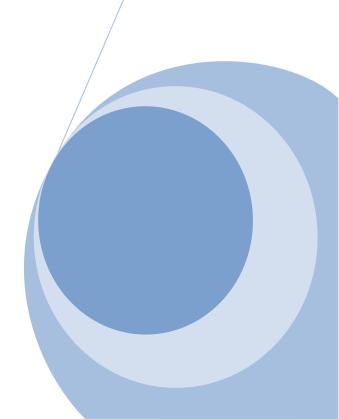# Employee Engagement – A Brief Review of Definitions, Theoretical Perspectives and Measures

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# 1. Literature Review – Perspectives on Engagement

Managers want to improve staff engagement because this tends to lead to staff performance, reduces staff turnover and improves the well-being of employees (Wright and Cropanzano, 2000; Taris et al., 2003; Griffith, 2004; Michie and West, 2004; Macey and Schneider, 2008; Robinson et al., 2004; Hakanen, 2008). Despite this fact, relatively little academic research has been conducted in employee engagement. The verb 'to engage' has a variety of meanings, ranging from straightforward and transactional (to hire someone to do a job), to exciting and mysterious (to fascinate and charm) (Robinson et al., 2004). According to Macey and Schneider (2008), measuring engagement is difficult as it involves assessing complex feelings and emotion. Engagement has been used to refer to a psychological state (e.g., involvement, commitment, attachment, mood), performance construct (e.g. either effort or observable behaviour, including pro-social and organisational citizenship behaviour), disposition (e.g. positive affect), or some combination of the above (Macey and Schneider, 2008). Over the years, researchers have measured employee engagement by using three different approaches, namely engagement as a description of conditions under which people work, engagement as a behavioural outcome, and engagement as a psychological presence. We briefly discuss each approach in turn.

Engagement can be described by the conditions under which people work (Macey and Schneider, 2008). In many cases, the definition of engagement is constructed based on in-depth interviews, consultations and other qualitative studies with employees (see Q12® developed by The Gallop organisation; Department of Health, 2008a; Department of Health 2008b; Robinsons et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2007). According to Macey and Schneider (2008), surveys that ask employees to describe their work conditions may be relevant for assessing the conditions that provide for engagement but do not directly tap engagement. They further argue that such measures require an inferential leap to engagement rather than assessing engagement itself.

Three major threads of research are relevant to this notion, when we think of engagement as behavioural outcome. These include role expansion and the related constructs of proactive

behaviour (Crant, 2000), personal initiative (Frese & Fay, 2001) and organisational citizen behaviour (OCB) and related variants (pro-social behaviour, contextual performance, and organisational spontaneity (Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). Early theoretical work on OCB emphasised the discretionary nature of certain behaviours that were regarded as essential to organisational success but not formally defined as part of the job and therefore not explicitly rewarded. More recently, conceptual problems have been discussed in the literature regarding limiting discretion to extra-role behaviours, and the working definition of OCB has been modified to include those behaviours that support or in some way enhance the social and psychological environment essential for individual task performance (Organ, 1997), a term more closely aligned with the meaning of contextual performance (Le Pine, Erez, & Johnson, 2002).

When we look at engagement as a psychological presence, it is worth mentioning Kahn (1992) who developed the concept. He argues that experiential state enables organisation members to draw deeply on their personal selves in role performances. Engagement in a role refers to one's psychological presence in or focuses on role activities and may be an important ingredient for effective role performance (Kahn, 1990, 1992). This includes the expression of thoughts and feelings, questioning, assumptions and innovating. He stated that employees are emotionally and cognitively engaged when they know what is expected of them, have what they need to do their work, have opportunities to feel an impact and fulfillment in their work, perceive that they are part of something significant with co-workers whom they trust, and have chances to improve and develop. For Khan (1990) role engagement has two critical components, attention and absorption in a role. Attention means being engrossed in a role and refers to the intensity of one's focus on a role (Goffman, 1961; Kahn, 1990). Attention and absorption differ in that attention devoted to a role may be thought of as an invisible, material resource that a person can allocate in multiple ways, whereas absorption implies intrinsic motivation in a role. Nonetheless, research on role conflict suggests that demands from one role create strain for the individual, which inhibits functioning in the other role (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985, Rothbard, 2001).

Over the last few decades researchers have conceptualised Khan's ideas regarding employee engagement. They have mainly used three scales, namely the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (MBI-GS), the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), and the Job Demand-

Resources (JD-R) model (Maslach, 1986, Maslach and Jackson, 1986 and 1993, Demerouti et al, 2001, and Schaufeli et al., 2002). Each measure is discussed in the paragraphs below.

The Maslach-Burnout Inventory-General Survey (MBI-GS) was developed following the Maslach-Burnout Inventory (MBI). The MBI model was initially developed to measure burnout of individuals who work with other people (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). The model was defined as a three-dimensional syndrome which included exhaustion, cynicism and (lack of) professional efficacy (Maslach and Jackson, 1986; Schaufeli et al., 2002 and Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Exhaustion measures fatigue without referring to other people as the source of one's tiredness. Cynicism reflects indifference or a distant attitude towards work in general, not necessarily with other people. Finally, professional efficacy encompasses both social and non-social aspects of occupational accomplishments.

Maslach and Leiter (1997) consider burnout and engagement to be the opposite poles of a continuum that is entirely covered by the MBI. Thus they consider energy, involvement, and efficacy the direct opposites of the three dimensions of burnout. In the view of Maslach and Leiter (1997) engagement is assessed by the opposite pattern of scores on the three MBI dimensions. Low scores on exhaustion and cynicism, and high scores on efficacy are indicative for engagement. It became clear that burnout can occur to individuals who do not work with other people. The MBI is therefore adopted for use outside human services and the new version was called MBI-GS (Schaufeli et al., 2006). The three dimensions of the MBI-GS parallel those of the original MBI (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Psychometric research with the MBI-GS using confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated that the three-factor structure is invariant across occupations such as clerical and maintenance employees, technical staff, nurses, and managers (Leiter and Schaufeli, 1996), software engineers and university staff (Taris et al., 1999), and blue collar and white collar workers (Schutte et al., 2000). In the latter study the factor-structure of the MBI-GS proved to be invariant cross-nationally across samples from Sweden, Finland, and The Netherlands (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

The second measure of engagement as a psychological presence is the 17-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), which was later shortened to 9 items (Schaufeli et al., 2006).

Schaufeli and his colleagues argue rather than a momentary and specific state, engagement refers to a more persistent and pervasive affective cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behaviour (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Burnout and engagement are opposite concepts, but that should be measured independently with different instruments. Engagement is a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Vigour is characterised by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence also in the face of difficulties. Dedication is characterised by a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Vigour and dedication are the direct positive opposites of exhaustion and cynicism, respectively. The third dimension of engagement is called absorption, which was found to be a constituting element of engagement in 30 in-depth interviews (Schaufeli et al., 2001). Absorption is characterised by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work. Based on a theoretical analysis, these researchers have identified underlying dimensions of work-related well-being: (1) activation, ranging from exhaustion to vigour, and (2) identification, ranging from cynicism to dedication. Burnout is characterised by a combination of exhaustion (low activation) and cynicism (low identification), whereas engagement is characterised by vigour (high activation) and dedication (high identification).

The third alternative to the operationalisation of burnout and engagement is the Job Demand-resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001, and Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The model indicates that job demands (i.e. physical demands, time pressure, shift work) are associated with exhaustion whereas lacking job resources (i.e. performance feedback, job control, participation in decision making, and social support) are associated with disengagement. Using this model a new German questionnaire – the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) – that includes both core dimensions of burnout (i.e. exhaustion and disengagement) that are conceptually similar to those of the MBI-GS (i.e. exhaustion and cynicism) was developed (Demerouti et al., 2001). Contrary to the MBI-GS, both OLBI-dimensions are measured by negatively phrased items as well as by positively phrased items.

## 2. Summary of Scales

### 2.1 Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (MBI-GS)

- Engagement is characterised by energy, involvement, and professional efficacy which are considered the direct opposites of the three burnout dimensions exhaustion, cynicism, and lack of professional efficacy, respectively (Maslach and Leiter, 1997).

- Engagement in the view of Maslach and Leiter (1997) is assessed by the opposite pattern of scores on the three MBI dimensions. Low scores on exhaustion and cynicism, and high scores on efficacy are indicative for engagement.

- Exhaustion, cynicism and decreased professional efficacy are opposites of vigour, dedication and increased professional efficacy.

### 2.2 Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES)

- Burnout and engagement are opposite concepts that should be measured independently with different instruments (Schaufeli and Salvanova, 2001).

- Engagement is defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2001).

- Engagement refers to a more persistent and pervasive affective cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behaviour (Schaufeli et al., 2001). Vigour is characterised by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence also in the face of difficulties. Dedication is characterised by a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge.

- Vigour and dedication are the direct positive opposites of exhaustion and cynicism, respectively.

- The third dimension of engagement is called absorption.

**2.3 Job Demand-Resources (JD-R) model**

- The model indicates that job demands (i.e. physical demands, time pressure, shift work) are associated with exhaustion whereas lacking job resources (i.e. performance feedback, job control, participation in decision making and social support are associated with disengagement (Demerouti et al, 2001).

- Although job demands are not necessarily negative, they may turn into job stressors when meeting those demands requires high effort and is therefore associated with high costs that elicit negative responses such as depression, anxiety, or burnout (Schaufeli et al, 2001).

# 3. Examples of Scales Used to Measure Engagement

## 3.1 Work and Well-Being Survey (UWES)

*The following 17 statements are about how you feel at work. Please read each statement carefully and decide if you ever feel this way about your job. If you have never had this feeling, cross the "0" (zero) in the space after the statement. If you have had this feeling, indicate how often you felt it by crossing the number (from 1 to 6) that best describes how frequently you feel that way.*

| *Never* | *Almost Never* | *Rarely* | *Sometimes* | *Often* | *Very Often* | *Always* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| *Never* | *A few times a year or less* | *Once a month or less* | *A few times a month* | *Once a week* | *A few times a week* | *Every day* |

1. At my work, I feel bursting with energy.[a] (VI1)
2. I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose. (DE1)
3. Time flies when I am working. (AB1)
4. At my job, I feel strong and vigorous.[a] (VI2)
5. I am enthusiastic about my job.a (DE2)
6. When I am working, I forget everything else around me. (AB2)
7. My job inspires me.[a] (DE3)
8. When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work.[a] (VI3)
9. I feel happy when I am working intensely.[a] (AB3)
10. I am proud of the work that I do.[a] (DE4)
11. I am immersed in my work.[a] (AB4)
12. I can continue working for very long periods at a time. (VI4)
13. To me, my job is challenging. (DE5)
14. I get carried away when I am working.[a] (AB5)
15. At my job, I am very resilient, mentally. (VI5)
16. It is difficult to detach myself from my job. (AB6)
17. At my work, I always persevere, even when things do not go well. (VI6)

Source: Schaufeli and Bakker (2003).
Note: VI = Vigor scale; DE = Dedication scale; AB = Absorption scale.
[a]. Shortened version (Utrecht Work Engagement Scale–9 [UWES-9]).

**3.2 Measuring Work Engagement (Rothbard, 2001)**

*Attention*
I spend a lot of time thinking about my work.
I focus a great deal of attention on my work.
I concentrate a lot on my work.
I pay a lot of attention to my work.

*Absorption*
When I am working, I often lose track of time.
I often get carried away by what I am working on.
When I am working, I am completely engrossed by my work.
When I am working, I am totally absorbed by it.
Nothing can distract me when I am working. (*)

**(Parallel Scale: Family Engagement)**

*Attention*
I spend a lot of time thinking about my family.
I focus a great deal of attention on my family.
I concentrate a lot on my family.
I pay a lot of attention to my family.

*Absorption*
When I am focused on my family, I often lose track of time.
I often get carried away by what I am doing in terms of the family.
When I am focusing on family, I am completely engrossed by it.
When I am engaged in family activities, I am totally wrapped up in them.
Nothing can distract me when I am taking care of my family. (*)

*(*) Reverse-coded*

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