The Future of Engagement: Thought Piece Collection

The future of research in employee engagement

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In this thought piece, Katie explores the differences in the way that academics and practitioners conceptualise and approach engagement – differences that do not seem to be lessening over time. She poses seven key areas that are ripe for future engagement research, starting with the fundamental question, 'what is engagement?'. Employee engagement is a fascinating area for both quantitative and qualitative research, and it will be interesting to see if there will be greater convergence between academics and practitioners in the future.

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Research on engagement: The background

As recently as 2006, when we were first commissioned by the CIPD to undertake research on employee engagement levels in the UK (Truss et al, 2006), we could not find any evidence of other substantive research studies being undertaken on the topic in Business Schools in the UK. At the time, all the major research on engagement was being conducted in the USA or the Netherlands, with the Utrecht Group, led by Professor Wilmar Schaufeli, being the most prominent in the field. Furthermore, the bulk of the research was not being carried out by management or HRM academics (with the important exception of Dr Brad Shuck of Louisville University and his colleagues), but rather by psychologists.

Engagement as a topic area grew out of the 'positive psychology' movement which, in turn, emerged from a growing disenchantment with the 'deficit model' of psychology and its focus on illness and psychopathy in the clinical psychology field, and issues such as stress and burnout in occupational psychology. Calls for a shift towards a more strengths-based approach that would enable a better understanding of how to lead a flourishing life and achieve high levels of work performance led to the emergence of a more positive focus (Youssef-Morgan and Bockorny, 2013).

William Kahn has widely been regarded as the 'founding father' of the field with his extensively-cited paper on personal engagement published in the *Academy of Management Journal* in 1990. Kahn saw engagement as arising when 'people bring in ... their personal selves during work-role performances' (p. 702) in terms of their cognitive, emotional and physical expression, and argued that disengagement involved the 'uncoupling' of people's authentic selves from their work experiences. Thus, engagement is associated with the 'needs-satisfying' approach to motivation.

Other researchers have viewed engagement differently, for instance, as the opposite of burnout; as an extension of work satisfaction; or in a multi-dimensional framework in terms of the locus of engagement (Shuck, 2011). A wide range of different scales have been developed to measure engagement (Fletcher and Robinson, 2013) and confusion remains over what, exactly, engagement is. Christian et al (2011, pp. 89-90) conclude: 'engagement research has been plagued by inconsistent construct definitions and operationalizations'.

Practitioners and those concerned with managing engagement in organisational settings have approached the whole engagement question from a very different angle. MacLeod and Clarke (2009) famously uncovered at least 50 different definitions of engagement whilst researching for their report, *Engaging for Success*. Their chosen definition was that engagement is 'a workplace approach designed to ensure that employees are committed to their organisation's goals and values, motivated to contribute to organisational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well-being' (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009, p. 9). Thus, from this perspective, engagement is an approach taken by organisations to managing their workforce, rather than a psychological state experienced by employees in the performance of their work; 'doing' engagement, rather than 'being' engaged (Truss et al, 2012).

These differing perspectives sadly mean that, often, academics and practitioners have not been involved in a meaningful dialogue about engagement. Generalising to make a point, academics have been wary of practitioners' focus on engagement strategies and actions and perceived lack of interest in theory,

definitions, and countervailing arguments, whilst practitioners have tended to regard academics' emphasis on precise definitions and the intricacies of complex attitudinal measures as less relevant than the question of what can be done, in practice, to foster high levels of engagement. These diverse viewpoints gave rise to some lively discussions during the recent seminar series funded by the Economic and Social Research Council that brought academics and practitioners together to debate the topic.[1]

Where next for engagement research?

But now that these views have been aired and explored, where next for research on engagement? What are the critical research gaps that we are likely to see addressed over coming years, and what are the key questions that researchers are likely to face? Drawing on the contributions to both our recently-published book *Employee Engagement in Theory and Practice* (Truss et al, 2013a) and the special issue of the *International Journal of HRM* (Truss et al, 2013), at least seven overarching questions can be identified. It is likely that these questions will be explored using a greater range of methodologies and approaches, including longitudinal study designs, multi-level datasets, mixed methods, and discourse and conversational analysis, and this methodological plurality will undoubtedly enrich and diversify the field.

What is engagement?

Since there is no current agreed definition or measure of engagement, researchers are likely to continue to address this question for years to come. The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, or UWES (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003) is now well-established as the most widely-used academic measure of engagement around the world, and will certainly continue to be adopted in many studies of engagement. However, the UWES is built around a particular understanding of what engagement means, *ie* that it comprises three states: vigour, dedication and absorption. Other current measures, such as the intellectual-social-affective engagement scale (ISA; Soane et al, 2012) and the scales used by researchers such as Rich et al (2010) are predicated on slightly different assumptions about engagement's constituent states (Fletcher and Robinson, 2013). As the field grows, and more research is conducted within the business/HRM fields, alternate ways of conceptualising engagement are likely to emerge that start to bring together the concerns of practitioners with those of psychologists. These are likely to include further studies that explore whether the locus of engagement is, in fact, the work we do, or whether it is the organisations that employ us (Reissner and Pagan, 2013).

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[1] (http://www.kent.ac.uk/kbs/ecg/news-events/esrc-general.html). The debates are explored further in the book *Employee Engagement in Theory and Practice* (Truss et al, 2013a) and the special issue of the *International Journal of HRM* (Truss et al, 2013b) linked to the series.

What is the link between engagement and human resource management (HRM)/human resource development (HRD)?

Up until recently, there had been very little research linking concerns within the HRM or HRD fields with engagement (Shuck and Rocco, 2013). This area is therefore both very promising and significant for the development of research on engagement (Sparrow, 2013). For example, we know very little about how engagement relates to collectivist forms of representation (Townsend et al, 2013; Arrowsmith and Parker, 2013). Engagement is normally positioned at the individualist end of the employment relationship spectrum and so understanding how this relates to more established, collectivist forms is likely to receive some further attention from scholars. Other areas of interest to be explored include how opportunities for personal development affect levels of engagement; the association between high-performance work practices and other forms of HRM with engagement (Alfes et al, 2012; 2013); and 'soft' versus 'hard' approaches to HRM and engagement (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2013).

How can employee engagement workplace strategies be evaluated?

As interest in engagement grows amongst HRM scholars, there are likely to be more studies that focus on a question of central interest to engagement practitioners: what engagement strategies are most effective, and why? Several papers in our special issue of the *International Journal of HRM* focus on just this question using a variety of methodologies (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2013; Arrowsmith and Parker, 2013; Francis et al, 2013; Reissner and Pagan, 2013), and reveal the complexity and ambiguity of major organisational engagement programmes from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders.

How is engagement related to its wider internal and external context?

As most research on engagement to date has been conducted within the psychological paradigm, the focus of interest has been on the link between various psychological states, or between engagement and processes such as leadership, perceived supervisory support, or job design. However, there is now an emergent interest from a more sociological angle in engagement as it relates to organisational culture, structure, and power relations, as well as broader societal concerns, such as the current economic crisis (Arrowsmith and Parker, 2013; Francis et al, 2013) and cross-national differences (Kelliher et al, 2013; Rothmann et al, 2013). There are many interesting questions in this area that remain unexplored, and this is likely to be a fruitful avenue of enquiry.

How does engagement 'work' at the group or team level?

Given the wealth of psychological studies, we now know a great deal about how engagement is experienced at the level of the individual. However, little is known about engagement at the level of the group or team. For example, is engagement 'contagious' within groups and, if so, how does this work, and how can this be addressed by organisations? There is significant scope for further research in this area, building on the notion of the 'relational context' identified by Kahn and Heaphy (2013).

How does engagement interact with diversity?

Within the literature on engagement there has been some limited attention to issues such as work-life balance and the potential for engagement to lead to excessive working hours, but there has been a general tendency to date to assume a diversity-neutral stance within engagement, *ie* issues of gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, and class have very rarely been discussed. There is clear and important potential for further research that explores these issues. Purcell (2013) notes that, 'since engagement is associated with the notion of exceptional personal investment in work, it will inevitably remain a minority activity'. What are the implications of this from a diversity perspective?

How engagement is understood within the context of critical management studies?

Critical approaches have a rich history within the HRM literature, and pose a series of challenges to the notion that engagement is unproblematically positive. For instance, it has been argued that engagement has unitarist underpinnings that do not take account of other, more pluralistic perspectives on power and organisational functioning, and risks relegating workers to a passive, reactive role (Keenoy, 2013; Purcell, 2013). Engagement can also constitute the acceptable veneer within the current economic climate for a set of practices aimed at work intensification and the undermining of workers' rights (Keenoy, 2013; Purcell, 2013). As yet, there has been little research conducted within this more critical paradigm that could challenge the notion of engagement as mutually beneficial for employees and employers.

Conclusions

In summary, this is an era rich in potential for scholarship and research on engagement. A considerable body of knowledge has been accumulated over the past two decades on engagement and, of course, for many decades prior to that on related topics within the management sphere such as employee voice and strategic human resource management. In this article, I have identified seven questions that seem ripe for further research, but others will undoubtedly add to these with further important areas for exploration. We are already witnessing a significant surge in interest in researching engagement amongst business school scholars, and the fruits of these studies are likely to be published over the next few years, adding substantially to our knowledge of this fascinating yet challenging topic.

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This paper forms one in a collection of thought pieces by the Engage for Success special interest group on 'The future of employee engagement'. A white paper on the same theme is being published separately. The full collection is available (as will be the white paper) at: **www.engageforsuccess.org/futures**