Employee Engagement and Work Engagement: A Discourse on the Similarities and Differences

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Abstract : Engagement has been a buzzword in Human Resource Practice for quite a while now. While practitioners are pumping millions of dollars and innumerable man hours to ensure that employees are engaged at the work place, research along these lines throws up different terms associated with the idea of engagement - work engagement and employee engagement being the prominent ones. This paper tries to delve into the nuances of both and trace their theoretical evolution to determine if there are any fundamental differences between them, or if we have arrived at a consensus to use the terms interchangeably. The paper is presented as a literature review of contemporary work in the area of engagement and also seeks to identify the best way to measure engagement.

IndexTerms – **Employee engagement, Work engagement.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Popularised by the work of William Kahn in the 1990's, engagement has caught the imagination of Human Resource (HR) practitioners around the world as it has been proven to be positively linked to desired organisational outcomes such as productivity, commitment, organisational citizenship behaviour and lowered absenteeism and intention to leave (Crabb, 2011; Rothmann & Rothmann 2010; Kumar & Sia, 2012). As the interest in the concept has grown, so has the literature surrounding it. The interesting aspect of the study of engagement is that there is an academic body of research and there is a far more popular and widely accepted body of research with consulting firms like Gallup who have carved a niche for themselves in workplace consulting based on proprietary measures of engagement and offer organisations insights based on years of accumulated data across countries and industries.

There is a popular saying in quality management techniques that 'if you can't measure it, you can't improve it'. A precursory glance at engagement shows that there are multitudes of ways that academicians and practitioners have defined engagement and there are numerous measures of the same. It is important to be able to identify which path one must take on the quest to understand the phenomenon of engagement and hence, this paper focuses on the views propounded by academic researchers and takes the method of reviewing literature in academic journals, to clarify the most popular constructs of engagement - employee engagement and work engagement.

II. EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND WORK ENGAGEMENT – THE OVERLAPS

Ahmetoglu, Harding, Akhtar and Chamorro-Premuzic (2015) consider the definition of employee engagement to encompass vigour, dedication and absorption as defined by Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Romá and Bakker (2002). They go on to hypothesise that engagement is positively related with creative achievement, based on an understanding that employee engagement fosters a positive effect in individuals at work. They use the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) to measure 'employee engagement'. This work begets the question as to whether employee engagement and work engagement are indeed two names for the same construct.

In a similar vein, Alarcon, Lyons and Tartaglia (2010) look at employee engagement in a military setting and look at employee engagement as the motivation and ability to contribute to an organisation's success. They also build on the Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) definition of engagement as a positive psychological state that characterises the relationship individuals have with their work. On the one hand they look at purely intra-person factors like motivation and ability while also linking it to the influences of their work on the other hand. They found that peer group interactions, organisational climate and role clarity were significant predictors of engagement.

Soane, Shantz, Alfes, Truss, Rees and Gatenby (2013) contribute to the literature by combining broaden and build theory with engagement theory. Using the 17 item UWES, they were able to show how positive affect impacts cognitive processes and that in turn leads to beneficial outcomes. They purport how perceptions of work lead to the expanded personal resources and the simultaneous deployment of cognitive, emotional and physical processes that are an overlap between the visualisations of engagement by Kahn and Schaufeli et al (1990). They highlight that future research could delve into employees' responses to work and their responses to a job role and call on HR practitioners to help employees identify meaning in their job roles as a proactive smeasure to enhance engagement.

Fletcher and Robinson (2014) conduct a review of the extant literature on engagement and divide the various schools of thought along four approaches - burnout antithesis, need satisfying, satisfaction-engagement and multidimensional. They examine the various scales used to measure the various operationalisations of engagement and the common thread through a majority of the scales is the link with the 'job'. Measures under the satisfaction-engagement approach seem to measure more on the positive working environment rather than engagement per se, and are more related to organisational factors rather than job factors. This then, is captured by the multidimensional approach wherein engagement is viewed as an employee's engagement with the job and the organisation. They recognise that the 17 item UWES is by far the most widely used and validated measure of employee engagement. They also cite three important measures based on the need satisfying approach of Kahn - May, Gilson and Harter's Psychological engagement measure of 2004 (13 items); Rich, LePine and Crawford's Job engagement measure of 2010 (18 items) and the Intellectual Social Affective (ISA) engagement measure developed by Soane et al in 2012 (9 items). They highlight an important observation in the measurement of engagement by stating that little can be done to overcome the possibility of the

'acquiescence bias' as the concept evolves from positive psychology and to word statements negatively would be counterintuitive and would seem more like a burnout question rather than an engagement one, which in turn has been proven to be a different concept altogether.

III. EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND WORK ENGAGEMENT – THE DIFFERENCES

The concept of engagement was initially proposed as the degree to which people use their personal selves in their various roles (Kahn; as cited in Ruslan, Islam & Noor, 2014). It started as a psychological disposition wherein employees could decide how much of themselves they wanted to invest in their roles, predominantly work roles and they could express themselves physically, emotionally and cognitively based on the levels of engagement felt. It was postulated that engaged employees would 'give more' of themselves and thereby better drive organisationally desired outcomes. Work engagement, on the other hand, provides a perspective on an individual's relationship with and behaviour exclusively at work (Lyu, 2016) and purports that it builds personal resources that can promote positive outcomes in the workplace (Junca-Silva, Caetano & Lopes, 2017).

Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter and Taris (2008) speak about engagement as a unique concept that is best predicted by job and personal resources and highlight that work engagement predicts job performance and client satisfaction. They have also endorsed the UWES as the most commonly used instrument used to measure engagement. They build consensus to the idea that engaged employees have high levels of energy and identify strongly with their work and also go on to say that work engagement is a positive, fulfilling, affective-motivational state of work related well being that is characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption.

Jones, Ni and Wilson (2009) look at employee engagement as a kind of 'turning up to work' phenomenon, taking the analogy of absenteeism as being physically absent and citing engagement as not just being physically present, but being present. They try to highlight the nuances in the understanding of employee engagement. One definition that resonates with them looks at engagement as looking at work and employee role related activities as avenues for expression of self. They consider that employee engagement has some aspect of an employee's perception about themselves, their work and their organisation. They propose that employee engagement has a more immediate effect on work outcomes and is therefore more interwoven with workplace interactions especially those with managers and co-workers. Employee engagement is also stated as having an affective component that is rooted in a work context. They used the Gallup Q12 for the measurement of employee engagement.

Kumar and Sia (2012) carried out a study on the personal engagement of employees based on the dimensions propounded by Kahn - namely, physical, cognitive and emotional engagement and they used an employee engagement scale with 13 items, developed by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in 2006. They looked at the work environment as an antecedent to engagement and the context of the study was semi-skilled employees in the food processing industry in India. They found that irrespective of the nature of the work environment, employees exhibit a high degree of physical engagement and they attribute this to the nature of the Indian employment scenario. Therefore they raise a word of caution that managers must not view physical engagement as evidence for actual overall employee engagement, but must actively seek out avenues wherein they can drive the emotional and cognitive engagement of their employees. The emotional and cognitive aspects can be associated with the nature of the job roles being fulfilled as was evidenced from the results stating that autonomy, clarity and comfort were significantly correlated with positive engagement.

Crabb (2011) looks at employee engagement as positive organisational practices that help to nurture and build a positive relationship with the employees to help them identify with business goals and work as active team members towards the attainment of organisational goals. This is a novel approach that views engagement more as a practise rather than a state of mind or active involvement. Crabb goes on to highlight the organisation level drivers of engagement and state that job features and managerial relationships are important aspects that can be focussed upon. The challenge however is to understand what the internalised drivers of engagement are - what are those aspects that people hold within themselves that can be used to drive engagement at the individual level. The study looks at the vigour, absorption and dedication model of engagement proposed by Schaufeli and state that these are the outcomes of individual level engagement and not the drivers of it. Hence, they propose that focusing strengths, managing emotions and aligning purpose could be viewed as individual level drivers of engagement.

Townsend, Wilkinson and Burgess (2013) adapt the definition of Purcell in their work on employee engagement to mean people management practices that are focussed on individual level outcomes that would in turn lead to higher firm performance. They propose a model where work practices or employee management practices can focus on a continuum from individual focus to an individual and collaborative engagement model combined at the other end of the spectrum. They used a case study methodology to test their hypotheses.

Ruslan, Islam and Noor (2014) talk about the types of engaged employees as those who are engaged, non-engaged and actively disengaged based on previous studies. They draw an interesting parallel to the idea of contracting from an employee's perspective when looking at engagement from the psychological perspective of Kahn. They also trace the evolution of the concept of engagement and propose that the job characteristics model could be used as a predictor of engagement with age and gender acting as moderating variables. As the job characteristics model talks about the nature of the work that employees are associated with during their employment, this again begets the question that would it be better to measure work engagement over employee engagement when one has to look at work related outcomes. The paper also brings out the evolving concept of organisational engagement.

Wang, Chen, Duan and Du (2018) look at the work engagement of a newcomer and the role of supervisory mentoring to achieve it. They state that engaged employees have a sense of energetic and effective connection with their work activities and perceive themselves as capable of successfully managing the demands of their jobs. They have used the shortened 9 item UWES to measure work engagement.

Work engagement is operationalised as a demonstration of high levels of personal investment towards one's work, encompasses being energised, cognitively vigilant and a willingness to invest extra effort towards the accomplishment of goals and objectives (Schmitt, Hartog and Belschak, 2016). Schmitt et al, go on to cite studies that have shown that of the three dimensions discussed under the UWES, vigour and dedication seem to be the core dimensions whereas absorption is seen more as a consequence, and therefore they propose to conceptualise work engagement as high levels of vigour and dedication, and it was measured using the relevant items from the 9 item UWES.

Zhang, Zhang and Qiu (2017) undertook a study in technology companies in China to investigate the impact of positive group affective tone on the work engagement of the employees. The 17 item UWES, translated into Chinese was used for measurement of work engagement. The study highlights that positive group processes are an important aspect that needs to be considered while planning for improving the work engagement of employees.

Junca-Silva, Caetano and Lopes (2017) look at studies on employee engagement and work engagement as part of their literature review and highlight the positive impact that both have on job performance and other outcomes. They hypothesise that daily uplifts at work would positively impact work engagement which in turn would positively impact well-being and performance. Daily uplifts are positive experiences arising out of daily life in the workplace and examples cited are receiving positive feedback and receiving peer and managerial support. They consider work engagement as an affective state and use it as a mediator variable and measure the same using the shortened 9 item UWES. This is different from the employee engagement model of Kahn wherein engagement is looked upon as a psychological state encompassing the affective, cognitive and emotional states. Their findings also highlight the association of work engagement, well-being and organisational performance.

Schaufeli, Taris and Rhenen (2008) set out to empirically prove that workaholism, burnout and work engagement are indeed different concepts and they seek to clarify the conceptual definitions of these seemingly overlapping concepts. They use the 17 item UWES to measure work engagement and they are able to establish the differences in the three concepts and not as being subsumed within one another and not as antonyms for each other.

A study in Japan to validate the UWES found that the 9 item shortened scale was better than the 17 item UWES and it was further established that in the Japanese context, work engagement was to be treated as a unitary construct and not as the three dimensions of vigour, dedication and absorption (Shimazu et al., 2008). They also suggest that engagement has a more chronic and persistent nature rather than being a momentary and transient state. This could help in clarifying the difference in employee engagement and work engagement, as by very definition, the psychological perspective of Kahn looks at a more momentary phase.

Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti and Schaufeli (2009) look at the between person and within person differences in engagement using a methodology that combines both the approaches and asks respondents to maintain a diary for five consecutive working days and looking at the responses so recorded. They maintain that the study of engagement must encompass general tendencies as well as momentary states. They term the variable of the study as general work engagement and use the 9 item UWES to measure the same on a 6 point scale.

Welbourne (2011) has dived deep into the 'wildfire that is engagement' and likens it to an actual wildfire stating that it is required for a healthy working relationship to be built between employee and employer, but leaving it unchecked whether there can actually have more negative consequences than positive. She traces the evolution of the concept of engagement and argues that there is no consensus in literature on the meaning of the term engagement and this is an area that has attracted a lot of consultants to emerge with their own definitions of how this works. There are multiple perspectives of engagement and the question she seeks to answer is what we can do at work to engage the employee better. Although she starts with the employee engagement concept as defined by Kahn of 'bringing yourself to work' she ends with engagement with work related roles that are far more in the control of the organisation to influence. She highlights that most academic studies on engagement have used the 17 item UWES to measure work engagement. She also cites a measure developed by Rich, Lepine and Crawford in 2010 based on Kahn's work as well as the availability of a scale developed by Martin in 2006-'07, known as the Motivation and Engagement Scale (MES-W).

Lyu (2016) looks at the mediating effect of psychological safety on the work engagement of teachers in compulsory schools in China and found that there is a partial mediation of psychological safety on the relationship between organisational justice and work engagement. She measured work engagement using the 17 item UWES. Lyu is able to establish that psychological safety does indeed affect work engagement. This gives rise to the question of whether we can consider the model of Kahn and that of Bakker et al to overlap or one be the antecedent of the other.

Farndale, Beijer, Van Veldhoven, Kelliher and Hope-Hailey (2014) talk about employee engagement as an organisational asset and look at the divergent points of view related to employee and work engagement. Through their reviews they establish that it is work engagement that takes precedence in academic literature and they push the boundaries of engagement to support the idea of organisation engagement - wherein the focus of the employee's engagement is on the organisation and not limited to their specific job. They purport that work engagement and organisation engagement are aspects of the broader notion of employee engagement. They bring out the differences in employee engagement as visualised by Kahn and work engagement as defined by Schaufeli et al (2002) and state that employee engagement was meant to understand how much of themselves an employee brings to each of the roles that they play whereas work engagement specifically looks at job roles, as those are the ones most important for an organisation to measure. They argue that limiting the study of engagement to only job roles may negate the importance of other factors that may increase the stickiness of employees to an organisation, such as, manager, team, unions and the like.

IV. DISCUSSION

Rothmann and Rothmann (2010) look extensively at the ideas proposed around the theme of engagement and evaluate it from the dimensions of personal engagement as espoused by Kahn and work engagement as defined by Schaufeli and Bakker, in a South African context. They suggest that both the models can be integrated to arrive at a comprehensive model of engagement that looks at the psychological aspects as well as those that can be driven from work related aspects. They suggest a possible similarity between the dimensions measured on each of these scales. While the personal engagement model talks about physical, cognitive and emotional expressions in the work role, work engagement deals with vigour, absorption and dedication which the authors suggest may be expressions of similar nature. Going deeper into the psychological conditions that impact engagement, they measure the dimensions of psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety and psychological availability. They cross reference these with the work engagement precedents of job demands-resources and conservation of resources schools of thought. Through their findings, they suggest that a comprehensive measure of engagement is the call of the day and both angles are important to be evaluated - wherein organisations can plan for interventions that successfully enhance psychological meaningfulness and engagement as well as those that enable work related engagement. They used the Work Engagement Scale (WES) based on the work of Kahn in their first study and the 17 item UWES in their second study.

V. CONCLUSION

Engagement - employee, work or organisational - will continue to capture the imagination and efforts of HR professionals in the future. For us to focus on the true need derived from the organisational values and current state of organisational culture, we must evolve an understanding on what to focus on when. It is evident from the discourse of this paper that there are various perspectives to the study of engagement and various measures - both academic as well as proprietary - to help us understand what we are dealing with. It is proposed that if there is a situation of a dip in energy in the workplace, we focus on employee engagement as the thrust of the concept is on the physical, cognitive and emotional availability of the employee at work. If the organisation is looking to better engage employees using job related roles, work engagement would be a better concept to measure as it directly looks at how well the employee is engaged with the work that they are doing. It has also been established that the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale is the most commonly used measure of work engagement.

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