

Work Engagement: Ironing Out the Details

March 12, 2014



Disaffected workers are so common in television and movies that they've become something of an archetype. Almost every show about working life includes at least one member of the team who would, quite frankly, rather be doing something else. The fact that audiences empathize — or identify — with these characters so much seems to suggest that disengagement is widespread.

This problem hasn't been lost on the business community — or on psychologists. The field of engagement study is still relatively new, but over the past decade, research on the topic has increased exponentially. In 2011, APS Fellow Arnold A. Bakker, Simon L. Albrecht, and Michael P. Leiter published the article “Key Questions Regarding Work Engagement” in the [*European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*](#) in an effort to summarize the research on engagement and lay out an agenda for further research and practice.

The authors claim that the field is plagued by a profusion of disconnected models and methods, and that advancing our knowledge of engagement now depends on finding common ground. For instance, some conceptualizations of engagement differ from each other — where one sees absorption as a component of engagement, another might see it as a corollary — but researchers can agree that engagement comprises, at the very least, work-related energy and dedication. Settling issues like this one will allow psychologists to pursue several new lines of investigation.

For example, although engagement is usually thought of only in a positive sense, Bakker, Albrecht, and Leiter cite substantial evidence that it has a dark side as well. The high arousal of engaged workers can turn into strain, which can lead to burnout, and absorption can become “workaholism” over time. Likewise, overly high levels of optimism and positivity can lead to persistence on futile tasks, weak information processing, and poor attention to detail.

Another facet of engagement that has begun to be recognized is its dynamic nature. Levels of

engagement can fluctuate significantly, even over the course of a day. In fact, diary studies have shown that up to 40% of the variance in engagement occurs at the individual level. By shifting from between-person to within-person approaches, researchers have begun to uncover short-term triggers of engagement, such as social support, and how fluctuations in engagement relate to performance.

Unfortunately, many questions that could inform interventions for engagement remain unanswered — for instance, what effect can workers have on their own engagement? There is some evidence that engaged employees cultivate their engagement, but more work is needed to determine their strategies: Do they actively seek out feedback and professional training? Do they surround themselves with positive coworkers? Do they purposely increase their job demands to make their work more challenging — and, therefore, more engaging?

Engagement research is at a critical point. By consolidating what we know, reaching consensus, and identifying and refining validated measures, research on engagement can proceed from a firm foundation. Well-established theories and practices will make for better science and better interventions — giving us a better shot at restricting disengagement to prime-time plotlines.

Reference

Bakker, A. B., Albrecht, S. L., & Leiter, M. P. (2011). Key questions regarding work engagement. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 20(1), 4–28.