Engaging employees through internal communication

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ABSTRACT

Engagement is becoming one of the more popular concepts in various social sciences including psychology, organizational behavior, human resource management, and of course public relations. Even though engagement is applied in several areas of public relations, it is most commonly explored in connection to internal communication. The purpose of this paper is to make a contribution to the growing body of research exploring the relationship between internal communication satisfaction (as a part of internal communication) and employee engagement. Principally we wanted to test the relationship between the eight dimensions of internal communication satisfaction and three employee engagement dimensions.

1. Introduction

Engagement is becoming one of the more popular paradigms in describing the way organizations try to collaborate with their stakeholders. Worryingly, research shows that today there are more disengaged employees than engaged ones. According to Gallup's State of the Global Workplace report conducted in 142 countries, only 13% of questioned employees state that they feel engaged at their workplace (Gallup, 2016). This, rather disheartening result means that actively disengaged workers (negative and potentially hostile to the organization they work for) outnumber engaged employees almost 2–1. Having in mind potential benefits of employee engagement such as greater work performance (Gruman & Saks, 2011), reduced absenteeism and turnover (Brunetto, Teo, Shacklock & Farr-Wharton, 2012), and higher customer loyalty (Salanova, Agut & Peiro, 2005), it also adds importance to the approach in which engagement is an important source of competitive advantage, as it allows the organization to innovate and compete on the market (Welch, 2011). In public relations engagement is studied in various contexts, is defined in multiple terms and has different operationalizations. It is used as the umbrella term that includes a wide array of organizational attempts to involve stakeholders in its activities and decisions.

In spite of a certain confusions of definitions, there are numerous studies that report a strong connection between engagement, employee performance and business outcomes. Key drivers of employee engagement include nature of the job and work environment, recognition of one’s work, social climate, personality traits, and most important for this particular study – internal communication satisfaction, as an integral part of internal communication. However, in spite of the importance of the relationship between internal communication and employee engagement, the association has not been widely empirically tested.
2. Literature review

2.1. The concept of engagement

The term engagement has been used in several academic disciplines including sociology, political science, psychology, organizational behavior and others (Achterberg et al., 2003; Resnick 2001; Saks 2006). For example, while civic engagement has been common in sociology (Jennings & Stoker 2004; Mondak, Hibbing, Canache, Seligson, & Anderson, 2010), social engagement has been applied in psychology (Achterberg et al., 2003; Huo, Binning, & Molina 2009). Other uses of engagement have included stakeholder engagement (Greenwood 2007; Ihm, 2015), public engagement (Linjuan & Wan-Hsiu, 2016; Taylor & Kent, 2014), as well as areas closer to marketing such as customer and consumer engagement (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011).

Communication experts are also increasingly using engagement as the measure with which they estimate their stakeholder’s experiences and connect them with cognitive and behavioral consequences that help the organization’s bottom line (Jiang, Luo, & Kulemeka, 2016). In the area of public relations, the development of relationship management has led to using engagement as the new paradigm within which organizations are trying to integrate, interact and collaborate with their stakeholders (Edelman, 2008; Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Engagement is often used as the umbrella term that includes a myriad of organizational efforts to involve stakeholders in organizational activities and decisions. When defined this way engagement is often interchanged with involvement and dialogue (Lewis, Hamfel, & Richardson, 2001). For some authors, this relationship between the organization and groups (or individuals) that are influenced by (or that influence) the organization is actually public engagement (Bruce & Shelley, 2010), with some authors relating CEO-public engagement to the interpersonal communicative variables (Linjuan & Wan-Hsiu, 2016). Engagement is, however, still most commonly linked to organizational behavior and management literature where studies are focused on employee engagement (Brodie et al., 2011).

2.2. Conceptualizing employee engagement

One of the biggest challenges in academic literature, when it comes to engagement, is the lack of a universal definition. Engagement has been defined as the emotional and intellectual commitment to the organization (Baumruk, 2004; Shaw, 2005); an “individual’s involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work” (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002, p. 417) or as the amount of effort that an employee invests into his or her job (Frank, Finnegan, & Taylor, 2004).

Most of the commonly used conceptualizations of engagement build from Kahn’s (1990) influential work about three constructs that help explain how engagement develops: meaningfulness, safety, and availability. In his systematic analyses of engagement Kahn defines employee engagement as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (1990, p. 694). The cognitive aspect is related to beliefs of employees, leaders and working conditions. The emotional aspect is connected to the way employees feel and their positive or negative attitude towards the organization and its leaders. Physical aspect is connected to the physical energy invested in order to fulfill a role. Therefore, according to Kahn (1990), engagement implies physiological as well as physical presence in performing an organizational role. May, Gilson, and Harter (2004) tested Kahn’s model and their results support the assumption that psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability are positively linked to engagement.

Another important definition of engagement comes from Schaufeli, Martínez, Marques Pinto, Salanova and Bakker (2002, p. 465). They created the term job engagement and defined it as a positive, work related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption. Saks (2006) stipulated that employee engagement includes two important aspects, job engagement and organization engagement. However, even though it is mostly accepted that engagement is a multifaceted construct, Truss et al. (2006) define it simply as passion for work.

All these (and numerous other) definitions impede the exploration of employee engagement, especially since different protocols are applied to each study. Yet, if employee engagement isn’t universally defined and measured, it is difficult if not impossible to manage it (Ferguson, 2007). Different definitions of the concept also don’t allow comparisons of results.

A lack of clarity stems also from the unanswered question – what is the real difference between employee engagement and other, more developed concepts such as organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behavior (Robinson, Perryman, & Hayday, 2004)? Engagement can be perceived as only a step away from commitment. As a result, the popularity of research in the area of employee engagement can be seen as only another trend (Kular, Gatenby, Rees, Soane, & Truss, 2008).

On the other side, there is abundant research that concludes that engagement is connected to, but still distinct from other constructs in organizational behavior (Saks, 2006). Hallberg and Schaufeli (2006) claim that work engagement, job involvement, and organizational commitment are empirically distinct constructs and, thus, reflect different aspects of work attachment. According to May et al. (2004) engagement is closest to job involvement. However, job involvement is defined as a cognitive state of psychological identification (Kanungo, 1982), and while the focus of job involvement is on cognition, engagement (according to most definitions) includes emotions and behavior (Kular et al., 2008). Organizational commitment implies that employees stay with an organization because of the desire to stay (affecive commitment), recognition that the costs related to leaving would be high (continuance commitment), and/or feelings of obligation to stay (normative commitment) (Allen & Meyer, 1990). As such, organizational commitment exhibits a long-term perspective, compared to employee engagement which is a short-term employee attitude towards his/her job (Pološki Vokić & Hernaus, 2015).

Since this study is concentrated on the potential impact that internal communication has on employee engagement, it is important
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