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Felt and behavioral engagement in workgroups of professionals ☆

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ABSTRACT

This research proposes a two-dimensional measure of engagement for professionals in technically-oriented workgroups. It examines the relationship of their engagement to five workgroup outcomes: innovation, performance, satisfaction with the organization, career success, and intentions to stay. Three studies are reported involving: (1) a random sample of 123 workgroups and 1351 self and reports by others of professionals employed by a Fortune 100 company, (2) a panel study of 1024 of the study one professionals four months later, and (3) the replication of results with 827 professionals across three cultures. The results support felt engagement and behavioral engagement as distinct constructs that can be measured by both a self-report and assessments by others of workgroup engagement. The relationship of engagement to workgroup innovation, performance, satisfaction with the organization, career success, and intentions to stay generalized across four countries and cultures: U.S./North America, The Netherlands/Europe, Argentina, and India. Felt engagement was the best predictor of affective outcomes and intentions to stay when all variables were measured concurrently. Behavioral engagement was the best predictor of workgroup performance concurrently and over time. This research indicates that the two dimensions of engagement are important aspects of vocational adjustment for the success of professionals in technically-oriented workgroups. Implications for future research are to consider multiple dimensions of engagement, clearly define the population and setting for engagement, and to study engagement as a dynamic experience that warrants ongoing management and workgroup attention.

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1. Introduction

Employee engagement, a concept often promoted by human resource consulting firms (e.g., Tower-Perrin, 2003), has been scrutinized and is now generally accepted by the academic community (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Macey & Schneider, 2008). An early view of engagement by Kahn (1990, 1992) has guided much of the research on engagement: *personal engagement* represents a state in which employees become part of their work performance as they invest their energy — experiencing an emotional connection with their work. Kahn (1990, p. 719) concluded that personal engagement involves "leaps and falls" in one's work experiences.

Employee engagement has also been used to refer to a psychological state such as job involvement and commitment, as well as observable behaviors such as extra-role effort, proactivity, being adaptive, and expanding one's work role (Macey & Schneider, 2008). *State engagement* has been defined to include the dedication, absorption, and energy put into one's work (Salanova, Agut, & Peiro, 2005; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006), while *active engagement* has been defined as "high levels of activity, initiative, and responsibility" (Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002, p. 737).

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In their review and meta-analysis of work engagement as it relates to employee performance, Christian et al. (2011) proposed that work engagement be viewed as a higher-order construct because dimensions of engagement correlated highly (they note a median correlation of physical, emotional, and cognitive engagement of .81). They defined work engagement as a "relatively enduring state of mind referring to the simultaneous investment of personal energies in the experience or performance of work" (p. 95). This definition infers significant stability in work engagement over time, somewhat contrary to the "leaps and falls" view proposed by Kahn (1990).

In their study of the meaning of engagement, Macey and Schneider (2008) found that most definitions of engagement share the notion that "employee engagement is a desirable condition, has an organizational purpose, and connotes involvement, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, focused effort, and energy, so it has both attitudinal and behavioral components" (p. 4). They argue that an employee's state of engagement differs from his/her behavioral engagement. This distinction is critical because psychological outcomes that are personally relevant may not contribute to performance and career success. An employee's state of engagement, however desirable, is distinct from engagement behaviors that are observable by others — behaviors which can be assessed, reinforced, encouraged, and used to direct future career actions. If employee engagement is multiple constructs, or distinct dimensions of the same construct, then measures are needed that overcome the high inter-dimension co-variation found in previous studies as reported by Christian et al. (2011).

A second issue raised by reviews of engagement by Macey and Schneider (2008) and Christian et al. (2011) is the extent to which employee engagement is a stable or consistent attribute of a person (e.g., a state or trait), or something that varies based on the work experience. De Lange, de Witte, and Notelaers (2008) conducted one of the few studies using a two-wave, time-lag panel examination of engagement. After 16 months, of the 871 Belgian employees participating, 69% were in the same job (stayers), 14% had been promoted (promotion makers), and 17% obtained a different job with a new employer (external movers). Work engagement was measured at two points in time with a 6-item version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), which assessed employee vigor and dedication (i.e., felt or state of engagement). Those reporting a promotion or external move reported a significant increase in their level of work engagement – the stayers had no increase. Their findings suggest that engagement changes over time – either before or after work-role changes – and may contribute to or be the result of career changes.

Based on Kahn's early conceptualization and the two reviews cited, three questions need to be addressed in the measurement of engagement: (1) Is engagement a "state," or a "trait," or is it an emotional connection to work that has ebbs and flows (Dalal, Brummel, Wee, & Thomas, 2008; Kahn, 1990; Schaufeli et al., 2006?; (2) Is engagement one-dimensional or multi-dimensional with respect to work, given the conceptual support for multiple dimensions argued by Macey and Schneider (2008)?; and, (3) If engagement is multi-dimensional, do the dimensions differentially impact outcomes important to vocational adjustment including perceptions of career success and performance?

Our interest in these questions led to a program of research involving highly educated professionals working in technically-oriented workgroups. Recently, Rich, Lepine, and Crawford (2010) called for research to examine the role of engagement for employees in workgroups, since workgroups have become increasingly common. In addition, more research is needed with samples of "knowledge workers," a fact alluded to by Rich et al. as their analysis focused on firefighters. A challenge facing workgroup members grappling with finding solutions to complex issues is one of sustaining high levels of motivation, engagement, and performance over the duration of the project. When projects last for months to years with little assurance of success, many ideas pursued lead nowhere, contributing to the frequent need for member resilience and creativity (Amabile, 1993, 1997). In this context, frequent ebbs and flows in the emotional climate of the workgroup can be observed (Awal & Stumpf, 1981; Katz, 2005). While people are hired or assigned to a workgroup based on project needs and technical fit, their enthusiasm may to vary due to project challenges and setbacks. Workgroup members may sometimes feel engaged, and other times may not. Similarly, they may sometimes behave in an engaged manner and sometimes not (e.g., providing extra initiative to reach a stretch goal, seeking out opportunities to do more, being resilient to set-backs, and going beyond expectations to provide incremental value to the project).

For professionals in workgroups we sought to measure both the 'felt' dimension of engagement and behaviors that displayed engagement. While several different measures of work engagement have been used (e.g., Rothbard, 2001; Saks, 2006; Schaufeli et al., 2006), none effectively measured the employee's personal, emotional connections with their work and separately (low co-variance) the behaviors which demonstrate an investment of personal resources such as high levels of energy, activity beyond that which is expected, and observable actions that demonstrate work engagement (Rich et al., 2010). The instruments in use had not demonstrated validity beyond self-reports — and we found no assessments by others of workgroup member engagement. After examining available instruments and research findings, we decided to use Macey and Schneider's (2008) propositions in an effort to develop a measure of *felt engagement* and *behavioral engagement* that would be relevant to workgroups of professionals doing technical work, be equally valid for self-report and assessments by others, and be useful to workgroup members and their community in engaging the workgroup over time.

1.1. Felt engagement and behavioral engagement for professionals in workgroups

It is generally accepted that motivation of professionals is derived from a sense that their work is challenging and meaningful, that it gives them freedom of choice for independent action, that it provides an opportunity for recognition and personal development, and that it can lead to progress and breakthroughs (Amabile, 1993; Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta, & Kramer, 2004; Katz, 2005; Thomas, 2009). While the job characteristics of their work, resources available, and extrinsic factors such as salary, job security, and working conditions are important, these elements may not create the ongoing excitement and energy to persevere

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