



## Performance Management and Employee Engagement

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Performance management; Employee engagement; Talent management Personnel; Working conditions

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### ABSTRACT

*Many contemporary organizations are placing a greater emphasis on their performance management systems as a means of generating higher levels of job performance. We suggest that producing performance increments may be best achieved by orienting the performance management system to promote employee engagement. To this end, we describe a new approach to the performance management process that includes employee engagement and the key drivers of employee engagement at each stage. We present a model of engagement management that incorporates the main ideas of the paper and suggests a new perspective for thinking about how to foster and manage employee engagement to achieve high levels of job performance.*

### INTRODUCTION

Performance management is a critical aspect of organizational effectiveness (Cardy, 2004). Because it is the key process through which work is accomplished, it is considered the "Achilles Heel" of managing human capital (Pulakos, 2009) and should therefore be a top priority of managers (Lawler, 2008). However, less than a third of employees believe that their company's performance management process assists them in improving their performance, and performance management regularly ranks among the lowest topics in employee satisfaction surveys (Pulakos, 2009). Contemporary challenges facing organizations have led many of them to refocus attention on their performance management systems (Buchner, 2007) and explore ways to improve employee performance. In this paper, we argue that one important way to enhance the performance management process is to focus on fostering employee engagement as a driver of increased performance. To this end, we present a conceptually-grounded approach to the development of employee engagement and discuss elements of the performance management process that can promote its occurrence. We also present a model of engagement management that builds on prior work on performance management.

### A BROAD CONCEPTUALIZATION OF PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Although performance evaluation is at the heart of performance management (Cardy, 2004), the full process extends to all organizational policies, practices, and design features that interact to produce employee performance. This integrative perspective represents a configurational approach to strategic human resources management which argues that patterns of HR activities, as opposed to single activities, are necessary to achieve organizational objectives (Delery & Doty, 1996). As Armstrong (2000) notes, the performance management process offers an opportunity for the integration of all HR strategies. "Bundling" HR practices so that they complement and strengthen each other has been shown to be necessary for an organization's HR architecture to deliver desired performance (Pfeffer, 1998). As suggested by Verweire and Van Den Berghe (2004), performance management is valuable only if the various components of the system are aligned. Aligned bundles of HR practices create the mutually reinforcing conditions that generate desired outcomes (MacDuffie, 1995).

Although it is the ultimate objective of performance management, increased performance (both task and contextual; Borman & Motowild, 1993) can be considered a distal outcome of the process. More proximal outcomes include the cognitive, affective and conative outcomes that precede changes in performance. For example, Kuvaas (2007) found that the

relationship between developmental goal setting and feedback on the one hand, and self-reported performance on the other hand was mediated by intrinsic motivation. Kinicki, Prussia, Wu, and McKee-Ryan (2004) found that an employee's responses to feedback were mediated by a set of cognitive variables which, in turn, predicted performance. Norris-Watts and Levy (2004) found that the relationship between the feedback environment and organizational citizenship behavior (contextual performance) was partially mediated by affective commitment. Thus, managing performance effectively requires achieving intermediary outcomes that precede enhanced performance. As noted by Verweire and Van Den Berghe (2004), performance management involves creating motivation and commitment to achieve objectives. Producing these more proximal outcomes is a vital step in the performance management process.

One variable that has been receiving increasing attention as a key determinant of performance is employee engagement (Macey, Schneider, Barbera, & Young, 2009). For example, Mone and London (2010) suggest that designing the performance management process to foster employee engagement will lead to higher levels of performance. Along these lines, we argue that the performance management process will be enhanced by focusing on employee engagement as a proximal outcome and fundamental determinant of job performance.

Employee engagement is a relatively new concept (Macey & Schneider, 2008) and the factors that produce engagement may be different from those that produce more traditional employee outcomes such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Macey et al., 2009). Considerations of how to promote engagement as a desirable outcome of the performance management process thus represent a significant, but untested, development in the performance management literature (Sparrow, 2008). Additionally, building on the positive psychology movement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Lopez & Snyder, 2009), much contemporary organizational research adopts a positive approach to understanding organizational phenomena. Notable among these approaches are positive organizational behavior (Luthans, 2002a, b) and positive organizational scholarship (Cameron & Caza, 2004; Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). Linley, Joseph, Maltby, Harrington, and Wood (2009) note that employee engagement represents an application of this positive approach. Thus, consideration of how employee engagement contributes to performance management is a development in the performance management literature that is consistent with recent trends in the organizational sciences.

A focus on employee engagement in the performance management process may foster performance improve-

ment beyond that achievable through a conventional focus on performance itself. As noted by Banks and May (1999), the traditional approach to performance assessment is appropriate for stable jobs in which work processes are procedural and easily observable. However, contemporary jobs are much less static (Singh, 2008). Today the definition of a job and what represents good performance is more variable (Fletcher & Perry, 2001). Fletcher and Perry (2001) note that the multidimensional and dynamic nature of performance is captured by the evolution of concepts such as emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998) and the distinction between task and contextual performance (Borman & Motowilo, 1993). To this list we might effectively add the concepts of adaptability (Pulakos, Arad, Donovan, & Plamondon, 2000), creativity (Tierney & Farmer, 2002), and proactivity (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Grant & Ashford, 2008), which represent outcomes associated with behavioral engagement (Macey et al., 2009).

Because of the dynamic, multifaceted nature of modern jobs, in the contemporary work environment achieving increments in performance often involves less "management" of performance than "facilitation" of performance (Das, 2003), by creating the conditions for performance to improve. A comprehensive approach to performance improvement certainly requires control systems and the "management" of performance in order to, for example, coordinate cascading goals (Pulakos, 2009). However, the desired outputs of knowledge-based economies (i.e., creativity and personal initiative) are less amenable to control by supervisors. Changes in workplaces such as decentralization, enlarged spans of control, a lack of direct experience, and an increasing proportion of knowledge workers make it harder for superiors to manage the performance of others (Buchner, 2007; Fletcher & Perry, 2001). Pulakos, Mueller-Hanson, and O'Leary (2008) note that it is difficult to manage and set objectives for employees in economies dominated by knowledge- and service-intensive jobs because such work is more varied and subtle. Contemporary performance management processes must therefore also focus on the creation of conditions for the engagement of knowledge workers in order to facilitate the type of enhanced performance desired in advanced economies. Put another way, modern performance management is as much about managing the context in which performance occurs as it is about managing performance itself (Jones, 1995). This general idea was expressed over 30 years ago by Miller (1977) who suggested that improving the productivity of knowledge workers requires a focus on the environment in which work is completed.

Another reason to focus on "facilitating", instead of "managing" performance has to do with developments in performance management itself. Today, the focus of the performance management process is largely on results, as opposed to personality, behaviors, or competencies (Fletcher & Perry, 2001; Pulakos, 2009). Results can be obtained in numerous ways, as underscored by the notion of equifinality (Jennings, Rajaratnam, & Lawrence, 2003; von Bertalanfy, 1960). Thus, managing performance may be somewhat of a misnomer. Therefore, along these lines we present a model of "the performance context" that can promote employee engagement and enhanced performance. First, however, we explain the construct of employee engagement.

### EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Employee engagement has received a great deal of attention in the last five years, especially in the popular press and among consulting firms. It has often been touted as the key to an organization's success and competitiveness. Indeed, Schaufeli and Salanova (2007) claim that engagement is "essential" for contemporary organizations given the many challenges they face (p. 156) and Macey et al. (2009) argue that organizations can gain a competitive advantage through employee engagement. Numerous writers have sung the praises of engagement as a key driver of individual attitudes, behavior, and performance as well as organizational performance, productivity, retention, financial performance, and even shareholder return (Bates, 2004; Baumruk, 2004; Harter,

Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Richman, 2006). In fact, Macey et al. (2009) have shown that among a sample of 65 firms in different industries, the top 25% on an engagement index had a greater return on assets (ROA), profitability, and more than double the shareholder value compared to the bottom 25%. However, it has also been reported that employee engagement is on the decline and there is a deepening disengagement among employees today (Bates, 2004; Richman, 2006). For example, roughly half of all Americans in the workforce are not fully engaged or they are disengaged leading to what has been referred to as an "engagement gap" that is costing U.S. businesses \$300 billion a year in lost productivity (Bates, 2004; Johnson, 2004; Kowalski, 2003).

Given the importance of employee engagement to organizations, combined with the deepening disengagement among workers today, a key issue is how to promote the engagement of employees. As noted by May, Gilson, and Harter (2004), "Engagement is important for managers to cultivate given that disengagement, or alienation, is central to the problem of workers' lack of commitment and motivation" (p.13).

However, controversy exists regarding the definition of employee engagement. Macey and Schneider (2008) note that there are numerous definitions of the construct, but that they all agree that employee engagement is desirable, has an organizational purpose, and has both psychological and behavioral facets in that it involves energy, enthusiasm, and focused effort. Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes (2002) define employee engagement as "the individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work" (p. 269).

Leiter and Maslach (1998) view engagement as the opposite pole of burnout. They define engagement as "an energetic experience of involvement with personally fulfilling activities that enhance a staff member's sense of professional efficacy" (Leiter & Maslach, 1998, p. 351) and consider it to be comprised of energy, involvement and efficacy (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, and Bakker (2002) also view engagement as the conceptual opposite of burnout but view these constructs as independent states with dissimilar structures that must be measured with different instruments. They regard engagement as "a positive fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (p. 74). Rothbard (2001) similarly regards absorption as a critical component of engagement (the other component being attention). Schaufeli and Salanova (2007) note that being fully absorbed in a role comes close to what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls "flow." They suggest that the distinction lies in the fact that whereas engagement is a persistent work state, flow is a more complex concept that involves momentary peak experiences that can occur outside of work.

Schaufeli and Salanova (2007) suggest that engaged employees are energetically and effectively connected to their work. This can occur through the investment of one's "self" in work activities. In his work on personal engagement Kahn (1990) suggested that engagement involves "the harnessing of organizational members' selves to their work roles; in engagement people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (p. 694). By contrast, disengagement involves an extrication of organizational members' selves from their work roles. "In disengagement, people withdraw and defend themselves physically, cognitively, or emotionally during role performances" (Kahn, 1990). Kahn (1990) further notes that,

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 (physical, cognitive, and emotional), and active, full role performances (p.700).

Engagement involves high levels of energy and identification with one's work, in contradistinction to burnout which in-

volves low levels of both (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007). When engaged people become physically involved in their tasks, cognitively alert, and ardently connected to others in ways that demonstrate their individuality (e.g., thoughts, feelings, values, etc.). Engagement allows people to simultaneously express their preferred selves and completely satisfy their role requirements (Kahn, 1990).

More generally, engagement means to be psychologically present when occupying and performing an organizational role (Kahn, 1990, 1992). When people are psychologically present they feel and are attentive, connected, integrated, and focused in their role performances (Kahn, 1992). People vary in the extent to which they draw on themselves in the performance of their roles or what Kahn (1990) refers to as "self-in-role." Thus, when people are engaged they keep their selves within the role they are performing.

However, both the concept of employee engagement and research on it has been subject to criticism. For example, it has been suggested that there may be substantial overlap and redundancy between engagement and other constructs such as job satisfaction (Newman & Harrison, 2008; Wefald & Downey, 2009). However, there is overlap among many constructs in the organizational sciences. For example, meta-analysis of the association between job satisfaction and affective commitment reveals a correlation of .65 (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnysky, 2002). Such levels of association still leave room for differential relationships with other outcome variables of interest and can add to our understanding of organizational phenomena. Nonetheless, as a relatively new construct, more work establishing the validity, differential antecedents and differential outcomes associated with engagement is warranted.

As suggested by the descriptions above, employee engagement has also been criticized for lacking a consistent definition and measurement (Masson, Royal, Agnew, & Fine, 2008). Mone and London (2010) define and measure employee engagement using an amalgam of six distinct constructs. A recently published paper defined and measured employee engagement as satisfaction, commitment and discretionary effort (Fine, Horowitz, Weigler, & Basis, 2010). Advances in understanding employee engagement will be difficult if not impossible to achieve until a consensus is reached on a definition and measurement of the construct. The present paper builds on the definition of engagement advanced by Kahn (1990) in the first published work on the topic. This definition has been used in organizational research consistently since its introduction.

Additionally, research on employee engagement has been criticized for treating engagement almost exclusively as a static trait (Dalal, Brummel, Wee, & Thomas, 2008). This is a valid point given that Kahn (1990) discussed engagement as a state-like phenomenon in which people adjust their selves-in-role in response to the ebbs and flows of daily work. However, some recent research does treat engagement as a state-like phenomenon (e.g., Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009a). We conceptualize engagement as state-like with corresponding behavioral expressions as noted below. In our model, levels of employee engagement are assumed to change in response to the degree to which the various elements in the performance management process are designed to promote its occurrence.

An important distinction when defining engagement is whether it is a state or behavior. Although some consider engagement to be a state (Schaufeli et al., 2002), others have described it as consisting of a psychological state that has behavioral manifestations. For example, according to Kahn (1992), the state of engagement which he refers to as psychological presence consists of four dimensions (attentiveness, connected, integrated, and focused), is manifested in terms of physical, cognitive, and emotional behaviors or what he calls personal engagement. In his model, personal engagement leads to performance outcomes. More recently,

Macey et al. (2009) distinguished engagement in terms of employee engagement feelings which consist of feelings of urgency, focus, intensity, and enthusiasm and employee engagement behaviors which consist of persistence, proactivity, role expansion, and adaptability. Macey et al. (2009) also proposed a model of the employee engagement value chain in which engagement feelings lead to engagement behaviors and engagement behaviors lead to performance outcomes.

Thus, both the Kahn (1992) and Macey et al. (2009) models suggest that 1) employee engagement has a state and behavioral dimension, 2) the state of engagement precedes and leads to engagement behaviors, and 3) engagement behaviors are directly related to performance outcomes. These distinctions and linkages are important for understanding how to develop and manage employee engagement which we consider in the next section.

## ENHANCING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Several models and theories have been developed in the literature that provides a framework for how to enhance employee engagement. For example, based on his ethnographic study, Kahn (1990) suggested that three psychological conditions serve as antecedents of personal engagement: Psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability.

Psychological meaningfulness refers to one's belief regarding how meaningful it is to bring oneself to a role performance. It is associated with incentives to engage and the perception that one is receiving a return on investment of one's "self-in-role." Psychological meaningfulness is achieved when people feel worthwhile, valuable, and that they matter. The three factors that Kahn (1990) found influenced meaningfulness were task characteristics, role characteristics and work interactions.

Psychological safety involves one's perception of how safe it is to bring oneself to a role performance without fear of damage to self-image, status or career. It is associated with reliable, predictable social environments that have clear boundaries of acceptable conduct in which people feel safe to risk self-expression. Kahn (1990) found that the four factors that impacted psychological safety were interpersonal relationships, group and intergroup dynamics, management style, and norms.

Psychological availability pertains to one's perception of how available one is to bring oneself into a role. It is associated with the physical, emotional and psychological resources people can bring to their role performances. Kahn (1990) suggested that four distractions affected psychological availability: depletion of physical energy, depletion of emotional energy, insecurity, and outside lives.

May, Gilson, and Harter (2004) operationalized Kahn's psychological states and developed a scale to assess the expression of oneself physically, cognitively, and emotionally in one's work role. Schaufeli and Salanova (2007) note that these three dimensions are similar to the dimensions of vigor, dedication and absorption noted earlier. May et al. (2004) also investigated Kahn's (1990) three psychological conditions of engagement. In support of Kahn's (1990) theory, they found that meaningfulness, safety, and availability were significantly related to engagement. They also found that job enrichment and role fit were positive predictors of meaningfulness; rewarding co-worker and supportive supervisor relations were positive predictors of safety while adherence to co-worker norms and self-consciousness were negative predictors; and resources available was a positive predictor of psychological availability while participation in outside activities was a negative predictor.

A more recent approach to enhancing employee engagement is the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model. According to the JD-R model, the work environment can be divided into demands and resources. Job demands refer to physical,

psychological, social, or organizational features of a job that require sustained physical and/or psychological effort from an employee that can result in physiological and/or psychological costs. Common job demands, which initiate a health-impairment process, include work overload, job insecurity, role ambiguity, and role conflict. Job resources refer to physical, psychological, social, or organizational features of a job that are functional in that they help achieve work goals, reduce job demands, and stimulate personal growth, learning, and development. Job resources, which initiate a motivational process, can come from the organization (e.g., pay, career opportunities, and job security), interpersonal and social relations (supervisor and co-worker support, and team climate), the organization of work (e.g., role clarity and participation in decision making), and from the task itself (e.g., skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and performance feedback) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The basic premise of the JD-R model is that high job demands exhaust employees' physical and mental resources and lead to a depletion of energy and health problems. Job resources are motivational and can lead to positive attitudes, behavior, and well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The motivational potential of job resources can be intrinsic because they facilitate growth, learning, and development, or extrinsic because they are instrumental for achieving work goals (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Job resources are also important because they help individuals cope with job demands and have been found to buffer the effect of job demands on job strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2008).

Research on the JD-R model has found that job demands are related to burnout and health problems while job resources predict work engagement, extra-role performance, and organizational commitment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). An integration of the ideas regarding the psychological and resource antecedents of engagement suggests that the performance management process should provide employees with resources that will promote engagement by fostering the psychological conditions that precede it.

Given that various factors in the work environment have been shown to be related to employee engagement, how can organizations actually enhance employee engagement? Current approaches for driving employee engagement involve the use of an employee engagement survey to assess and benchmark engagement levels in an organization and to measure various work environment conditions that might be related to engagement (Macey et al., 2009). The results are then used to identify interventions to improve engagement levels in the organization. Engagement surveys have received considerable attention among consulting firms and in the popular press which typically report the percentages of employees who are engaged to various degrees as well as relationships between engagement and organizational performance outcomes (Klie, 2007).

However, although engagement surveys are useful for benchmarking employee engagement levels in organizations, the use of an engagement survey for the management of employee engagement has a number of limitations. First, it relies on employees' self-reports of their levels of engagement and there is ample evidence in the literature of a self-serving bias when employees report their own behavior such as performance and absenteeism (Johns, 1994). Second, the potential drivers of engagement or those work conditions that might be related to employee engagement might not be important for all employees. In other words, the best approach for improving employee engagement might depend on each employee rather than aggregate levels of various working conditions. For example, providing additional supervisor support is not likely to improve the engagement of employees who already perceive a sufficient level of support or for those who are more concerned about other aspects of their job. Third, modifications to various drivers of engagement are not likely to have a strong and lasting effect on engagement levels unless such changes are integrated with other

parts of the organization and HR system. In other words, to be effective there needs to be a series of well-integrated and connected practices and programs that focus on developing and measuring employee engagement. Fourth, the use of engagement surveys is an organizational-level approach and does not enable an organization to develop or monitor the engagement of individuals or hold them accountable for their engagement.

Finally, engagement surveys are best suited for measuring employee engagement feelings or state engagement. However, as already indicated, it is behavioral engagement that leads directly to job performance. Therefore, we argue that a more effective and integrated approach for enhancing and managing employee engagement is to manage engagement the same way that job performance is managed. This is all the more important to the extent that employee engagement behavior is an antecedent of job performance. Along these lines, in the following sections we discuss how to integrate employee engagement into the performance management process.

## CONCLUSION

Buchner (2007) suggests that contemporary economic challenges have led organizations to try to improve results by increasing their attention on performance management. However, as outlined in this paper, achieving the distal outcome of enhanced performance through the performance management process may be best achieved by targeting the more proximal outcome of employee engagement.

Mone and London (2010) suggest that "performance management, effectively applied, will help you to create and sustain high levels of employee engagement, which leads to higher levels of performance" (p. 227). Our intention in this paper has been to present a model of the effective application of performance management processes that may foster employee engagement and produce high levels of performance. There currently exists very little conceptual and empirical work on how the performance management process can enhance performance by fostering employee engagement. This paper thus represents a significant new development in the performance management literature. It also represents a significant development in the literature on engagement by presenting a coherent model and process for promoting the engagement of employees that goes beyond the use of engagement surveys that focus on aggregate levels of psychological engagement as self-reported by employees.

The ideas presented here, including those pertaining to the engagement management model, warrant empirical attention. Research on how well each of the ideas discussed in this paper fosters engagement and performance is needed in order for organizations to best structure their performance management systems to drive higher levels of performance. Additionally, research on the interactive effects of these elements would shed light on which ones are most potent, for which employees, and under which circumstances. It would also be encouraging if application of these ideas resulted in employees being more satisfied with their organizations' performance management processes, and if this promoted other outcomes such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment. We await future studies that explore the linkages in our model and on the relationship between employee engagement and job performance. In the meantime, we believe that organizations that hope to achieve a competitive advantage through employee engagement will be most successful by incorporating and including employee engagement in the performance management process.

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