

Employee Engagement: Role of Self-efficacy, Organizational Support & Supervisor Support

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In the prevailing competitive environment, engaged employees are viewed as a strategic asset by both academicians and practicing managers alike. Although academicians have isolated various organizational conditions which they argue initiate engagement, there exists a lack of understanding on the observed variations in engagement levels between employees exposed to similar organizational conditions. Through theoretical arguments as well as empirical support, this study argues that differences between self-efficacy levels in employees are primarily responsible for differences in displayed engagement. Based on the findings the study argues and defines engagement as expressed empowerment pertaining to a role thus enriching the management literature concerning engagement. Suitable managerial implications are also discussed.

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Employee Engagement: a Snapshot

The importance of employee engagement in the current business scenario attains significance and it has been labelled as one of the “hottest topics in management” in recent times (Welbourne 2007), since engaged employees are fully “psychologically present”, thus “giving it their all” (Brenthal 2004) to their tasks. Moreover with an incessantly deepening “engagement gap” reported amongst employees (Kowalski 2003), that is threatening to cripple organizational growth and productivity, it becomes imperative to advance research on the construct thus leading to a better appreciation and application of the same in the interest of the organization.

The academic work regarding the construct of engagement is limited to three distinct approaches, viz. the Role Theory Approach (Kahn 1990, May et al. 2004), the Burn Out Approach (Maslach & Leiter 1997, Schaufeli et al. 2002), and the Social Exchange Theory (SET) Approach (Saks 2006). The Role Theory Approach defines personal engagement as “the harnessing of organization mem-

bers” selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances (Kahn 1990). Thus engagement is understood as “psychological presence” while occupying and performing an organizational role. The Burnout Approach, initiated by Maslach and Leiter (1997) argues that engagement is positive antithesis of burnout. According to this school, engagement is characterized by energy, involvement and efficacy which are direct opposite of three burnout dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy. Schaufeli et al (2002) refute this approach by arguing that “it is not plausible to expect both the concepts to be perfectly negatively correlated with each other”, thus calling for an independent assessment of the same. Therefore they define engagement as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by *vigour*, *dedication*, and *absorption*”. Lastly, the SET Approach, put forth by Saks (2006), argues that displaying varying degrees of engagement is one way for individuals to repay their organization for the economic and socio-emotional resources they receive from it. Since it is more difficult for employees to vary their levels of job performance, given that performance is often evaluated and used as the basis for compensation and other administrative decisions, employees are more likely to exchange their engagement for resources and benefits provided by their organization.

The above theories, despite their appeal, do not explain the observed variability of engagement amongst employ-

ees on exposure to similar working conditions. Further there also exists a lack of explanation regarding the factor(s) that selectively propels employees of the same organization, to burnout or engagement.

Study Hypotheses

It is our contention that, exposed to similar organizational conditions and task characteristics, the variation in engagement levels among individuals is the result of individual differences amongst them. Numerous evidences dot the literature supporting our above stated premise. For example, Arvey et al. (1989) present evidence indicating that genetic predispositions may influence job satisfaction. Furthermore, longitudinal research has found that job satisfaction scores remain correlated over time, and that this can occur even when individuals change occupations or employers (e.g. Staw & Ross 1985). While it goes undisputed that work attitudes are influenced by work environment and do change over time, evidence also confirms that the rank order of individuals remains somewhat stable, the stability being argued to be associated with certain personality dispositions (George 1992). Since work attitudes involve affective reactions to one’s workplace (Locke 1976), and engagement is believed to be intrinsically motivated involvement owing to affective association with the role (Kahn 1990), the influence of dispositional traits on engagement gains heightened support.

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Bandura (1977), from the perspective of social cognitive theory, asserts that individual behaviour is fuelled by two sets of cognitive forces – perceived valuability of the outcome as well as self-efficacy which influences choices about which behaviours to undertake, the effort and persistence exerted in the face of obstacles to the performance of those behaviours, and thus, ultimately, the mastery of the behaviours. While valuability can be understood to be analogous to search for “meaning-fulness” (Kahn 1990) which is the chief driving factor behind engagement (May et al. 2004), it also becomes evident from Bandura’s (1977) affirmation that the primary dispositional predictor of engagement is self-efficacy which according to Lent et al. (1994) is instrumental in initiating other social cognitive variables that in turn influence an individual’s career development. Self-efficacy is found to positively predict innovative behaviour (Tierney & Farmer 2004) and hence can be expected to influence employee engagement since Macey and Schneider (2008) define engagement as adaptive behaviour. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) too argue that ‘meaning’ is a manifestation of an individual’s self-efficacy and involves a fit between the requirements of a work role and beliefs, values, and behaviours (Hackman & Oldham 1980) thus giving further credence to our premise. Addi-

tionally Ozer and Bandura (1990) argue that self-efficacy reduces the level of fatigue by enhancing coping abilities under stress, since employees with higher levels of self-efficacy believe they can control apprehensive cognitions that threaten their psychological safety. This explains as well as clarifies the missing link in the conceptualization of the dimensions of engagement as viewed from the angle of burnout theorists, i.e. engagement is a positive antithesis of burnout. Exposed to similar working conditions, the presence or absence of self-efficacy determines whether the employee shall be engaging or shall burn out respectively.

The concept of self-efficacy has been conceptualized and researched in three different ways: a global construct generalized over several domains (Shelton 1990), as a domain specific variable (e.g. Schwarzer & Fuchs 1995), and as a task specific behaviour to predict circumscribed behaviour like overcoming snake phobia (Bandura 1977). In this study, we refer to self-efficacy conceptualized as a domain specific variable labelled as occupational self-efficacy (OSE), in order to sound concordant with the multiple role attribution of engagement by the role theorists. Schyns and von Collani (2002) define occupational self-efficacy as “one’s belief in one’s own ability and competence to perform successfully and effectively in situations and across different tasks in a job”. Put simply, it is self-efficacy related to the domain of work place. It assesses self-efficacy in a way that is broad enough to compare different types of occupa-

tions but still specific enough to be a good predictor for the workplace context. Thus we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1(H1): Occupational self – efficacy will positively predict employee engagement.

Proceeding further, several researchers (e.g. Schneider 1987) hold the opinion that individuals possessing the attributes that orient them to display engagement are more likely to choose the environments that provide the opportunity to do so, thus indicating subtly the role of autonomy and appropriate workplace conditions in catalyzing the transformation of such attributes to engagement. Thus it logically translates that to choose the context of role play, and to behave adaptively which insists on independent decision making, employees must perceive themselves to have been permitted to act autonomously by the leaders of the organization. In other words we opine that perceived organizational support (POS) shall mediate the relationship between OSE and employee engagement. POS has been defined as the employees' global beliefs that the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al. 1986). POS has been positively related to expatriates' adjustment to the country and work (Kraimer et al. 2001) thus promoting adaptive behaviour – a characterization of engagement put forth by Macey and Schneider (2008). Hence we hypothesize:

Perceived organizational support (POS) shall mediate the relationship between OSE and employee engagement.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Perceived organizational support (POS) will mediate the relationship between OSE and employee engagement.

Further, organizational support theory postulates that the actions of its agents are indicators of the organization's intent (Levinson 1965). Agents help personify the organization to the employee. Immediate supervisors are typically the closest organizational link to the employee and have the ability to communicate the organization's intentions directly to their subordinates. Accordingly, subordinates view supervisor support as a personal extension of the organization (Eisenberger et al. 1986, Levinson 1965). Following from the above discussion, another type of interaction between perceived supervisor support (PSS) and OSE can be thus formulated based on the path goal theory of leadership (House 1971) as well as the goal – setting theory (Locke et al. 1981). PSS is defined as the degree to which employees form impressions that their superiors care about their well-being, value their contributions, and are generally supportive (Eisenberger et al. 2002). While House (1971) advocates that effective leadership includes aiding in clarification and simplification of path of the followers by the leaders, nevertheless it must be borne in mind that since challenging goals and feed-

back aids in higher performance (Locke et al. 1981), there is a limit to which leaders must assist the followers in their task performance. Since job complexity enhances creative self-efficacy in employees (Tierney & Farmer 2002), we argue that very high degree of leader support or PSS shall result in weakening the effect of occupational self-efficacy on engagement since it may decrease the challenge in the road to goal achievement thus triggering a loss in perceived task significance and “meaningfulness” (Kahn 1990). So we conclude:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): PSS moderates the relationship between OSE and employee engagement.

The scope of our study is figuratively represented in Fig. 1.

Sample

A total of 200 self-identified ‘software programmers’ who have been working in a large Indian software organization for two years or more were selected randomly, approached indi-

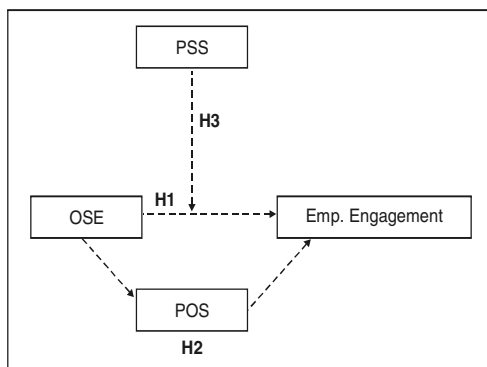
vidually, and requested to participate in this study, of which 152 responses were returned and 124 were found suitable for the study. The period of two years was selected as a benchmark for selecting employees from whom the responses had to be taken. We argue that it gives ample scope for the employees to get themselves acclimatized to organizational conditions. Biographically, 47% of the suitable responses were obtained from females; the average age of the selected sample was 27 years while the average work experience was 3.6 years.

Measures

Occupational Self-efficacy (OSE) was measured using the instrument developed by Rigotti et al. (2008) containing six items. The respondents were asked to indicate the extent they strongly disagree or agree to each of the six statements on a five point Likert scale (‘1’ referring to ‘strongly disagree’ while ‘5’ referring to ‘strongly agree’). The instrument had a Cronbach Alpha Coefficient (Table 1) of 0.721, and hence more than the acceptable minimum alpha limit of 0.6 (Sekaran 1992).

Perceived Organizational Support (POS) was measured with the eight-item short-form of the survey of perceived organizational support (SPOS) (Rhoades et al 2001). Participants responded using a five-point Likert-type scale (‘1’ referring to strongly disagree and ‘5’ strongly agree). The Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of the instrument was found to be 0.87 (Table 1).

Fig. 1: Proposed Research Framework



Perceived Supervisor Support (PSS) was measured with a three-item scale developed by Eisenberger et al. (2002). The responses were collected on a five-point Likert-type scale ('1' referring to strongly disagree and '5' strongly agree) and the Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of the instrument was found to be 0.75 (Table 1).

Employee engagement (EE) was measured by the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002). The scale consists of three subscales; absorption (six items; Cronbach Alpha = 0.693), vigor (six items; Cronbach Alpha = 0.764), and dedication (five items; Cronbach Alpha = 0.842). All the 17 items were rated on a 5-point frequency-based scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). All the Cronbach Alpha values are listed in Table 1.

Analysis & Findings

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations of the study variables. First, it is worth

noting that significant positive correlations exist between all the study variables. Secondly, it can be observed that both POS and OSE relate differently to the different dimensions of employee engagement. While POS is moderately correlated with dedication ($r = 0.417, p < 0.01$), occupational self-efficacy is moderately correlated with the dimensions of vigor ($r = 0.449, p < 0.01$) and absorption ($r = 0.436, p < 0.01$). However the correlation of PSS with that of vigor ($r = 0.324, p < 0.01$), dedication ($r = 0.220, p < 0.01$), and absorption ($r = 0.323, p < 0.01$) is found to be very low yet significant. To get further clarity and test the study hypotheses, we conduct regression analyses.

Occupational self-efficacy as predictor of employee engagement: Assuming a linear model, we regressed EE on OSE in order to examine the first hypothesis (H1). As shown in Table 2, OSE explained a significant amount of variance in employee engagement ($R^2 = 0.229, p < 0.05$) and is a significant predictor ($\hat{a} = 0.478, p < 0.05$) of the same thus providing support for H1.

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities and Inter-correlations of Variables

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Alpha	Vigour	Dedication	Absorption	POS	OSE	PSS
Vigour	11.49	2.28	0.764	—	—	—	—	—	—
Dedication	11.58	2.64	0.842	0.641**	—	—	—	—	—
Absorption	10.68	2.34	0.693	0.568**	0.523**	—	—	—	—
POS	28.25	5.36	0.870	0.345**	0.417**	0.315**	—	—	—
OSE	22.63	3.69	0.721	0.449**	0.331**	0.436**	0.348**	—	—
PSS	11.19	2.66	0.750	0.324**	0.220**	0.323**	0.416**	0.284**	—

Note: POS Perceived Organizational Support; OSE Occupational Self-efficacy; ** $p < 0.01$; N=124

Table 2: Occupational Self-efficacy as Predictor of Employee Engagement

Independent variable	Dependent variable
	Employee engagement (EE)
OSE	0.478*
R sq.	0.229
F value	36.2*

Note: * $p < 0.05$; the values in the table are standardized \hat{a} coefficients

POS as the mediator: To determine whether POS was a mediator of the relationship between OSE and EE, we followed the procedure recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). As suggested, three regression equations should satisfy the tests of the linkages of the mediation model. First, the independent variable (OSE) must be related to the mediator (POS). Second, the mediator (POS) must be related to the dependent variable (EE). Third, a significant relationship between the independent variable (OSE) and the dependent variable (EE) will be reduced (partial mediation) or no longer be significant (full mediation) when controlled for the mediator (POS). OSE was found to be a significant predictor of EE (H1) as well as POS (Table 3; $\hat{a} = 0.348$, $p < 0.05$). Moreover POS is found to be significantly related to EE (Table 3; $\hat{a} = 0.348$, $p < 0.05$). Thus proceeding to the final step, it can be observed in Table 3 that the \hat{a} value for the influence of OSE on EE decreases from 0.478 ($p < 0.05$) to 0.376 ($p < 0.05$) on inclusion of POS in the regression model (Step 3), thereby indicating a partial mediation. H2 is thus partially supported.

Table 3: Mediation Effect of POS

	Independent variables	Dependent variables
Step 1		POS
	OSE	0.348*
	R sq.	0.121
	F value	16.818*
Step 2		Employee engagement (EE)
	POS	0.425*
	R sq.	0.180
	F value	26.832
Step 3		Employee engagement (EE)
	OSE	0.376*
	POS	0.294*
	R sq.	0.305
	F value	26.503*

Note: * $p < 0.05$; the values in the table are standardized \hat{a} coefficients

PSS as moderator: The hierarchical regression model was employed, in accordance with Cohen and Cohen (1983), to determine the moderation effect of PSS on the relationship between OSE and EE. In Step 1, EE was regressed on PSS. This was followed by Step 2, where we introduce OSE into the regression model along with PSS as independent variables. Finally in Step 3, we introduce the interaction term (PSS X OSE) into the equation. The results, shown in Table 4, indicate that the regression coefficient of the interaction term to be non-significant ($\hat{a} = -0.338$, ns); thereby it can be inferred that PSS does not moderate the relationship between OSE and employee engagement. Thus H3 was not supported.

Table 4: Moderating Effect of PSS

	Independent variables	Employee engagement
Step 1	PSS	0.337*
Step 2	OSE	0.416*
	PSS	0.218*
Step 3	OSE	0.598*
	PSS	0.457
	OSE X PSS	-0.338

Note: *p < 0.05; the values in the table are standardized \hat{a} coefficients

Discussion

Summarising the above findings, we conclude that employee engagement necessitates a workforce that is attributed with self-efficacy as a dispositional trait. The above inference does propose an acceptable solution to our concern raised earlier about the observed discrepancy in levels of engagement exhibited by a workforce exposed to analogous working conditions. It attributes such difference in levels of engagement amongst the workforce to the variation in self-efficacy amongst them as well as the difference in perception of employees towards received organizational support. Further it argues and establishes that engagement results out of 'interaction' between self-efficacy and POS, thus providing empirical evidence on the influence of workplace conditions in promoting employee engagement. Viewing critically, we contend that self-efficacy can be taken as a representative variable of psychological empowerment since Conger and Kanungo (1988) have defined psychological empowerment as a motivational concept of the same. Similarly POS can

be said to represent structural empowerment dimension for it is the subordinates 'perception of organizations' policies and practices (e.g. HR practices), that define the functional aspect of the organizational structure (Guzzo Noonan 1994) and directly influences the effectiveness of four structural empowerment dimensions elucidated by Kanter (1977) namely opportunity, support, resources and information. Thus taking cue from the above analogies as well as the second hypothesis (H2), we argue that engagement is the expressed empowerment pertaining to a role. It must be noted that both the forms of empowerment, i.e. psychological as well as structural, are necessary for engagement to manifest. While self-efficacy helps "drive personal energies into role behaviours" (Kahn 1990), organizational support helps increase the three psychological conditions of meaningfulness, availability and safety necessary for psychological presence thus initiating engagement (Kahn 1990).

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Moving further, we opine that the absence of any one of the empowerment condition, shall result eventually in disengagement. The term "eventually" is introduced since we believe that any one of the empowerment condition is capable of initiating engagement (in accordance with H1), however the absence of the

other empowerment dimension may progressively reduce the psychological availability of the actor in the role owing to a constant struggle between creating appropriate conditions for the role play and the actual role play leading to psychological strain (Kahn 1990) eventually resulting in self-estranged (Seeman 1972), closed (Gibb 1961) and emotionally un-expressive behaviours (Rafaeli & Sutton 1987). More specifically, the absence of self-efficacy shall inhibit individuals from self-expression thus forcing them to limit their activities to externally scripted roles (Kahn 1990). On the other hand the absence of organizational support affects all the three prerequisite psychological conditions enlisted earlier, and in our view promotes learned helplessness. Learned helplessness is a cognitive state in which people perform poorly for they believe that the actual outcome is independent of their effort and input (Martinko & Gardner 1982).

Managerial Implications

Allen et al (2003) had revealed empirically the major contribution of participation in decision making, growth opportunities and fairness in rewards and recognition against other organizational conditions in creating a favourable perception on organizational support amongst employees. Since POS was found to be a significant mediator between self-efficacy and engagement, the onus lies on organizational elites who must make specific efforts towards clear establishment of career routes for every task. There ought to be a mecha-

nism to identify role performances of employees beyond the stated requirement as well as link it with suitable rewards and recognitions in-order to make employees feel “worthwhile and meaningful” (Kahn 1990), thus validating the appropriateness of their effort as well as emboldening them to dive deeper into role play beyond the requisite performance parameters. Thus employees give their all (Brenthal 2004) and engage. Further Aziz (2003) has found resource inadequacy to be a potent role stressor amongst the employees in Indian IT sector. In the light of the above finding the absence of support for H3 in the current study can be appreciated better. Hence participative decision making with adequate supervisor support is a must to initiate and enhance engagement among software programmers in an IT firm.

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Conclusion & Future Research

This study, drawing on empirical support and previous literature, argues that an empowered employee can be expected to be engaged. However it is not without its limitations which we enlist here. The study is conducted with the basic assumption of an emotional affiliation between employees and their assigned roles in accordance with Kahn’s (1990) explanation of engagement. But

this condition may not hold well in a bureaucratic organization which has its positions frozen and top – down chain of command demarcated. Hence the mechanism of employee engagement in these types of organizations is worth an investigation. Apart from that the study is conducted taking a sample of software programmers which limits the findings to a specific role. Hence additional research and validation of the study's findings at various hierarchical levels of an IT organization embracing versatile roles shall open newer frontiers in engagement research. Lastly the study is silent on the influence of demographic variables such as age, gender etc. as well as cultural influence on the above relationship between self-efficacy and engagement which can be also be researched to increase the applicability as well as generalizability of the theory.

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