

# PERCEIVED ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT AND WORK ENGAGEMENT: MEDIATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL - A RESEARCH AGENDA

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**Abstract** *In the present business scenario, it has been proved time and again that perceived organisational support (POS) has a significant influence on work engagement. But, the role of intervening variables in this relationship has rarely been examined. This article proposes a theoretical framework that explores the role of psychological capital as an intervening variable in the relationship between POS and work engagement. Psychological capital (PsyCap) is a positive core construct consisting of the psychological resources of efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience. The role of PsyCap as a mediator for influencing work engagement imparts a crucial tool to the HR managers as PsyCap can be developed through training. Also, when an employee feels engaged in his work primarily because of his PsyCap, it would be more deep-rooted and lasting than from an organisational level variable such as POS. This paper also discusses the influence of POS on each construct of PsyCap. In addition, this study provides insight into the process through which employee's PsyCap influences his engagement levels. It also has implications for managers who struggle to keep their employees engaged.*

**Keywords:** *Perceived Organisational Support, Work Engagement, Psychological Capital, Self-Efficacy, Hope, Optimism, Resilience*

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## INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that highly engaged employees remain with their companies much longer than their colleagues who are less engaged. Engaged employees are proactive and innovative. They are also committed to high standards of performance and play a crucial role in business success. A study by Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) says that the biggest challenge that is being faced by HR professionals in 2016 and beyond is to maintain high level of employee engagement (SHRM, 2015). If the engagement level of employees decreases in an organisation, it leads to increased absenteeism, higher employee turnover, and lower customer satisfaction which ultimately results in poor financial performance. Hence, engagement has a direct effect on the financial health and profitability of a company. It plays a vital role in customer satisfaction, company reputation and overall stakeholder value. Therefore, the top management expects HR to set the agenda for employee engagement to establish a competitive advantage. Success of every organisation depends on the contribution of its engaged employees. Engaged employees are physically,

cognitively and emotionally involved in their job (Kahn, 1990). They outperform themselves by setting higher standards of excellence. According to organisational support theory, when HR practices and supervision are favourable to employees, they perceive that they are well-supported by their organisation. When their perceived organisational support (POS) enhances, they are more satisfied with their jobs. They feel a close connection with their organisation and they consider the organisational goals as their own goals. This makes them more loyal and committed to the organisation. Thereby, their engagement level increases and their performance also improve considerably (Eisenberger, Malone, & Presson, 2016).

Perceived organisational support (POS) is an important tool which enhances the engagement levels of employees. Perceived organisational support refers to employees' perception concerning the extent to which the organisation values their contribution and cares about their well-being (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Organisation support theory states that an employee views his organisation as having a favourable or unfavourable disposition based on the treatment that the organisation provides him (Eisenberger, Huntington,

Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). POS is the criterion based on which an employee understands how much he is valued by his organisation. An employee with high POS feels more obliged to help the organisation reach its objectives. This decreases his withdrawal behaviours such as absenteeism and turnover. On the other hand, an employee with low POS feels that the organisation will get rid of him at the slightest possible opportunity. POS is particularly relevant today as the present work environment is characterised by lack of mutual trust and concern between the employer and his employees. POS results in mutual benefits for both the employer and the employees. Also, high POS positively relates to performance (Kurtessis *et al.*, 2015; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Successful organisations provide their employees a supportive work environment and opportunities for development of inner psychological strengths, thereby leading to high engagement levels among employees. Psychological capital (PsyCap) is being presented as a positive psychological strength and it can be suitably developed through training and intervention programs. Hence, it is a 'state like capacity' from an organisational point of view (Luthans *et al.*, 2007). PsyCap has been chosen as the mediating variable as recent literature on organisational behaviour identifies PsyCap as a critical variable which correlates with many favourable employee outcomes. Hence by enhancing PsyCap level of employees, the management can strengthen other positive organisational outcomes like work engagement. Past studies have tested the direct effect of POS on engagement but there has not been a study proposing PsyCap as an intervening variable in the relationship between POS and engagement. The objective of this article is to propose a testable model regarding the link between POS and engagement with the mediating influence of PsyCap. The mediation model helps in understanding how an antecedent (POS) is related to an outcome variable (engagement) through a mediator called PsyCap. The presence of PsyCap as a mediator for influencing engagement provides a crucial tool to the managers as PsyCap can be developed through training. This paper starts with an overview of PsyCap, POS and work engagement. The proposed conceptual framework is discussed in the next section. The major findings of the study and the managerial implications are summarised in the conclusion.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Psychological Capital

Luthans and his colleagues developed the construct of psychological capital to capture an individual's psychological capacities that can be measured, developed and harnessed for performance improvement. The concept of PsyCap is a multi-dimensional construct which refers to having

confidence in one's ability to fulfill job-related tasks (self-efficacy), having a positive attitude toward future success (optimism), having the ability to set realistic goals, finding alternative pathways (hope) and persevering (resilience) when faced with obstacles (Luthans *et al.*, 2007). In short, PsyCap is an individual's positive psychological state of development that comprises four positive psychological resources: self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience. PsyCap should be grounded in theory or research, have valid measures and must be state-like (as opposed to trait-like), therefore having the potential to be developed through training and intentional practice (Luthans, 2012; Luthans *et al.*, 2008). PsyCap is a form of strategic resource that has gained increasing attention in the literature for its influence on human performance (Ardichvili, 2011).

Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's conviction about his or her abilities to successfully execute a course of action that leads to a desired outcome. People with high self-efficacy have strong belief in their ability to control outcomes and succeed in facing challenges. Albert Bandura has proved through his research that self-efficacy as a PsyCap attribute has a strong positive relationship with work-related performance (Bandura, 1997). He has also shown through his research and subsequent application in workplace that self-efficacy can be developed. Snyder (1995) defined hope as the process of thinking about one's goals, along with the motivation to move towards those goals (agency) and the ways to achieve those goals (pathways). Hopeful people have the desire to achieve goals and have the capability to develop various strategies towards the accomplishment of goals. Individuals with high levels of hope show greater goal-directed energy and are more likely to exhibit the capacity to develop alternative pathways to accomplish their goals (Luthans *et al.*, 2008).

Optimism more specifically refers to explanatory style and the way in which people regularly explain happenings in their lives (Seligman, 1990). Martin Seligman linked the concept of optimism to attribution theory, the idea that individuals are optimistic when they attribute the issues they are facing in their lives to being temporary, specific, and due to external causes as opposed to those who view the issues pessimistically and attribute them to being permanent, pervasive, and internal. Optimism has been associated with the improvement of performance (Martin-Krumm, Sarrazin, Peterson, & Famose, 2003). Optimism is regarded as being a realistic, flexible and dynamic construct that can be learned and developed (Peterson, 2000). Resilience refers to having the capacity to bounce back from adversity, failure or some positive changes such as increased responsibility. Individuals high in resilience tend to be better at adapting in the face of negative experiences and changes in the external environment (Luthans *et al.*, 2006).

## Perceived Organisational Support

Organisational support theory (OST) proposes that if employees perceive more support from their organisation, they are likely to develop more positive attitudes towards the organisation (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). Past studies (Byrne & Hochwarter, 2008; Erdogan & Enders, 2007) have found that when an employee perceives strong support from the organisation, it strengthens his/her cognitive and emotional evaluation of his/her job and organisation. POS is valuable to employees partly because it meets their needs for approval, esteem and affiliation. It provides them with a much needed comfort whenever they experience stress. Employees feel safe when the work environment is open and supportive. In a supportive environment, employees tend to be creative without fear of failure (Kahn, 1990). OST has evoked considerable interest as it gives employees' perspective of his relationship with the organisation. When individuals perceive positive levels of organisational support, they are naturally encouraged to exert considerably higher levels of effort (Biswas & Bhatnagar, 2013). Perceived organisational support (POS) assures that the organisation will support its employees to do their job effectively and also to deal with stressful situations. A stronger theoretical rationale for explaining work engagement can be found in social exchange theory (Saks, 2006). According to the reciprocity norm of social exchange theory (SET), employees who have higher POS might become more engaged to their job and organisation in order to help the organisation reach its objectives (Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001). When employees feel that their organisation cares about their well-being, they reciprocate by becoming more engaged to fulfill their obligations to the organisation.

POS leads to positive consequences both for the employees and their organisations. POS meets the self-esteem and affiliation needs of the employees. It provides comfort to the employees whenever they are stressed. High POS is the result of favourable HR practices and supportive supervision. As a result, employees feel more satisfied with their jobs, are more attached with their organisation and are inclined to view organisational goals as their own. This results in greater commitment to the organisation.

## Work Engagement

Work engagement refers to the degree to which employees feel energetic, dedicated, and engrossed in their work (Schaufeli, Salanova, Bakker, & Ales-rom, 2002). An engaged employee is completely immersed in his job. Employees are engaged when they feel positive emotions towards their work, find their work to be personally meaningful, consider their workload to be manageable, and have hope about the future of their work (Nelson & Simmons 2003). They are emotionally and intellectually committed to

the organisation. Engaged employees believe in the mission and values of their organisation. Work engagement was initially conceptualised by William A. Kahn, as harnessing of potential of organisational members in achieving the organisational goals. Engagement results in higher levels of performance, commitment and loyalty. Engaged employees are crucial in today's dynamic, competitive and complex business environment.

Work engagement is a work-related state of mind that is characterised by three interrelated dimensions: vigor, dedication, and absorption. Vigor refers to the willingness to invest effort in one's work and persistence while facing challenging situations. It is characterised by high energy levels and mental resilience. Dedication is one's strong involvement in work and experiencing a sense of enthusiasm, significance, inspiration, pride and challenge. Absorption refers to the state of being fully engrossed in one's work and in a mindset that enables full concentration in the work (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006).

An organisation requires engaged employees to achieve its goals. Engaged employees are likely to have a greater attachment to their organisation and a lower tendency to leave the organisation (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Organisations need to provide the necessary support and care to the employees to sustain the engagement levels of its employees. Engaged employees are motivated and committed to achieve the goals of their organisation. Work engagement helps in sustaining organisational growth through innovation and low employee turnover.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework and the reasoning behind it are discussed in this section. Propositions regarding the relationships between POS, Engagement and PsyCap are also developed. This framework explains the role of PsyCap as a mediator in the relationship between POS and Work engagement.

### Link between POS and Engagement

Perceived organisational support is an important job resource that helps employees to cope with the growing job demands in the ever demanding work environment. Past studies indicate that POS ensures organisational endorsement, faith, regard, and status to the employees (Fuller, Hester, Barnett, & Relyea, 2006). Hence, it can be inferred that higher levels of POS allow employees to exploit their abilities without any threat to their self-esteem, social standing, or occupation. Employees with high level of POS believe that they have the necessary physical, cognitive, and emotional reserves to fulfill their role-related responsibilities. They are in complete harmony with nearly

all aspects of their work conditions (Saks, 2006). This induces them to give their best to their assigned roles in their organisation. The job-demand resources model proposes that job resources have motivational potential and lead to high work engagement. These job resources boost personal resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008) like PsyCap which, in turn, can enhance the engagement levels of employees. A supportive work environment motivates employees to dedicate their efforts to their work thus making them more engaged. Saks (2006) suggested that employees can repay their organisation for the resources they receive through their levels of engagement. Accordingly, when employees experience autonomy, receive positive feedback and support from colleagues and superiors, and have opportunities for development, they are likely to reciprocate by showing higher levels of engagement. When employees perceive that they are adequately supported by their organisation, their engagement level also increases. POS is a job resource that motivates employees to accomplish their goals which leads to positive job outcomes like work engagement.

### Link between PsyCap and Engagement

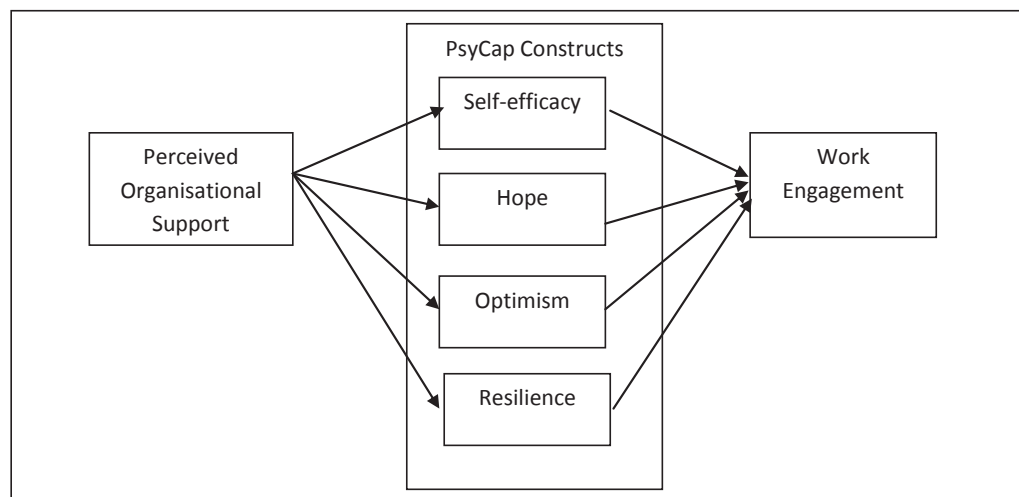
Bandura (1997) has demonstrated that greater efficacy is related to higher absorption level and higher energy levels for task completion. Optimism reduces cynicism and increases dedication by a sense of personal control over the demands at hand (Karasek, 1979). Optimism allows one to be more psychologically available through the expectation of a positive outcome. This psychological availability leads to higher levels of engagement through absorption (Kahn, 1990). A hopeful person shows persistent dedication towards achieving his goals. Resiliency is related to work engagement through increasing personal resources to handle job demands as well as through resources to undo the negative effects of past job demands (Bakker & Leiter, 2010). Youssef and Luthans (2007) maintain that

the relationship between PsyCap, work engagement, and organisational commitment has been supported empirically in various organisational contexts. In a study conducted on the frontline hotel employees, Karatepe and Karadas (2014) reveal that employees with high PsyCap are engaged in their work at elevated levels.

Self-efficacy, organisational-based self-esteem, and optimism make a unique contribution to the explanation of variance in work engagement over time, over and above the impact of job resources and previous levels of engagement (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007). Hakanen, Bakker, and Schaufeli (2006), in their study among female school principals, found that those with most personal resources scored highest on work engagement. They found that resilience, self-efficacy, and optimism contributed to work engagement and resulted in the unique variance in engagement scores. Self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience are the constructs of PsyCap. Their study indicates that PsyCap has a positive impact on engagement. Employees who are higher in PsyCap are likely to have more positive emotions and subsequently be more engaged (Avey, Wernsing, & Luthans, 2008).

### Proposed Conceptual Framework

There have been numerous studies carried out in India to understand the drivers of work engagement. But very few studies have examined the role of personal resources (PsyCap) as the intervening variable in the relationship between organisational level variables and engagement. This paper attempts to propose a research agenda based on this research gap. Based on an extensive literature review, a framework has been developed which examines the role of PsyCap in the relationship between POS and work engagement. This framework proposes PsyCap as the mediating variable.



**Fig. 1: Proposed Model Linking POS, PsyCap and Work Engagement**

The JD-R model by Xanthopoulou *et al.* (2007) classifies working conditions into job demands and job resources. Job demands are the aspects of the job that require sustained effort and are associated with physiological and psychological costs. Job resources are those aspects of the job that help in achieving one's work related goals. They reduce the job demands and stimulate personal growth and development (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). Hence, POS can be considered as a job resource. According to the job demand resources model, personal resources mediate the relationship between job resources and work engagement. Personal resources are aspects of the self that are generally linked to resiliency. It indicates an individual's ability to control and impact upon one's environment successfully (Hobfoll, Johnson, Ennis, & Jackson, 2003). PsyCap has been categorised as a personal resource in many studies (Taylor *et al.*, 2012; Avey, Luthans, & Jensen, 2009; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2007). Based on the JD-R model, this paper proposes that PsyCap mediates the relationship between POS and work engagement. Also, PsyCap enhances the engagement levels of employees.

The above model can also be explained based on the conservation of resources (COR) theory. COR theory states that the availability of job resources leads to accumulation of resources (Hobfoll, 2002) which in turn results in positive outcomes. When COR Theory is incorporated into the motivational process of the JD-R model, it can be interpreted that the availability of job resources (POS) results in an accumulation of resources (PsyCap) leading to more positive outcomes such as work engagement (Llorens, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2007; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2007). A supportive work environment (POS) thus activates the personal resources (PsyCap) of employees, which in turn, leads to work engagement. POS not only reduces employees' perception of resource loss but also enhances their positive perceptions of personal resources. Hence, when employees perceive organisational support, it enhances their PsyCap and thereby produces positive outcomes like work engagement.

### POS and Self-Efficacy

POS represents one's relationship with the organisation and self-efficacy represents one's self-perception. Perceived organisational support is an assurance that aid will be available from the organisation when it is needed to carry out one's job effectively and to deal with stressful situations (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Self-efficacy is described as one's belief in one's ability to succeed and attain a given level of performance (Bandura, 1977). It is one's conviction about one's own capabilities to carry out tasks to achieve a desired result. Employees who perceive supportive work environment are intrinsically motivated and self-efficacious. Backed by the support of the organisation, they have strong

belief in their abilities to do the job effectively. They choose challenging tasks and accomplish them successfully. Positive feedback or encouragement from a superior can enhance one's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

**Proposition 1:** POS may have a positive influence on self-efficacy.

### POS And Hope

A hopeful person must have both the will to succeed in a given task, as well as a viable means, or ways to accomplish that task. When employees perceive adequate support from their organisation, they are more likely to use the pathway generation characteristic of hope to try unproven or new methods to accomplish tasks within the organisational context (Luthans *et al.*, 2008). Employees tend to become more hopeful when they feel that their organisation cares for their well-being. The support of the organisation helps them to set their goals and to find ways to achieve those goals.

**Proposition 2:** POS may have a positive influence on Hope.

### POS and Optimism

In a supportive work environment, employees tend to attribute failures as a temporary obstacle which they believe that they can overcome. They are optimistic and they move on to achieve success. An optimistic person believes that he will succeed in a supportive work environment. He believes that he can overcome challenges through his effort and abilities.

**Proposition 3:** POS may have a positive influence on Optimism.

### POS and Resilience

Resilience is the capacity to bounce back not only from adversity or conflict but also from a positive change, progress or increased responsibility. It helps a person to thrive during a challenging situation. Employees are more resilient when they feel that they are cared and supported by their organisation. A supportive work environment enhances the resilience of its employees. It helps them to experience positive emotions even during stressful situations.

**Proposition 4:** POS may have a positive influence on Resilience.

### POS, PsyCap, and Engagement

The positive psychology movement benefits the organisation by helping to sustain the engagement levels of employees.

Positive psychology is concerned with people's strengths and how they can grow and thrive. It focuses on what is right with people and how to thrive based on their strengths. PsyCap can be viewed as "who you are" and "what you can become in terms of positive development" (Avolio & Luthans, 2006). PsyCap plays a mediating role between positive, supportive climate and individual employee performance (Luthans *et al.*, 2008).

Perceptions of supportive climate are conducive for the enhancement of PsyCap levels of employees. A supportive environment induces employees to be creative and to try new methods of accomplishing their work tasks. Employee will not have the fear of punishment if something goes wrong due to his mistake. There is a tendency to attribute the mistake to external circumstances as the employees are optimistic in a supportive environment. Thus, POS enhances the PsyCap level of employees which in turn results in positive outcomes like work engagement. In a supportive work environment, employees feel confident about their ability to perform well and they are hopeful about their career prospects in the organisation. A supportive work environment creates a positive condition for the flourishing of PsyCap.

Sweetman and Luthans (2010) have explained in detail how PsyCap helps in contributing to work engagement in today's organisations. Bandura (1997) has clearly demonstrated that greater efficacy is related to the extent of being absorbed in the task as well as higher energy levels to complete a task. An optimistic person is more psychologically available to the task at hand as he expects a positive outcome. This leads to an enhancement in his engagement level. Resiliency is related to work engagement as it increases personal resources to handle job demands. A hopeful person has persistent dedication towards achieving his goals. Thus, hope is also an essential requirement to work engagement. Sweetman and Luthans (2010) proposed that PsyCap is a key component in developing work engagement.

**Proposition 5:** PsyCap mediates the relationship between POS and work engagement.

## DISCUSSION

Based on an extensive literature review, a theoretical framework has been presented that introduces psychological capital as an intervening variable for exploring how POS influences employee's work engagement levels. The JD-R model has focused predominantly on job characteristics as antecedents of work engagement, while ignoring the important role of personal resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2007). In support of this notion, this paper has proposed a theoretical framework that integrates the personal resource, PsyCap into the JD-R model. Based on the JD-R model, this paper proposes that

the presence of an organisation level variable like POS when combined with a personal resource like PsyCap enhances the work engagement levels of employees. When employees perceive high levels of organisational support, it enhances their PsyCap levels, which in turn translates into having a positive influence on their engagement levels. POS thus serves as a source of enhancing one's PsyCap thereby resulting in higher levels of engagement. It points out the importance of not only a supportive work environment but also the need to constantly enhance the PsyCap levels of employees to help them sustain their engagement levels.

The uniqueness of PsyCap is that it is a 'state-like capacity' as it can be developed and managed in an organisation-specific fashion towards creating more motivated and healthier employees. Unlike personality traits or core-self evaluation traits, it can be changed by experience and developed in training (Luthans *et al.*, 2008). PsyCap is related to an employee's inner psychological strengths. Hence, the engagement resulting from an employee's PsyCap will be more deep-rooted and lasting than from merely an organisational variable like POS. This paper points out the significance of the personal resource of PsyCap as an intervening variable in the relationship between POS and work engagement. It makes a modest contribution to the existing literature of work engagement. It also provides insights to practicing HR managers on the influence of PsyCap levels in the enhancement of work engagement. The key to PsyCap's relevance to the workplace is mainly derived from its openness to development through relatively short and easy-to-implement training interventions (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). Organisations need to develop the PsyCap of their workforce in order to achieve sustained growth and performance. An empirical study on the proposed model can establish the extent to which POS influences work engagement through PsyCap. As PsyCap is a state-like construct that is open to development, a longitudinal research will be more appropriate to understand the mediation effect of PsyCap in the relationship between POS and work engagement.

## IMPLICATIONS

Nearly every organisation faces the challenge of retaining its employees. Although it is difficult to frame a perfect strategy for employee retention, work engagement plays a crucial role in retaining employees. A supportive work environment enhances the PsyCap of employees which in turn leads to an engaged workforce. PsyCap is a personal resource and it is related to one's own inner strengths. Hence, when an employee feels engaged in his work primarily because of his PsyCap, it would be more deep rooted and lasting than merely from an organisational level variable such as POS. Moreover, PsyCap can be developed in a short, highly

focused intervention in a group training session (Luthans *et al.*, 2006). So, the management should focus on providing not only a supportive work environment but also training programs that enhance the PsyCap levels of its employees. Apart from providing the needed organisational support to employees, the management should demonstrate its concern for its employees by imparting PsyCap training. This will positively influence the emotional ties of the employees to the organisation. POS is thus an effective strategy in the development of work engagement and PsyCap and as a result, PsyCap enhances work engagement. The proposed theoretical model can be applied to develop work engagement in today's workplace.

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