies that improve firm results), (ii) interpersonal competencies (ability to relate effectively to peers at work) and (iii) personal competencies, which include the capacity to transmit trust and exemplarity to collaborators. Other authors focused on emotional and social intelligence (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2013) or courage, justice and temperament (Wright & Goodstein, 2007).

We based our concept of knowledge managerial competencies on Cardona and Lombardía (2005) for its simplicity and straightforward interpretation. For all the above, we propose a model that includes 7 knowledge managerial competencies, which can be classified in 3 groups: external, interpersonal and personal competencies. External competencies are related to actions that directly affect the organization’s profitability. For example, Cheng et al. (2005) examined customer orientation, and Van der Laan and Erwee (2012) considered strategic vision. We propose three external competencies: Business vision, or the capacity to recognise and seize opportunities, dangers and external forces that impact on the competitiveness and effectiveness of the business; Customer orientation, or the capacity to respond promptly and effectively to customer needs and suggestions; and Negotiation, or the capacity to get reaches agreements that satisfy the interests of both parties.

Interpersonal competencies are those focusing on effective relationships with other employees in the organization. Cheng et al. (2005) studied teamwork and cooperation as interpersonal competencies. We propose Delegation, or the concern that the team members have the ability to take decision by their own, as competencies included in this group.

Personal competencies are related to self-development and individual capacities like Emotional intelligence (Goleman et al., 2013) or Open-mindedness (Tett, Guterman, & Bleier, 2000). We suggest the following competencies in this group: creativity, understood as the generation of innovative approaches and solutions to problems; Optimism, or the capacity of viewing situations and problems from its most favorable side; and Time management, or the capacity to prioritise and schedule activities.

2.2.2. The relationship between knowledge managerial competencies and engagement

Previous research has examined competencies observing behaviors (Woodruffe, 1993), habits (Cardona & Chinchilla, 1999), and patterns and circumstances (Ruth, 2006). Our study explores the effects of managerial competencies focused on attitudinal outcomes for the following reasons: (i) managerial competencies can be considered personal resources, and following the job-demands resources theory resources promote positive attitudes such as engagement, and (ii) engagement predicts a wide diversity of important organisational outcomes.

Bailey et al. (2015) claim the need of examining areas of particular interest related to engagement antecedents, such as the effect of
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