



## Daily self-management and employee work engagement



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### ABSTRACT

The present study adopts a bottom-up approach to work engagement by examining how self-management is related to employees' work engagement on a daily basis. Specifically, we hypothesized that on days that employees use more self-management strategies, they report higher resources at work and in turn, are more vigorous, dedicated, and absorbed in their work (i.e., engaged) on these days. We tested this hypothesis in a sample of 72 maternity nurses who filled out an online diary for 5 days ( $N = 360$  data points). In line with our hypotheses, results of multilevel structural equation modeling analyses showed that daily self-management was positively related to the resourcefulness of the daily work environment (i.e., more skill variety, feedback, and developmental opportunities) and consequently, to employees' daily work engagement. However, contrary to our expectations, the measurement model showed that two of the five included self-management strategies (i.e., self-reward and self-punishment) loaded onto a separate factor and were unrelated to all job resources. The findings contribute to our understanding of employees' role in regulating their own daily work engagement.

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Daily diary studies show that work engagement varies greatly within persons (Xanthopoulou & Bakker, 2012). Employees who are generally engaged in their work may be more or less engaged on a specific day depending on the amount of job resources available (e.g., Simbula, 2010; Tims, Bakker, & Xanthopoulou, 2011; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009). Hence, it is important for employees to be surrounded by a resourceful work environment (e.g., being supported, receiving feedback, and having decision latitude) on a day-to-day basis. Several studies have shown that certain leadership behaviors contribute to work-related resources like decision latitude how and when to perform the work, feedback about work, social support, and opportunities to use skills (e.g., Nielsen & Daniels, 2012; Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006; Purvanova, Bono, & Dzieweczynski, 2006; Tuckey, Bakker, & Dollard, 2012). These resources, in turn, have a positive influence on followers' work engagement. However, the timing of work and work spaces (e.g., office, home, train) become increasingly flexible. Therefore, employees are no longer always under direct supervision, and working independently becomes increasingly important. The present study focuses on how employees can take the lead themselves, and influence their own daily work engagement.

The current study contributes to the literature on work engagement and self-management by being the first to examine the relationship between daily self-management and daily work engagement. Self-management refers to employees' control over their own behavior instead of being externally controlled by the supervisor. Manz and Sims (1980) argue that self-management may even substitute leadership effects, because individuals who use self-management are responsible for many managerial functions such as monitoring performance, taking corrective actions, and seeking resources. Furthermore, we examine how self-management and work engagement are related by arguing that self-management contributes to the resourcefulness of the work environment and consequently, to employees' work engagement. Although several beneficial effects of self-management for employees and organizations have been shown (e.g., Murphy & Ensher, 2001; Raabe, Frese, & Beehr, 2007; Uhl-Bien & Graen,

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1998), very little is known about the underlying mechanisms explaining these effects. Our sample of maternity nurses enabled us to examine the suggested relationships in the appropriate context, because these nurses work independently and do not frequently interact with their leader.

## 1. Theoretical background

### 1.1. Self-management

Self-management means that employees manage and monitor their own behavior and are responsible for the decisions they make. It also means that employees, in the absence of any external control, make decisions that are less attractive, but more desirable (Manz & Sims, 1980). Self-management strategies help structuring the work environment, increase self-motivation, and facilitate behaviors that contribute to the achievement of performance standards (e.g., Hackman, 1986; Manz & Sims, 1980). Self-management strategies consist of self-observation, self-goal setting, self-cueing, self-reward, and self-punishment (Houghton & Neck, 2002). Self-observation means that individuals are aware of why and when they show certain behaviors. This awareness may lead individuals to change their behavior to improve their performance. Self-goal setting contributes to goal achievement and performance when goals are specific, challenging, and attainable (Locke & Latham, 1990). Self-cueing refers to using reminders that help focusing on what individuals need to accomplish, which enables employees to adjust their behavior to improve their performance. Finally, self-reward and self-punishment are referred to as incentive modification. That is, desirable behaviors are reinforced (e.g., treating yourself with something you like), while undesirable behaviors have aversive consequences (e.g., be tough on yourself when you do not perform well). Together, these strategies are aimed at encouraging desirable behaviors and preventing undesirable behaviors, thus ensuring successful performance (Frayne & Geringer, 2000).

According to substitutes for leadership theory (Kerr & Jermier, 1978), certain characteristics of the employee, task and organization make leadership unnecessary. That is, substitutes for leadership ensure that leadership behaviors are unable to predict follower outcomes. As mentioned earlier, self-management may substitute leadership behavior (Manz & Sims, 1980). Thus, self-management can be advantageous for organizations, because it saves time and money otherwise spend on external managers (Manz & Sims, 1980; Markham & Markham, 1995). We expect that, in the absence of a leader, self-managing individuals will optimize their daily work environment, which contributes to their daily work engagement.

We treat self-management as a state that can fluctuate within persons rather than a static characteristic. Manz and Sims (1980, 1991) argue that we all use self-management to some extent, depending on external contingencies. For example, it is likely that employees do not consciously monitor their behavior when pressing matters require their attention, such as conflicts with/between colleagues or problems arranging childcare. Research on self-management training has shown that self-management is not a stable characteristic; instead, it is trainable (Frayne & Latham, 1987; Latham & Frayne, 1989).

### 1.2. Daily work engagement

Daily work engagement is a transient, positive, fulfilling and work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption and fluctuates within individuals over a short period of time (Breevaart, Bakker, Demerouti, & Hetland, 2012; Sonnentag, Dormann, & Demerouti, 2010). Vigor refers to high levels of energy and mental resilience. Next, dedication means being enthusiastic about work and inspired by the work tasks. Finally, absorption refers to being fully concentrated on work and feeling like time flies when working (cf. Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Daily work engagement has been associated with several positive outcomes, including personal initiative and proactive behavior (Sonnentag, 2003), self- and other-ratings of in- and extra-role performance (Bakker & Bal, 2010; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Heuven, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2008), and objective financial returns (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009). Among the best-known predictors of work engagement are job resources (for meta-analyses, see Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010; Halbesleben, 2010). Moreover, research has shown that leaders' daily behavior positively affects the resourcefulness of the work environment, which in turn, stimulates employees' work engagement on these days (Breevaart et al., 2013; Tuckey et al., 2012). As leaders are no longer "always around", it is becoming increasingly important to complement this leader-focused approach to work engagement and its predictors with an employee-focused approach, i.e., self-management. The present study focuses on skill variety, feedback and opportunities for development as outcomes of self-management initiatives of employees, because they are valuable (e.g., Bakker & Bal, 2010) and contribute to performance by increasing work engagement (for a meta-analysis see Halbesleben, 2010).

## 2. Hypotheses

Self-management strategies are aimed at increasing the efficiency with which work is carried out as to increase the likelihood of goal achievement and high performance (Manz, 1986). Because job resources are aspects of a job that contribute to the achievement of working goals (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), they are especially salient for self-managing individuals. Self-managing individuals have the authority and control to make decisions (Uhl-Bien & Graen, 1998), which is a requisite for employees to actually make changes in the work environment (Tims & Bakker, 2010; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). As job resources hold intrinsic value to people and people are motivated to gain, protect, and regain resources (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002), this latitude to decide how to perform work makes it likely that self-managing individuals mobilize their own resources. For example, on the days that individuals use self-goal setting, they set specific goals, which may provide them with the opportunity to acquire new skills (i.e., developmental opportunities). Another example is that awareness and monitoring of one's own behavior (i.e., self-observation), provide feedback

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