

# Work Engagement: A Rethink

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*Work engagement has been recognized as a much desired and irreplaceable organizational asset in the prevailing globalized business environment. Yet building an engaged work force continues to be a challenge for organizations, thanks to the ambiguous conceptualization and limited understanding characterizing the construct. This study examines the extant literature on work engagement, enumerates the specific limitations that remains embedded in the same, and strives to provide an independent existence to the construct by reconceptualising it through qualitative research methodology. Work engagement is defined as application of self in the role context and comprises passionate task performance (PTP) and organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB).*

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## Introduction

Popularized and propagated by the Gallup Research Group, the construct of Work Engagement has acquired considerable stature in the eyes of practitioners and academicians, promising significant returns to organizations on its application. In fact, research has demonstrated the statistical relationship it shares with a wide variety of organizational constructs such as productivity, profitability, employee retention, safety, and customer satisfaction (Buckingham & Coffman 1999, Coffman & Gonzalez-Molina 2002). Welbourne (2007) characterizes Work Engagement as one of the hottest topics in management. The observation of Joo and McLean (2006), who label engaged employees as a strategic asset, lends further credence to the importance of the construct.

The exhilaration around Work Engagement should not be surprising since engaged employees are believed to be fully psychologically present (Kahn 1990), thus ever willing to go that extra mile to achieve success (Schaufeli et al. 2002), thereby making their impact on the business outcomes phenomenal. Moreover plenty of evidences seem to accumulate that support engagement-related

benefits to the organization, e.g., a meta analysis of 7939 business units in 36 companies by Harter, Schmidt and Hayes (2002) identified significant relationships between Work Engagement and improvement in customer satisfaction, productivity, profits, turnover and safety records. Similarly Saks (2006) too ascertained that Work Engagement is a significant predictor of job satisfaction and organizational commitment, while Gonring (2008) argued on the pivotal role played by engaged employees in ensuring customer loyalty. The importance of the topic gets further accentuated when we take into consideration reports that indicate the ever deepening disengagement among employees today (Bates 2004, Richman 2006). It has even been reported that the majority of workers today, roughly half of all Americans in the workforce, are not fully engaged or they are disengaged leading to what has been referred to as an “engagement gap” that is costing US businesses \$300 billion a year in lost productivity (Bates 2004, Kowalski 2003). These disengaged employees, devoid of passion for their work, are not just unhappy but also act out their unhappiness everyday thus undermining the accomplishment of their engaged counterparts.

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However, despite the growing organizational recognition and appreciation for engaged workforce, organizations are in-

capable of achieving the same thus falling short of enjoying the associated benefits. According to Frank, Finnegan and Taylor (2004), engaging employees continues to remain “one of the greatest challenges facing organizations in this decade and beyond”, e.g. Bhatnagar (2007) asserts that the lack of awareness amongst Indian software firms on Work Engagement being the key to the retention of talent, results in them experiencing escalating attrition rates despite paying substantially above Indian standards. This, we contend, can be accounted for on the acute lacunae of academic research and understanding that surrounds the construct of Work Engagement. Many authors affirm (e.g. Macey & Schneider 2008) that the existing literature on Work Engagement rests more on a crest of faith than on rigorous academic investigation thus motivating us to look at the construct afresh in order to advance research, understanding and subsequent application of the same. We seek to contribute in the following dimensions through this study:

- 1- Identification of the limitations plaguing the extant literature on Work Engagement.
- 2- Re-examination of the construct of Work Engagement with the primary objective being elucidation of its morphology.
- 3- Identification of novel engagement drivers in an organizational setting.

### **Research Questions**

Three major limitations in the literature regarding the construct have been

identified by us during the course of our literature review. Firstly, in the absence of scientific rigour, many practitioners usually pass off Work Engagement as an agglomeration of various work attitudes making no effort in justifying their inclusion conceptually or empirically. Additionally, there exists a lack of consensus amongst them on the type and number of work attitudes that in unison define Work Engagement, e.g. while Harter et al. (2002) view it to be synonymous with job satisfaction by using the term “engagement – satisfaction” in their study, several authors use terms such as commitment, loyalty, productivity and ownership to describe Work Engagement (e.g. Wellins & Concelman 2004). Similarly organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) is also argued to be similar to Work Engagement (Robinson et al. 2004, Wellins & Concelman 2004).

Secondly, several authors suffer from the mistaken notion of accepting the possible causes or conditions that initiate Work Engagement as representing it. The Gallup Workplace Audit (GWA) is the most prominent example of this approach. Consisting of just 12 questions such as “Do I know what is expected of me in work”, “At work do I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day?” etc. that were derived through thousands of focus groups conducted over 2,500 business, healthcare and education units and subsequent factor analysis of the responses, it gives a visual account of the existing confusion in literature regarding interpreting engagement in terms of its causes. In the same vein, Smythe (2007) argues that

Work Engagement is first and foremost a “management philosophy based on the idea of including the right people in the right decisions at the right time in the right way”, thus again contributing to the existing muddle of engagement drivers being regarded as engagement.

**Work Engagement is first and foremost a “management philosophy based on the idea of including the right people in the right decisions at the right time in the right way”.**

Finally, the academic literature concerning Work Engagement is in a juvenile stage and is primarily limited to three approaches – 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). While the role theory approach defines Work Engagement as “psychological presence” (Kahn 1990) during role performance, the burnout approach (Maslach & Leiter 1997, Schaufeli et al. 2002) provides a more representative definition of the same. According to Schaufeli et al. (2002), Work Engagement is opposite of burnout and is “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by *vigour*, *dedication*, and *absorption*”. Most recently, Saks (2006), on the basis of social exchange theory, argued that engagement is a mode of repayment demonstrated by employees for the economic and socio-emotional resources they receive from the organization. Since it is against the interest of the employees to vary their levels of job

performance, for performance is often evaluated in well-defined parameters 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. However the above theories fail to account for the variation of engagement levels observed across multiple tasks executed by employees in organizations. Moreover, Kahn (1990) calls for linking Work Engagement to as many management theories as possible in order to enrich understanding and literature on the construct. Thus, we state the following research questions that shall guide our investigation in this study:

*Research question 1 (RQ1):* What are the dimensions of Work Engagement?

*Research question 2 (RQ2):* What are the perceived drivers of Work Engagement amongst employees?

### **Theoretical Basis**

It is our contention that exhibition of “preferred self” (Kahn 1990) in an assigned role, which leads to engagement, shall emerge only if there is a surety that “the employee has the authority to do his or her job” (London 1993). In other words, psychological enabling (Conger & Kanungo 1988), which involves moving decision making authority down the organizational hierarchy and granting employees the ability to significantly affect organizational outcomes (Menon 2001), enhances the feeling of worthiness, valuability and usefulness amongst employees (Kahn 1990) which in turn in-

duces them to self-express in their work roles (Kahn 1990), thereby heralding the initiation of engagement in the same. However, the extent of psychological enabling is contingent on the competence of employees on the assigned role, the confidence enjoyed from the leadership, as well as the importance of role objective that differs across roles, which in turn induces a difference in the degree of autonomy enjoyed by the employees across various roles they adorn in an organization. Consequently employees experience dissimilar levels of perceived meaningfulness (Kahn 1990) in each of the work roles they apply themselves to, which in turn forces a variation in energy levels driven by them into each of them (Thomas & Velthouse 1990). Accordingly multiple roles become characterized with various degrees of self-expression thus bringing about different degrees of engagement displayed by employees across various roles. Hence we argue that the observed variation of engagement levels displayed across multiple roles adorned by employees in an organization is due to variation in psychological empowerment experienced by them across a set of roles. In short, our discussion is concordant with the view of Pati and Kumar (2010), who characterize Work Engagement as “expressed empowerment pertaining to a role”.

### **Methodology**

Using the definition of Pati and Kumar (2010), we entered the premises of a management institute in the city of Patna, with a desire to identify the behaviours that characterize an engaged

employee. We resorted to the usage of qualitative research methodology comprising observation as well as depth interviews used in consortium. Qualitative research is based on the philosophy that product and processes flow from the data than pre – established theory and frameworks (Glaser 1992). In fact one school of thought asserts that “Qualitative research . . . is concerned with developing concepts rather than applying pre-existing concepts” (Wilson 2006), thereby positing the same as relatively more appropriate in the case of the current study where discovery of interacting constructs is the principal objective. Additionally Work Engagement is an emerging construct in the academic literature with various facets still awaiting systematic reasoning and clarification. Therefore it is difficult, if not impossible to begin with a set of hypothesis as in the deductive approach. Qualitative research on the other hand provides the flexibility required for getting insights into the problem.

Ten full time faculty members, comprising two females and eight males who were oblivious to the purpose of the study, were identified and subjected by the first author to a structured observation of their activities for a period of two months, through ‘shadowing’ during the time they spent daily at the institute. Structured observation through ‘shadowing’ enables the researcher to make detailed and comprehensive recordings of individuals’ activity without influencing their behaviour. As an institutional policy, the first author was excluded from observing the subjects during their respective class hours, however approxi-

mately 70% of the time the subjects were under observation. Based on the institutional records the average work experience of the subjects was calculated to be 2.2 years (standard deviation = 0.8) while their average age was 28.2 years (standard deviation = 1.2). Moreover, the first author personally met the selected subjects every day, four hours before the official closing hours of the institute, and enquired in subtle ways whether they felt positively engrossed in work on that particular day. Further queries were initiated only if the participants answered in the affirmative. Conversation was allowed to develop naturally between the researcher and participant while ensuring that main topics were explored in sufficient depth. Forty-two such interviews were done in total using a semi structured questionnaire having the following broad questions:

1. Do you understand your primary job profile?
2. Why was the work engrossing?
3. How did you feel while performing “such” (naming the activity) activity?
4. Is there any relevance of “such” (naming the activity) activity to your primary job profile?

The above questions present a broad outline and are often punctuated by suggested prompts as and when felt applicable thus assisting the first author in inviting the informant to elaborate, clarify or provide further details. The conversations were approximately forty minutes in duration and were transcribed in short hand immediately on conclusion of the same.

## Analyses & Findings

Qualitative fieldwork inevitably yielded a large amount of data, which was analyzed in two steps at the end of data collection. Both the steps are elaborated below.

In Step 1, the data was arranged into segments of material based on an organizing system derived from the issues raised during observation and the interviews. The transcribed recordings of the observations and the conversations were read carefully and the data was segregated into three categories, namely “Activities”, “Feelings” and “Antecedents”. While “Activities” consisted of all the activities performed by the employee, as observed by the first author, on a given working day, “Feelings” reflected the state of mind of the interviewee during task performance as described. On the other hand “Antecedents” comprised perceived motivators of activities performed by the respondent in the work context. This process was repeated by the second author who independently read the transcripts and analyzed the data. A discussion on the validity of the above categorization and the differential arrangement of data underneath each category emerged between the first and the second authors which resulted in approximately 90% agreement between the two. Thus, an independent evaluation of the process was incorporated to reduce subjectivity of interpretation.

In Step 2, each of the above categories was examined further for hidden themes and concepts in order to derive a

more comprehensive meaning from the data.

Initially, the data categorized as “Activities” was critically reviewed and examined in accordance with Pati and Kumar’s (2010) definition of Work Engagement being expressed empowered behaviour, for isolation of all the *empowered activities* displayed by the respondents. The authors discussed the appropriateness of each recorded activity to be labelled as *empowered activity* after weighing its relevance against the definition of psychological empowerment as provided by Menon (2001). Only those activities on which the authors had a consensus were segregated and taken ahead for further analyses. Repeated careful examination of such segregated empowered activities revealed the presence of two broad themes of such activities which we labelled as – *passionate task performance* (PTP) and *organizational citizenship behaviour* (OCB). Similar examinations were carried out for the categories of “Feelings” and “Antecedents”. While data enlisted under “Feelings” reflected a singular theme and thus rechristened as *active engrossment*, the data coagulated under “Antecedents” was separable to two themes again which were named as – *perceived autonomy* and *perceived trust*.

### Passionate Task Performance

We define *passionate task performance* (PTP) as investment of discretionary effort in one’s assigned task in order to bring out a different as well as self and organizationally beneficial outcome

against scripted task performance. Two distinct parameters stand out in the above definition: investment of discretionary effort; and different and beneficial outcome to self and organization against scripted task performance. Discretionary effort has been defined by Towers-Perrin (2003) as investment of extra time, brainpower and energy with frame of reference implied yet not being made explicit. While Bernthal (2004) considers it as “giving it their all”, in our view it is doing “whatever it takes” (Hubrecht & Teare 1993). However it is just not extra “effort” (Brown & Leigh 1996, Kanfer 1990), i.e. doing more of just what is usual (Macey & Schneider 2008), but doing something different and beneficial since performance epitomizes self – expression (Kahn 1990) for the engaged employee. Our emphasis on “doing something different” is supported by Kahn’s (1990) assertion that self-expression amongst individuals may be exhibited in multiple approaches such as creativity, the use of personal voice, emotional expression, authenticity, non-defensive communication, playfulness and ethical behaviour. Similarly a different outcome is recognizable from the variance it has from the externally scripted parameters of performance and the amount of self – initiated planning that goes into its execution. In a way PTP can be understood to be a tangible manifestation of “perceived meaningfulness” (Kahn 1990) as well as “vigour” and “absorption” dimensions of Schaufeli et al. (2002). It occurs in case of tasks that require both routine and new skills thus permitting people to experience a sense of competence (that arises from the routine) as well as growth and learning (from the new) thereby enabling them

to feel empowered which Kahn (1990) describes as feeling “worthwhile, useful, wanted and valuable as if they made a difference”. We present below an instance that helped us identify and characterize PTP as one of the behavioural dimensions that make up Work Engagement.

The first author observed that one of the faculty members was spending over seventy percent of working hours in the classroom as well as enquiring from the Post Graduate Program (PGP) office of the institute for 12 consecutive days to ensure availability of classroom and teaching resources in the evening for additional class hours. Curious over this, the first author enquired from the faculty member over this obsession with teaching additional hours to which the reply was, “What to do? Most of the students have no mathematics background and hence cannot appreciate the nuts and bolts of financial accounting. Moreover they do not complete any assignments as well as solve the problems given in the class. Hence I am adopting a tutor mode of teaching. I am calling each student to my table and solving the problem for them. Literally it can be viewed as handholding which I know is inappropriate for post – graduate teaching. But I have no choice and in the end I want the students to learn something”. On further enquiry, the faculty member admitted to being guided by a sense of “commitment to the students and to the institute” with this being his “first priority”. Further he experiences

“satisfaction after a hard day’s labour” and an “addiction to this satisfaction”.

### **Organizational Citizenship Behaviour**

(OCB) had been studied since early 1980s (Bateman & Organ 1983, Smith et al. 1983) and was centred around recognizing those behavioural facets that contribute to enhancement in organizational effectiveness yet are often overlooked and inadequately measured in traditional assessment of job performance. OCB was initially thought to be extra role behaviour since such behaviours did not find a place in job description. However, the necessity and contribution of OCB in lubricating the social machinery which in turn is necessary for adaptive behaviour (Macey & Schneider 2008) to surface thus leading to enhanced PTP by application of “discretionary effort” (Towers-Perrin 2003) cannot be ignored. The appearance and subsequent inclusion of it by us as one of the dimensions of Work Engagement, is a recognition of the interdependency of tasks in the organization, hence calling for the support and cooperation of all concerned members to create an environment conducive to “self-expression” (Kahn 1990) and engagement. Our premise is supported by Graham (1991) who opposes the in-role/extra – role approach to study OCB since such a distinction is inconsistent across time, situations, employees and organizations. Moreover Vey and Campbell (2004) had even demonstrated empirically that certain form of OCB (conscientiousness and courtesy) were more likely to

be considered in – role by a panel of survey respondents with supervisory experience. Hence all of the above argue in favour of inclusion of OCB as a dimension of employee engagement and much in contrast to Saks’ (2006) argument that favoured its exclusion on grounds of judging it as extra – role and voluntary. The above view is also supported by evidence from literature that argues and presents the transferability (or crossing over) of engagement form one individual to another (Bakker et al. 2005) thus highlighting the importance of every employee being engaged as well as the onus on every individual irrespective of hierarchy to create an organizational culture conducive to engagement. Thus we assert that creation of an ‘engaging’ organizational atmosphere constitutes an important part of everyone’s in role performance and OCB is the primary medium to bring about this. Furthermore evidence also exists to show that higher level of OCB among service employees is associated with higher levels of service quality perceptions amongst customers, a supposed outcome of in-role behaviours, (Bienstock et al. 2003) thus lending further credence to our argument in including OCB as a necessary facet of Work Engagement behaviours.

**Higher level of OCB among service employees is associated with higher levels of service quality perceptions amongst customers**

Various instances were identified from the observations and the interviews which ultimately guided us to argue in

favour of including OCB as a part of employee engagement construct. Three such instances are enumerated below.

It was observed by the first author that faculty members were actively volunteering and participating while discussing various policy issues of the institute, like the student grading system, by calling for formal meetings after office hours. When enquired ingeniously, a faculty member replied, "It is necessary to participate, for it is the collective responsibility of all to ensure the quality of the institute".

Many faculty members took some time off to review a research paper written by one amongst them and came off with constructive feedback to enhance the quality of the same.

On arrival of a new faculty member, one of the existing members took her around the institute introducing her to all the staff and members of faculty voluntarily. Every effort was being made to make her feel at home and removing her doubts and apprehensions thus in tune with the "family culture" that the director of the institute wants to propagate, i.e. "all responsible for one and one responsible for all"

### **Psychological Dimensions**

Evaluating the collected data we argue that psychologically Work Engagement manifests as active engrossment in the given task. The term "active" signifies intrinsically motivated origin of Work Engagement and is characterized by ex-

temporaneous involvement in the task in focus (Goffman 1961). It indicates an affinity for the task and a spontaneous choice to be associated with the same. "Engrossment" on the other hand is equivalent to the construct of "absorption" defined by Schaufeli et al. (2002) where individuals are fully concentrated in their work and unable to separate themselves from the same thus becoming unaware of the passage of time. Below we present an instance from the interviews that guided us to the above conclusion.

"Today I missed lunch. It is not that am complaining but it is just that I was not aware. When did the lunch time come and go I had no idea. By the time I realized it was 3 p.m. I was lost in the lecture and trust me I was enjoying every bit of it"

### **Perceived Drivers**

Our data reflected two primary antecedents of Work Engagement amongst employees – *perceived autonomy* and *perceived trust* and can be viewed as a logical extension as well as confirmation of the empowerment approach to engagement discussed in the beginning of this paper as well as propagated by Pati and Kumar (2010). Autonomy or "elbow room" (Glor 2005) is often recognized by many as an intrinsic motivator and a primary indicator of empowerment. Moreover empowering workers is an exhibition of trust (Laschinger & Finegan 2005) by the management as well as a symbol of recognition and respect towards the employees' "preferred dimensions" (Kahn 1990) which accord-

ing to us is analogous to self-efficacy (Bandura 1982) or competence (Spreitzer 1995). However, empowerment is not “doing whatever one wants” (Glor 2005); rather it is a personal space provided to individuals in self directing their alignment with the organization in order to bring about optimal satisfaction of individual and organizational needs. In fact role autonomy is argued to be the primary indicator of the degree of trust enjoyed by the social actor, which in turn culminates in delegation (Hexmoor, Rahimi & Chandran 2008). Hence autonomy and trust calls to be reciprocated with a display of accountability and responsibility by employees which motivate them to engage themselves in order to continue enjoying the benefits of empowerment.

We present below two excerpts from our interview that enabled us to infer the above Work Engagement drivers.

“You know the director asked me to head the Library Committee today. I feel encouraged yet overwhelmed. It’s not even a month since I have joined the institute and heading a committee requires a thorough knowledge of the institutional process. Hopefully I justify this appointment.”

“I can’t help it. Tomorrow is the presentation and the MDP team depends on me. Have to stay late”

### Propositions

The above discussion leads to formulation of two propositions in reply to the

two research questions presented earlier in the study. We state them below:

*Proposition 1:* Work Engagement manifests psychologically as active engrossment in assigned task amongst individuals which in turn manifests behaviourally as passionate task performance (PTP) and organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB).

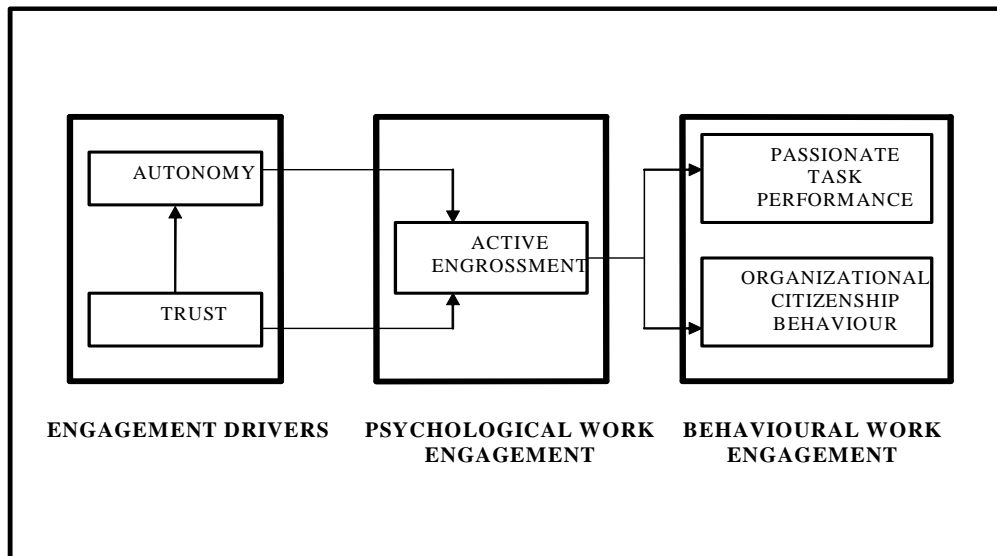
**Work Engagement manifests psychologically as active engrossment in assigned task amongst individuals.**

*Proposition 2:* Perceived autonomy and perceived trust are antecedents of Work Engagement and are related positively to the same. Tasks that promise a higher degree of autonomy and trust are most likely to be engaging and preferred. Moreover perceived autonomy mediates the relationship between perceived trust and Work Engagement.

The above propositions in unison make up a research framework that is represented in Fig. 1.

### Future Research

The primary limitation of the study is its reliance on a small sample. Unquestionably, ten individuals from a single management institute offer little scope for generalization of the findings. Moreover the study was conducted in a specific work context which again raises suspicions on the generalizability of the findings in different organizational settings.



However the limitations do not camouflage the significant theoretical insights that emerge from the undertaking. Firstly the study uncovered the morphology of the Work Engagement construct and offered a theoretical rationale for the inclusion of certain organizational constructs that make up the same. Thus Work Engagement is not just “application of self to a role” (Kahn 1990); rather it may be appropriately understood as application of self in the role context. Secondly, the study is the first attempt to define Work Engagement from a behavioural perspective. Previous studies largely focused on uncovering the attitudinal dimension. Thirdly, the study helped develop the emerging thought on Work Engagement, being “expressed empowerment pertaining to a role” (Pati & Kumar 2010), to a more comprehensible concept. Finally, the study operated as a test for the existing theories on Work Engagement and found them to hold good. Future research may focus on validating

the conceptual framework offered in the study in different industrial settings with enhanced sample size. Additionally, an empirical assessment by using quantitative data on the relevance of the conceptualization of Work Engagement reported in the study, shall offer an additional instrument on the same, thus facilitating triangulation (Cook & Campbell 1976) thereby contributing significantly to its understanding for the academicians and the practitioners.

**Work Engagement is not just “application of self to a role” rather it may be appropriately understood as application of self in the role context.**

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