A Historical Perspective of Employee Engagement: An Emerging Definition

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Abstract: This paper explores the development of employee engagement through a historical perspective lens. Using a structured literature review, seminal works are identified and reviewed. A working definition is proposed.

Employee engagement has generated a great deal of interest in recent years as a widely used term in organizations and consulting firms (Macey & Schneider, 2008) especially as credible evidence points toward an engagement-profit linkage (Czarnowsky, 2008). Employee engagement has been characterized as "a distinct and unique construct that consists of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components . . . associated with individual role performance" (Saks, 2005, p. 602). Engaged employees often display a deep, positive emotional connection with their work and are likely to display attentiveness and mental absorption in their work (Saks, 2006). Although engaged employees are consistently more productive, profitable, safer, healthier, and less likely to leave their employer (Fleming & Asplund, 2007; Wagner & Harter, 2006), only 30% of the global workforce is estimated to be engaged (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Saks, 2006). Nonetheless, despite continued evidence of linkages to positive business outcomes, employee engagement is declining (Czarnowsky, 2008).

As the concept of employee engagement moves from consulting and HR literature to more rigorous academic journals, the engagement construct has been poorly conceptualized and defined (Macey & Schneider, 2008), resulting in potential misuse of the construct. The current conceptualization includes both attitudes (satisfaction, commitment, involvement, and empowerment) and behaviors (organizational citizenship behaviors, taking initiative, willingness to take on new responsibilities, and acceptance of change; Macey & Schneider, 2008) but varies significantly in the literature. HRD professionals are being asked to play an increased role in the development of engagement interventions but are challenged with understanding the concept due to poor conceptualization, definition, and often-disjointed literature.

Problem Statement

The employee engagement construct has been inconsistently interpreted (Macey & Schneider, 2008) since its inception. Contemporary definitions of employee engagement have primarily come from business, psychology, and human resource consulting practitioner bodies of literature (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2005), many of which lack the rigor of academic scrutiny. Additionally, consulting firms who report having developed interventions that aid organizations in building employee engagement lack a working definition of the construct, referring to engagement only as a "persistent positive state" (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p. 4). Without a clear definition and common understanding, strategies for the development of employee engagement are cluttered, scattered, and unfocused. Having a clear definition and common understanding of employee engagement could result in enhanced strategy for HRD practitioners and scholars. The purpose of this paper is to explore the historical development of employee engagement through an integrated review of the literature and to propose a working

definition of the employee engagement construct. First, the method will be discussed. Second the historical development of employee engagement including a proposed working definition of the construct will be explored followed by concluding thoughts.

Method

The method that best captures data from various emerging fields of study is an integrative literature review, which is a "distinctive form of research that generates new knowledge"…about an emerging topic of study (Torracco, 2005, p. 356). Because employee engagement is an emerging topic being studied in various academic fields of which all have different conceptualizations, an integrated literature review was conducted. Selection of articles and data organization and analysis are discussed in this section.

Selection of Articles

The following data sources were selected and searched for their representation of the human resource development, human resource management, business, and psychology fields: PsycInfo, ABI/Inform, ASTD's Training & Development Journal (T&D), the Society for Human Resource Management Journals, the Academy of Management database, all four Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) journals, and AHRD conferences papers from the last ten years. Data sources were abstract queried using the single keyword *employee engagement* and limited to articles with employee engagement appearing in the abstract or title, published in the English language, and peer-reviewed. Literature was broadly searched for the key word employee engagement as a "distinct and unique construct" (Saks, 2005, p. 602). Because the first mention of employee engagement in the academic literature comes from Kahn (1990), the search was limited to articles published from 1990 to 2008.

A staged review method was then used to analyze all articles containing the phrase employee engagement. A staged review is the practice of initially reviewing only abstracts to determine relevancy and then reviewing relevant articles in depth (Torraco, 2005).

Data Organization and Analysis

A total of 155 abstracts were reviewed (see Table 1). Of the 155, ten were duplicates and five were unrelated to the topic and deleted. The remaining 140 abstracts were printed and

Table 1
Number of Selected Articles by Database Source

Database	Hits	Abstracts
PsycInfo	19	19
ABI/Inform	969	120
T&D, ASTD	10	10
SHRM Journals	2	2
Academy of Management	3	2
AHRD Conference Papers (1998-2008)	2	2
HRD Review	0	0
HRD International	0	0
HRD Quarterly	0	0
Advances in HRD	0	0

reviewed by both authors. Major theoretical articles were identified for further review. Of the 140 articles identified for further review, 26 were empirical. Ten of the 26 were selected for complete reading as they were considered to be seminal works on the topic because either (a) the authors were known for contributions in their areas of expertise, or (b) the abstract mentioned research specific to the development of employee engagement.

Historical Development of Employee Engagement

This literature review examines the historical development of the construct of employee engagement. First, early and contemporary conceptualizations of employee engagement are discussed followed by a proposed working definition of the construct.

Early Conceptualizations of Employee Engagement

The first mention of employee engagement appears in an *Academy of Management Journal* article, "Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work" (Kahn, 1990). In his article, Kahn explains the underpinnings and major influences on his thought, beginning with the classic sociology text, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1961). Goffman (1961) heavily influenced Kahn's (1990) writing as evidenced by Kahn's suggestion that "people act out momentary attachments and detachments in role performances" (Kahn, 1990, p. 694); a direct reference to Goffman's (1961) internationalist theory. This conceptualization and others alluding to the roles we play in our lives are interwoven throughout Kahn's (1990) development of the first grounded theory of personal engagement and personal disengagement. Kahn (1990) defined personal engagement as "the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence, and active full role performances" (p. 700). Drawing from the work of Goffman (1961), Maslow (1970), and Alderfer (1972), Kahn (1990) posited that the domains of meaningfulness, safety, and availability are important to fully understanding why a person becomes engaged. Kahn (1990) defined meaningfulness as the positive "sense of return on investments of self in role performance" (p. 705). He defined safety as the ability to show one's self "without fear or negative consequences to self image, status, or career" (Kahn, 1990, p. 705) and availability as the "sense of possessing the physical, emotional, and psychological resources necessary" (p. 705) for the completion of work.

Kahn's conceptualization of personal engagement and personal disengagement would be the only piece of empirical research on employee engagement until early 2001, when Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter (2001) focused on why employees develop job burnout. Conceptual in nature, Maslach et al. (2001) posited that employee engagement was the positive antithesis to burnout and defined employee engagement as "a persistent positive affective state . . . characterized by high levels of activation and pleasure" (p. 417). Together, Kahn (1990) and Maslach et al. (2001) provided the two earliest theoretical frameworks for understanding employee engagement (Saks, 2005).

The only study to date to empirically test Kahn's (1990) conceptualization of engagement found that all three of Kahn's (1990) original domains were "important in determining one's engagement at work" (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004, p. 30). This finding suggests the framework Kahn (1990) used in his conceptualization is foundational for the scaffolding of the construct.

Contemporary Conceptualizations of Employee Engagement

Harter et al. (2002) published one of the earliest and most definitive pieces of consulting literature on employee engagement. Using a research foundation pioneered by the late Donald O. Clifton as a part of the Gallup Strengths movement and popularized by the publication of *First Break All the Rules* (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999), Harter and colleagues (2002) pulled data

from a meta-analysis of 7,939 business units across multiple fields of industry. Harter et al. (2002) were the first to look at employee engagement at the business unit level. In their conceptualization, employee engagement was defined as an "individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work" (Harter et al., 2002, p. 417). This definition added the expectation of an individuals' satisfaction level and measured engagement on the business unit level, altering the way engagement had been previously viewed. Harter et al's (2002) article was a catalyst for the rapid expansion of interest in the employee engagement construct since it was the first widely disseminated publication to suggest an employee engagement-profit linkage. The Corporate Leadership Council (2004) and Towers Perrin (2003) followed Harter et al. (2002) by disseminating consulting literature on employee engagement geared toward consulting products. These for-profit organizations remain huge international players in driving the profitability of the employee engagement construct, although none share a common conceptualization or definition.

The first academic research to specifically conceptualize and test antecedents and consequences of employee engagement occurred in 2005 (Saks, 2005). Prior to Saks (2005), practitioner literature was the only body of work connecting employee engagement drivers to employee engagement consequences. Saks provided an important bridge between previous theories of employee engagement, practitioner literature, and the academic community. Saks (2005) thought employee engagement was developed through a social exchange model and was the first to separate job engagement and organizational engagement into separate types of employee engagement. As a result, Saks (2005) defined employee engagement as "a distinct and unique construct consisting of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components . . . associated with individual role performance" (p. 602). This definition was inclusive of previous literature by introducing the idea that employee engagement was developed from cognitive (Kahn, 1990; Maslach et al., 2001), emotional (Harter et al., 2002; Kahn, 1990), and behavioral components (Harter et al., 2002; Maslach et al., 2001).

In 2006, The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) commissioned a publication on employee engagement and commitment as an extension of the *Effective Practice Guidelines Series*. This report was hailed as a "clear, concise, and usable format" (Vance, 2006, p. v) for understanding employee engagement, hoping to make the concept of employee engagement more accessible to SHRM members. Although topic headings such as *Key Ingredients*, *Job and Task Design*, and *Designing Engagement Initiatives* were peppered throughout the pages, this publication was not clear and concise, lacked a single definition of employee engagement, and offered few research-based solutions for those struggling with developing engaged employees. This publication is noteworthy, however, because it marked the entrance of professional societies into the employee engagement conversation.

Two years after the SHRM study, The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) commissioned a study in association with Dale Carnegie Training to look at employee engagement (Czarnowsky, 2008). This study focused on the role of learning in the employee engagement construct, marking the first major research publication by ASTD on employee engagement and the first look into the construct from a training perspective. Using data from 776 human resources and learning executives from around the world, ASTD defined engagement as "employees who are mentally and emotionally invested in their work and in contributing to their employer's success" (Czarnowsky, 2008, p.6). The results of the study showed connections to the foundational work of Kahn (1990) and Maslach et al. (2001) by creating meaningful work environments, providing opportunities for learning, and focusing on the experience of the

employee. Additionally, this study presented an important link to the academic community, since ASTD was the first professional society to use a research driven framework to understand employee engagement.

Building significantly on the work of multiple scholars, Macey and Schneider (2008) pioneered conceptual research in the area of employee engagement. Conceptualizing that employee engagement develops from (a) trait engagement, (b) state engagement, and (c) behavioral engagement (2008), they drew significant parallels from previous research and defined each as a separate engagement construct. From their perspective, employee engagement is defined by suggesting that "(a) job design attributes would directly affect trait engagement, (b) the presence of a transformational leader would directly effect state engagement, and (c) the presence of a transformational leader would directly affect trust levels and thus, indirectly affect behavioral engagement" (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p. 25). In this conceptual model, the preceding state of engagement would build on the next, each developing a piece of the overall employee engagement construct. This contribution to the field, which built significantly on the work of Saks (2005), helped to clear the cluttered, scattered, and unfocused conceptual state of employee engagement by breaking the engagement construct into distinct parts.

A Working Definition of Employee Engagement

As evidenced by the literature reviewed, several definitions of employee engagement exist. Although each represents unique perspectives of the time and field, the disjointed approach to defining employee engagement has lent itself to the mischaracterization of the construct and the potential for misinterpretation. This is especially challenging for the HRD field, a field that is often called on to develop interventions for the development of such a construct. Several definitions from both the practitioner and academic literature reviewed for this paper are listed below starting with the earliest specific definition and working forward in time.

- "Personal engagement is the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence, and active full role performances" (Kahn, 1990, p. 700).
- "A persistent, positive affective-motivational state of fulfillment in employees characterized by high levels of activation and pleasure" (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 417).
- "Employee engagement refers to the individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work" (Harter et al., 2002, p. 269).
- "A distinct and unique construct that consists of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components that are associated with individual role performance" (Saks, 2005, p. 602).
- "[Engaged] employees are mentally and emotionally invested in their work and in contributing to their employer's success" (Czarnowsky, 2008, p. 6).
- Trait engagement is defined as the "inclination or orientation to experience the world from a particular vantage point" (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p. 5). Psychological state engagement is defined as an antecedent to behavioral engagement (encompassing the constructs of satisfaction, involvement, commitment, and empowerment). Behavioral engagement is "define[d] in terms of discretionary effort" (p. 6).

In each of the definitions, several areas of consistency and inconsistency can be identified. First, being engaged is a personal decision; it concerns the individual employee, not the organization. Many definitions (Kahn, 1990; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2005) allude to this; however, Maslach et al. (2001) and Czarnowsky (2008) speak only of generalities, underscoring a primary misconception that employee engagement is about the organization. Employee engagement concerns the individual, not the masses. Second, in several of the

definitions, different types of engagement can be identified: (a) cognitive engagement, (b) emotional engagement, and (c) behavioral engagement—each as separate, definable areas, although a few of the definitions only mention one type of engagement (e.g., Harter et al., 2002; Czarnowsky, 2008). The idea from both the literature reviewed as well as the definitions themselves is that each type of engagement builds on the next, which is consistent with the employee engagement framework (Alderfer, 1972; Maslow, 1970).

Third, employee engagement has no physical properties, but is manifested and often measured behaviorally (Kahn, 1990; Macey & Schneider, 2008). Behavioral manifestation is understood inconsistently as an employee's role performance, an employer's success, or discretionary effort, but consistently understood as an internal decision manifested outwardly. Best conceptualized as a positive or forward moving emotive state (Maslow, 1970), employee engagement is rooted in the psychology of the employee and observed through behavior. Last, employee engagement is about adaptive behaviors purposefully focused on meeting or exceeding organizational outcomes. By synthesizing the definitions, we argue that employee engagement can be defined in an emergent and working condition as a positive cognitive, emotional, and behavioral state directed toward organizational outcomes

Conclusion

This historical perspective of employee engagement has uncovered areas of inconsistent definitions and interpretations. In addition to understanding how the concept has evolved, scholars and practitioners can benefit from an integrated understanding of the construct through the use of a working, emergent definition. Encompassing early and contemporary conceptualizations, this definition gives scholars and practitioners a pragmatic tool in the form of a common understanding as well as a clear definition. By using a clear definition synthesized through multiple conceptualizations in various fields of study, HRD practitioners may be more uniquely situated to develop the expertise to provide specific strategic interventions in their places of work.

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