

Exploring Employee Engagement Among Three Non-Salaried Employees: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract: This exploratory empirical phenomenological study looks at employee engagement using Kahn (1990) and Maslow's (1970) motivational theories to understand the experience of non-salaried employees. This study finds four themes that seem to affect employee engagement: work environment, employee's supervisor, individual characteristics of the employee, and opportunity for learning.

In the United States, 146 million people go to work daily (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). Employees desire positive feelings about their work experience (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2002) that go beyond traditional definitions of job satisfaction, "an individual's attitude towards their work" (Brayfield & Rothe, 1951, p. 307). Measures of job satisfaction are often based in generalities of work that are subject to swings in affect depending on the day-to-day challenges of work, rather than an employee's experience, a more enduring indication of feeling positive at work. Employee engagement is defined as an employee's "involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work" (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002, p. 269) and is based in an employee's experience, inclusive of long-term emotional involvement, and is an antecedent to measures of job satisfaction. When employees are engaged, they are emotionally connected to others and cognitively vigilant to the direction of the team (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002).

In a survey of over 1,000 employees, The Gallup Organization found that 71% of employees go to work disengaged every day (Crabtree, 2004). Disengaged employees are defined as individuals who have distanced themselves from the rational and/or emotional components of work (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004). Engaged employees, as measured through the Gallup Workplace Audit, averaged 27% less physical absenteeism than disengaged employees, saving companies 86.5 million days per year in lost productivity (Wagner & Harter, 2006, p. xiii). A survey of over 50,000 employees found that engaged employees are 87% less likely to leave a company (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004), five times less likely than disengaged employees. Once an engaged employee is at work, his or her willingness to go above and beyond the call of duty increases by 57%, resulting in a 20% increase in individual performance improvement (Buchanan, 2004). Engaged employees are happier employees, produce increased profit, exhibit high levels of creativity, experience less absenteeism, have fewer on-the-job accidents, and positively affect business unit level outcomes.

Despite the benefits of having highly engaged employees, a surprisingly small body of literature examines the construct (Saks, 2006). Current trends in hiring more independent, non-salaried employees as well as the depleting talent shortage across the globe have demanded a new look at the employability and sustainability of this growing workforce population (Beck, 2003). A non-salaried employee is defined as independent, contract labor paid by the hour (Beck, 2003). Little research has investigated the experience of being engaged from the employee

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perspective and little is known about how non-salaried employees experience engagement or how engagement affects their experience at work.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how non-salaried employees describe the experience of being engaged at work. Conversational interviews are used to explore emergent themes about how participants experience engagement. The phenomenon of interest is engagement at work of non-salaried employees. The research questions are as follows: (a) how do non-salaried employees describe the experience of being engaged at work, and (b) what factors contribute to the feeling of engagement? First, a conceptual framework of employee engagement is presented. Second, the method of data collection and analysis is explained. Lastly, the findings of factors that contribute to the creation of employee engagement are described.

Conceptual Framework

Kahn's (1990) seminal grounded theory of employee engagement and disengagement posited that engagement is the concurrent expression of one's preferred self and the promotion of connections to others. Disengagement is the withdrawal of one's self and of one's preferred behaviors, promoting a lack of connectedness, emotional absence, and passive behavior. Expressing or withdrawing one's authentic self is the emotional, social, and physical act of employee engagement.

Constructs important to understanding engagement and disengagement at work are meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Meaningfulness is defined as the positive "sense of return on investments of self in role performance" (Kahn, 1990, p. 705). Safety is defined as the ability to show one's self "without fear or negative consequences to self image, status, or career" (Kahn, 1990, p. 705). Availability is defined as the "sense of possessing the physical, emotional, and psychological resources necessary" for the completion of work (Kahn, 1990, p. 705). Employee engagement or employee disengagement develops to the degree that these psychological constructs can be fulfilled (Kahn, 1990). Herzberg's two-factor theory parallels Kahn's engagement theory by positing autonomy in being, recognition of self and work, and meaningful understanding as factors that increase an employee's intrinsic willingness to engage in work (Latham & Ernst, 2006). Intrinsic factors rather than extrinsic factors (i.e. compensation, company image) motivate employees to be engaged in their work. The identification and satisfaction of individual needs was recognized as important components to engaging employees in Kahn (1990) and Herzberg's (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) theories; however, an understanding of individual needs was never fully explored. Maslow's (1970) theory of motivation provides a straightforward conceptual framework for understanding basic human needs.

The importance of Maslow's motivation theory in relation to employee engagement is the conceptualization of each of the basic needs. These needs, individually listed as physiological, safety, belonging and love, esteem, and self-actualization needs, are the basic needs of human beings (1970). The esteem need is defined as the "desire for a stable, firmly based, usually high evaluation of [the self], for self-respect, or self-esteem, and for the esteem of others" (Maslow, 1970, p. 45). Self-actualization is defined as the completion of activity that intensely satisfies (Maslow, 1970). The drive to self-actualization parallels the concept of employee engagement as used in Kahn's (1990) work by conceptualizing the drive to ultimate self fulfillment, a deep need for internal, emotional satisfaction that all humans long for.

Method

Phenomenological researchers attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations. This research seeks to capture and describe employees' experiences of being engaged at the workplace, beginning with silence and

ending with interpretation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In this case, the meaning that participants give to events that predate or coexist with the sense of being engaged as well as with the activities they perform at work is the phenomenology under study. All employees interviewed for this study worked for a multinational service corporation ranked by Forbes magazine as one of "America's Most Admired Companies." The Director of Operations for the company agreed to be the key informant for the study and was used to identify potential participants. A key informant is particularly helpful, insightful, and articulate in identifying potential participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The key informant was not interviewed for this study.

The first participant was a male working in his current position for three months, identified as John throughout the duration of this research. The second participant was a female, identified as Ashley, working in her current position for 10 years. The third participant, identified as Sarah, was a female working in her current position for 3 years. This study was implemented in Miami-Dade County, Florida, where 60.6% of the population is Hispanic (US Census Bureau, 2004). Coincidentally, the three participants willing to give interviews were Hispanic. Although this homogenous factor can be considered a limitation of the study, we make no claim that our conclusions are generalizable to the larger Hispanic population in Miami-Dade County, the global workforce, or that we reached saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Data was collected through conversational interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) lasting an average of 1 hour and 17 minutes. A 30 question conversational guide was used to help the interviewer focus on the agreed research topic. A conversational guide is a structured set of questions that gives direction to the starting points of conversation (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The guide included questions about expectations at work, general feelings about work, resources at work, the use of skills and/ or talents at work, supervision, co-workers, and general questions about an employee's satisfaction level. Interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy independently by each researcher.

Transcripts were read and coded by each researcher twice. During the first round of readings, one researcher identified 26 patterns and the second researcher identified 21. During analysis, a journal was used to record observations and reflections about emergent patterns and experiences of the researchers. A second round of readings was completed with the researchers together using a spreadsheet to compile patterns capturing the participants' experience of engagement at work. After the second reading, the initial patterns identified in the first round were collapsed into four emergent themes. Emergent themes were presented to three groups for peer review. The first group was comprised of graduate students studying qualitative research at an accredited, large, public, urban university. The second group, a writing for publication class, was comprised of graduate students. The third group included professionals in Human Resources and Development (HRD), professors, and graduate students studying education at a writing club. Feedback received from these venues has been incorporated into this paper.

Influencing Themes of Employee Engagement

Four emergent themes identified through the analysis of data are (a) work environment, (b) supervisor, (c) characteristics of the employee, and (d) opportunity for learning.

Work Environment

A work environment is defined as the physical and emotional characteristics of the workspace, including relationships with colleagues and typical job functions. How individuals feel about the environmental climate where they work affects their level of engagement (Brown & Leigh, 1996). Cooperation, support, trust, and partnerships were ways participants described their idea of an engaging environment. Early in our interview, John recalled a disengaging

experience in a previous job, describing that work experience as a cutthroat, aggressive environment. When asked about how this type of environment affected his motivation, John shared the following about his experience: “It’s awful, because I took work home with me. I take it all up here, so I mean, if it’s bad at work, you take it home with you.” When probed deeper, John disclosed further and compared his previous work environment to his current work environment: “I worked in some places where you get along with the person, but it is still work, you know. It’s I like you, but don’t mess up, cause...you’ll get fired. It’s not like that here.”

The varying experience of safety from one environment to another affected John’s experience of work. John later described that the fear of being fired was the sole motivating factor in the first job described. As John described his current position, relief could be heard in his voice. Safety needs, such as feeling protected, being free from fear, having a feeling of order, and knowing one’s limits, are potent needs for human beings (Maslow, 1970) and are essential to the foundation of motivational theory as operationalized in Brown and Leigh (1996). Supervisors cannot disregard the need for employees to feel safe at work; without fulfilling this need, employees can become paralyzed mentally. Employees may show up for work physically, but mentally and emotionally, they are not present.

Supervisor

A supervisor is defined as any person who is charged with the direct management of an employee. Frontline supervisors do much of the engagement work. Employees see their companies from the same perspective they see their supervisors (Galford & Drapeau 2003). In our interviews, each participant’s supervisor came up as a motivating force for being engaged or disengaged at work. Being new to the industry, John needed a developmental leader who could help him learn about the business. “[Supervisors are] the ones that evaluate me; they’re the ones that, you know, demand that I do a good job...I feel like they both have been unbelievable, so far. They have been good, probably the best bosses that I’ve had.” John chose the words to describe the experience with his supervisor carefully: “evaluate,” “demand,” and “unbelievable” describing a supervisor are not traditionally paired together. For John, this current supervisory style allows for feelings of safety, high expectations, and growth. The feeling of having great supervisors, maybe the “best bosses” he has ever had, has an impact on his experience of work.

Characteristics of the Employee

Unique characteristics, beliefs, and work philosophies are ubiquitous among humans. A characteristic of the employee is defined as a perception that the employee has about himself or herself and that is actively applied to life roles. Two unique characteristics emerged as patterns throughout our data collection: (a) the need for challenge and (b) an entrepreneurial spirit. The need for challenge referred to by the participants related to how challenge affects performance and engagement. Ashley shared stories about her previous experience working in several restaurants and large hotels before her current position. She spoke of looking for challenge in her work and seeking opportunities to grow. Ashley went on to share that if she challenged herself, she would learn more on the job, and potentially be promoted. When asked why she felt a need for challenge, Ashley expressed feeling an innate characteristic that was hard to capture in words: “There is something inside of me, I want to keep going, I want to learn more, I want to jump higher. I want to be challenged.” Sarah alluded to her motivation at work and the need for challenge. She hoped to someday open her own restaurant. Sarah recalled that she looks for challenge to keep occupied and in continuous development for the future. “I am a very quick learner, so I get bored really fast if I don’t have challenges; if something is not challenging, it’s boring.” Probing deeper with Sarah, we asked about a challenge she had recently faced. Sarah

shared a story about learning to work on a cash register for the first time in a very commanding and confident tone. She felt like she could try anything and liked the idea of being challenged daily at work: "I had never worked on a register on my life. I just figured it out. Let me do it. That doesn't bother me at all." This self-awareness, while not tangible, was important to the experience of engagement at work for our participants.

Opportunity for Learning

Opportunities to learn something new at work were important to all three participants. Learning is defined as "a change in behavior, cognition, or affect that occurs as a result of one's interaction with the environment" (Werner & Desimone, 2006, p. 33). A learning environment results from opportunities to learn at work and is defined as an environment that allows employees to gain new skills and knowledge "without fear or negative consequences to self image, status, or career" (Kahn, 1990, p. 705). Participants expressed learning as an incidental experience rather than an act they set out to accomplish every day. Incidental learning is defined as ever-present unconscious learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Ashley recalled her promotions at an earlier company. She shared her experiences of working in the dish room, next being moved to prep chef, and lastly finding herself in the kitchen as an assistant; but she was never formally trained or asked to attend professional development to gain the skills to continue advancing. "Every time they kept moving me, they [gave] me some more money, more benefits, but by that time I did not even care about the money, because I was happy because they were moving me and I was learning." For Sarah, learning emerged as an important pattern in her motivation for coming to work and performing her best. Although unable to define the learning that was occurring, when asked how she ranked the feeling of learning with other tangible artifacts such as pay, Sarah shared that learning for her was the most important variable right now. She saw her career aspiration of opening a business as primary motivation that enhanced the motivation for work. "For me right now, experience is more important than money, because this is my career. I want all the experience I can get."

Discussion

The findings of this paper suggest that supervisors play an important role in the development of employee engagement. They must be aware of their influence regarding the work environments they create (Wagner & Harter, 2006). Work environments have implications for feelings of safety and meaningfulness (Kahn, 1990; Maslow, 1970) as well as formal and informal learning opportunities presented to employees, all of which seem to affect the development of employee engagement. Additionally, our findings suggest that to enhance employee engagement, someone must work to empower opportunities for learning, establish a rapport between supervisor and employee (i.e. build trust), and encourage the understanding of unique employee characteristics. In conclusion, HRD practitioners should begin focusing on helping supervisors develop ways of encouraging the themes discussed within this paper. As this study suggests, a focus on how work is experienced rather than how work is delivered might be a first step in this practice.

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