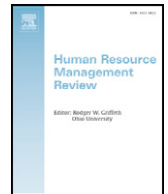




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Investigating the incremental validity of employee engagement in the prediction of employee effectiveness: A meta-analytic path analysis

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ABSTRACT

The current study used meta-analytic estimates and path analysis to examine whether the construct of employee engagement (EE) shows incremental validity in the prediction of employee effectiveness (a broad measure of performance-related behaviors) over other job attitudes such as job satisfaction, job involvement, and organizational commitment. Meta-analytic estimates between EE and various employee effectiveness indicators were computed from 49 published correlations representing a total of 22,090 individuals. We combined these estimates with published meta-analytic estimates between employee effectiveness and job attitudes to produce a meta-matrix representing 1,161 unique correlations. Using this meta-matrix, a series of path model comparisons produced two results: (1) EE bears low to moderate incremental validity over individual job attitudes (R^2 change of 0.02 to 0.06), and (2) EE bears low incremental validity over a higher-order job attitude construct representing the combination of other job attitudes in the prediction of a higher-order employee effectiveness construct (R^2 change of 0.01). Given the brevity of popular EE measures, the results suggest EE is better conceptualized as a higher-order measure of job attitudes that is an effective and concise predictor of employee effectiveness.

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For more than a decade, the construct of employee engagement (EE) has generated vigorous interest among organizational practitioners and scholars. A literature search (using PsycINFO/Business Source Elite) of the terms “employee engagement” and “work engagement” for the decade 2001–2011 revealed more than 1,000 results, of which about 80% were non-empirical papers authored by human resource practitioners. A similar search for the previous decade (1990–2000) produced a corpus of only 112 articles. This popularity is, in large part, due to EE’s empirically demonstrated and also intuitive link with job performance (for a review, see Macey & Schneider, 2008; Rich, LePine, & Crawford, 2010) and organizational success (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009). Defined as a “positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002), EE reflects a compilation of attitudes most human resource professionals deem to be the cornerstones of a highly performing workforce.

Despite the resounding popularity of EE among practitioners, academic researchers have increasingly questioned whether EE is overlapping with other well-established job attitude constructs (e.g. Harter & Schmidt, 2008, Newman & Harrison, 2008). In particular, the conceptual space of EE is shared with the long-established constructs of job satisfaction, affective organizational

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commitment, and job involvement (Newman & Harrison, 2008). In fact, some engagement scales developed by consulting companies define engagement by encompassing elements of job satisfaction. For example, the Gallup Organization defines EE as an “individual employees’ involvement and satisfaction with, as well as enthusiasm for, their work,” (Harter et al., 2002, p. 269).

The similarities between EE and these job attitudes are also apparent in the way the constructs are assessed. As pointed out by Newman and Harrison (2008), an examination of the items of the most popular EE survey (B76the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, UWES; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003) reveals that many items have closely matching counterparts on measures of the other job attitudes. The UWES item “I am enthusiastic about my job” is almost identical to the “Most days I am enthusiastic about my work” item that appears on a longstanding measure of job satisfaction (Overall Job Satisfaction Scale, OJS; Brayfield & Rothe, 1951). And the UWES item “I get carried away when I am working” matches the “I am very much involved personally in my work” item that appears on the Job Involvement Survey (JIS; Lodahl & Kejner, 1965)."

Given these similarities, the purpose of this study was to investigate the incremental validity of EE when accounting for other potentially overlapping job attitudes. Using meta-analytic techniques, path analyses, and building upon EE theory generally (Kahn, 1990), we propose that EE indeed is related to important job performance variables (i.e., focal performance, contextual performance) beyond other individual job attitudes. Further, taking into consideration the compatibility principle (Ajzen, 1988; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), we make the case that EE may be better identified as a higher-order construct that efficiently predicts *employee effectiveness*, a higher-order measure of performance-related indicators defined as “the tendency to contribute desirable inputs towards one’s work role” (Harrison, Newman, & Roth, 2006, p. 309). In essence, EE may serve as a more efficient and effective way to capture employee attitudes that predict indicators of employee effectiveness such as focal performance, contextual performance, turnover intention, and absenteeism.

1. Employee engagement research and theory

In a seminal paper, Kahn (1990) defined employee engagement as the degree to which individuals invest their physical, cognitive, and emotional energies into their role performance. According to Kahn, engaged individuals are psychologically present, attentive, connected, integrated, and focused in their role performances. The contemporary definition of engagement embraces a highly similar meaning, defining engagement as “a positive work-related state of mind comprised of vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002). *Vigor* refers to high levels of energy, the willingness to invest effort, and persistence at work-related tasks. *Dedication* relates to feelings of involvement in one’s work and the experience of enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Lastly, *absorption* is characterized by full concentration, immersion, and engrossment in one’s work whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties detaching oneself from work.

Some of the contextual predictors of EE are jobs that provide social support, performance feedback, autonomy, learning opportunities, and task variety (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011). High levels of engagement emerge in such work contexts because they allow employees to fulfill basic human needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985). According to the Job Demands-Resources model (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Van Rhenen, 2009) EE and burnout are diametric opposites of a single dimension: resources such as social support and frequent feedback foster engagement while work demands such as time, task difficulty, and physical strain predict levels of emotional exhaustion and burnout. An individual can sustain high levels of engagement only if the resources he or she receives outweigh job demands. Meta-analytic evidence indeed suggests that EE and burnout are constructs on the opposite ends of a single dimension (Cole, Walter, Bedeian, & O’Boyle, 2012). However, not all research supports this position, in part because of the variations in how EE is measured and manifested across samples and studies (Cole et al., 2012).

Due to the intuitive link between EE and employee performance, a number of studies have had success showing that engaged employees perform better than their less-engaged counterparts (Rich et al., 2010). Employee engagement has been linked to higher job performance ratings, increased in-role performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, personal initiative, higher likelihood of promotion, decreased absenteeism and tardiness, and lower turnover and turnover intention, (for a review, see Macey & Schneider, 2008). Studies have also shown links between EE and less intuitive outcomes such as decreases in work-related health complaints (Gonzalez-Roma, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Lloret, 2006), workaholism (Schaufeli, Taris, & Bakker, 2006), employee innovativeness (Schaufeli et al., 2006), and objective markers of financial performance at the organizational level (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009). Interestingly, research also suggests prolonged high levels of EE are rare (Sonnentag, 2003) and that EE can be contagious and cross over from one coworker to another or within married couples (Bakker & Demerouti, 2009; Bakker & Xanthopoulou, 2009).

In sum, research on EE in the past 25 years has been fruitful in many directions, including examinations of its contextual antecedents and consequences, the links between engagement and burnout, its associations with workaholism, and its divergence from other constructs. It appears as though EE has enjoyed a significant amount of success as a new construct in the nomological network of job-related attitudes. However, given that EE appears to encompass other job attitudes such as job satisfaction, job involvement, and organizational commitment, its overlap with these job attitudes brings into question whether EE predicts job performance over-and-above these attitudes. It is to this overlap that we now turn our attention.

1.1. Incremental validity of employee engagement

A small number of studies have indeed examined the overlap between EE and other constructs (e.g., Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008; Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006; Schaufeli, et al., 2006; Schaufeli, Taris, & van Rhenen, 2008). Notably, Joseph, Newman, and Hulin (2010) used meta-analytic means to address this issue and concluded that EE essentially assesses individuals’ general

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