



Work engagement, performance, and active learning: The role of conscientiousness

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines whether the relationship between work engagement and job performance is moderated by the extent to which individuals are inclined to work hard, careful, and goal-oriented. On the basis of the literature, it was hypothesized that conscientiousness strengthens the relationship between work engagement and supervisor ratings of task and contextual performance as well as active learning. The hypotheses were tested on a sample of 144 employees from several occupations. Results of moderated structural equation modeling supported the hypotheses. Work engagement was positively related to task performance, contextual performance, and active learning, particularly for employees high in conscientiousness.

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Engagement is important for organizations since it contributes to the bottom line (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010; Macey & Schneider, 2008). Recent studies have shown that work engagement is positively related to supervisor-ratings of job performance (Bakker & Bal, 2010; Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008), financial results (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009), and client satisfaction (Salanova, Agut, & Peiró, 2005). Earlier research by Demerouti (2006) has indicated that positive work experiences, like flow, are not necessarily directly and positively related to performance at work. Rather, it was found that the personality dimension of conscientiousness qualified the relationship between flow at work and both task and contextual performance. The present study builds on this research and investigates whether personality may qualify the work engagement–performance relationship. Specifically, we will investigate whether the persistency and self-discipline that is characteristic of conscientiousness is needed to transform work engagement into high-quality performance.

The present study contributes to the existing literature in the following ways. First, we aim to qualify the conscientiousness–job performance relationship. The overall average correlations in meta-analyses are typically rather modest (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Hertz & Donovan, 2000). This implies that there might be other variables involved that mask a possible relationship, including work engagement. Second, while Demerouti (2006) examined task and contextual performance, the present study additionally examines active learning as a valuable organizational outcome, which is relevant for contemporary learning organizations. A learning organization is one that focuses on developing and using its information and the knowledge capabilities of its employees in order to create higher-valued information and knowledge, to change behaviors, and to improve organizational outcomes (King, 2001). According to King, one of the strategies to become a learning organization is by supporting and stimulating individual learning – as enhanced individual learning will translate into improved organizational behaviors. Third, rather than focusing on flow, the major focus of our study is on work engagement. Work engagement has been found to be frequently experienced by employees throughout the whole working population (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006) while flow has unclear prevalence. Finally, while in Demerouti's (2006) study performance ratings were provided by colleagues, in the present study we collected supervisor ratings. Supervisor ratings have been found to have higher reliability than ratings of peers and subordinates (Conway

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& Huffcutt, 1997). This has been explained by the fact that it is part of the supervisor's job to pay attention to and evaluate subordinates' performance while peers may not attend to performance as closely because it is generally not part of their job to do so.

1. Theoretical background

Work engagement is an active, positive work-related state that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Vigor refers to high levels of energy and resilience while working. Dedication is characterized by being strongly involved in one's work and experiencing a sense of significance and enthusiasm. Absorption is the state of being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work. In short, engaged employees have high levels of energy and are enthusiastically involved in their work. Moreover, they are often fully immersed in their work so that time flies (see also May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004).

Work engagement is suggested to be beneficial for both the individual and the organization as it is expected to influence how individuals do their work and fulfill their work tasks (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010). Task performance is also referred to as in-role performance and refers to those officially required outcomes and behaviors that directly serve the goals of the organization (Motowilo & Van Scotter, 1994). Among other things, task performance includes meeting company objectives and effective sales presentations (Behrman & Perreault, 1982). The definition of task performance emphasizes the instrumentality of performance for organizational goals. However, in addition to task performance, there are other possible performance indicators such as contextual performance and active learning behavior. Work engagement may also facilitate these types of behaviors.

Contextual or extra-role performance is defined as discretionary behaviors on the part of an employee that are believed to directly promote the effective functioning of an organization without necessarily directly influencing an employee's productivity (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000). Contextual performance includes organizational citizenship behavior with its five components – civic virtue, courtesy, altruism, sportsmanship, and conscientiousness. It also refers to such aspects as personal initiative and voice that indicate proactive behaviors towards the organization. While the activities relevant for task performance may differ between jobs, the activities for contextual performance are relatively similar in the universe of jobs (Sonnentag & Frese, 2002).

Active learning behavior in the context of work is also known as employee development (Simmering, Colquitt, Noe, & Porter, 2003) and refers to self-initiated, self-directed behavior by means of which employees improve their competencies and work environment (London & Smither, 1999). Active learning has three characteristic components. First, active learning implies that employees have a motivation to learn whereby they start learning activities (e.g., searching for relevant information) themselves (Simmering et al., 2003; Taris, Kompier, De Lange, Schaufeli, & Schreurs, 2003). Second, an active learning employee feels that he or she is in control over the learning process (Bell & Kozlowski, 2008). Third, the active learner experiences a feeling of mastery and self-efficacy (Taris et al., 2003). An active attitude whereby an employee learns and applies new skills and knowledge has been suggested as a separate, but crucial component of job performance in today's rapidly changing work environment requiring flexibility and adaptability of employees.

1.1. Engagement–performance link

There are several reasons why engaged workers may perform better than their non-engaged counterparts. We will discuss two reasons here (for an overview, see Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010). First, engaged employees often experience positive emotions (Bindl & Parker, 2010). Happy people are more sensitive to opportunities at work, more outgoing and helpful to others, and more confident and optimistic (Cropanzano & Wright, 2001). According to the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), positive emotions like joy, interest and contentment share the capacity to broaden people's momentary thought–action repertoires and build their personal resources (ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological) through widening the array of thoughts and actions. For instance, joy broadens resources by creating the urge to play and be creative. Interest, another positive emotion, fosters the desire to explore, assimilate new information and experiences and grow (e.g., Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). Thus, engaged workers may perform better because they often experience positive emotions and are open to new experiences.

A second reason why engaged workers may perform better is that engaged workers have more physical resources. Indeed, research has generally shown a positive relationship between work engagement and health. For example, a recent study by Schaufeli, Taris, and Van Rhenen (2008) showed that engaged workers reported fewer psychosomatic complaints than their non-engaged counterparts. Similarly, Demerouti, Bakker, De Jonge, Janssen, and Schaufeli (2001) found moderate negative correlations between engagement (particularly vigor) and psychosomatic health complaints (e.g., headaches, chest pain). In addition, Hakanen, Bakker, and Schaufeli (2006), in their study among Finnish teachers showed that work engagement was positively related to self-rated health and workability.

Several recent studies have indeed shown that work engagement is positively related to job performance (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010). For example, Bakker and Bal (2010) showed that engaged teachers received higher ratings from their supervisors on in-role and extra-role performance, indicating that engaged employees perform well and are willing to go the extra mile. Salanova et al. (2005) conducted a study among personnel working in Spanish restaurants and hotels. Employees ($N = 342$) from 114 service units (58 hotel front desks and 56 restaurants) provided information about organizational resources, engagement, and service climate. Customers ($N = 1,140$) from these units provided information on employee performance and customer loyalty. The findings showed that organizational resources and work engagement predicted service climate, which in turn predicted employee performance and then customer loyalty. Moreover, Xanthopoulou et al. (2009) conducted a diary study among employees working in a Greek fast-food restaurant, and found that day-levels of work engagement were predictive of objective daily financial returns.

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