

From employee engagement to the employee experience

Current state of play

Employee engagement is complex and touches upon almost all known parts of human resource management. There's no single definition but most scholars agree that engaged employees typically have high levels of energy and identify strongly with their work.

Studies have shown links between engagement and organisational performance outcomes including employee retention, productivity, profitability customer loyalty and safety (Markos & Sridevi, 2010). Much research has also explored drivers of employee engagement that, if present, can enhance it, with one such study (Bakker, 2008) concluding that it is best predicted by job (e.g. autonomy, supervisory coaching, performance feedback) and personal resources (e.g., optimism, self-efficacy, self-esteem).

While engagement is undoubtedly critical to organisational success, many organisations still struggle to translate high levels of employee motivation into better individual, team and organisational performance. This naturally provokes debate around engagement as the sole behavioural predictor of organisational performance.

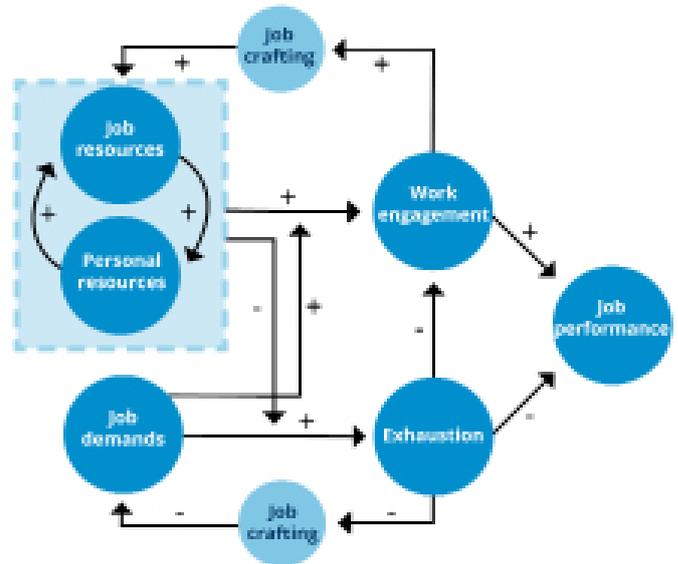
We've looked at the people-performance relationship as a multi-faceted one that can't be explained through motivation and vigour. Moreover, we've considered the evolution needed from understanding employees through engagement to a more holistic appreciation of their overall 'experience', as a more effective means of improving workplace performance.

A model of work engagement

The Job Demands Resources Model of Work Engagement (JDR Model, Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) is commonly used to explain the mechanics of workplace engagement. It describes the relationship between the job demands, be they physical, cognitive or emotional, and resources that help an employee to achieve work goals. The balance between the two determines both the motivation felt (engagement) and strain experienced (burnout) by an employee. As a result, this relationship directly impacts work performance.

The JDR model provides further detail as to what influences motivation and job-strain. For example, low autonomy (a resource) paired with a challenging work environment and

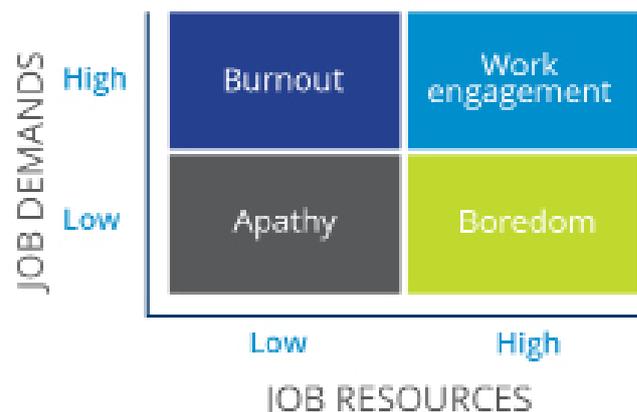
Below: Mechanics of the JDR model



heavy workload (job demands) can cause low motivation, high strain, and thus poor performance. However, increased autonomy gives a drastically different outcome. In addition to autonomy, resources including a supportive and trusting work environment, goal and role clarity, and opportunities for professional development have also been found to decrease job-strain, increase motivation, and ultimately improve performance.

Lastly, job crafting denotes a conscious and independent effort by an individual to modify aspects of their jobs to improve the fit between the job and their own needs, abilities, and preferences. This becomes a negative when an individual experiences a higher state of job strain, thus job crafting becomes a reactive task in an attempt to overcome current hurdles.

Below: Breakdown of behavioural outcomes depending on the balance between job demands and job resources



Building on the JDR model

This model's main premise is that work engagement requires the balancing of available job resources and demands. However, recent research suggests that a clear distinctiveness exists between types of job resources and their relationship to distinct behavioural outcomes, rather than solely engagement. One such paper (Permana et al, 2015), concludes additional elements of enablement and empowerment, alongside engagement, provides a more sustainable framework for 'employee excellence'. Feeding into these behavioural indicators of performance are different job resources (see image 3).

- Alignment of value and interest
- Trust in leadership
- Fit with job
- Fit with organisation
- Job satisfaction
- Opportunity for personal growth
- Passion
- Psychological capital
- Reward/recognition
- Vision
- Work accomplishment
- Adequacy of work equipment and supplies
- Clear direction
- Effective work processes
- Infrastructure for data sharing
- Job design
- Opportunity for learning and sharing
- Supportive work environment



- Clear roles and responsibilities
- Psychological capital
- Superior's willingness to delegate
- Transformational leadership

Image 3 above: Breakdown of behavioural outcomes depending on the balance between job demands and job resources

The definitions given for each behavioural outcome are:

Engagement

'The intensity of employees' emotional connection (i.e. attachment) they feel for their organisation, which influences them to exert greater discretionary effort (i.e. extra effort) committed to achieving their work goals'.

In other words, it is about what is in one's heart (e.g. willingness)

Enablement

'The extent to which employees feel that they are provided with what they need to do their jobs well, while working in an environment that allows them to perform to their greatest ability'.

In other words, it is about what is provided in one's surrounding

Empowerment

'The extent to which employees feel they are provided with problem-solving and decision-making authority to do their job, while working in an environment that allows them to speak-up and suggest better ways of doing things'.

In other words, it is about what is entrusted to one's capability

Another important distinction this model makes is specific behavioural states experienced when there is disparity between engagement, enablement and empowerment. These are labelled as Disengaged, Powerless or Disabled stars. For example, employees who are both engaged and enabled but aren't authorised to take responsibility can become Powerless stars.

This model therefore recognises that, while engagement can be high due to employee commitment to the organisational vision or perceptions of an exciting career path, for example, a lack of entrustment would prevent this from translating into high performance. In practical terms, failure to see this bigger picture could be undermining many organisations' efforts to drive high performance where levels of engagement are high.



The result: employee experience at ETS

Introducing the 'EX³' model

We've used our understanding of the foundations of workplace engagement, coupled with the more recent focus of deconstructing the behavioural drivers of workplace performance as the basis for creating our own ETS model of Employee Experience ('EX³'). Image 4 below outlines the model's framework.

Core mechanisms

The EX³ model focuses on understanding an employee's overall 'experience' – a collective assessment of perceived workplace engagement, as well as enablement and empowerment. By coupling a strong sense of engagement with an enabling and empowering infrastructure, a committed employee who is willing to apply discretionary effort will feel fully able to do so and thus reach greater levels of individual performance. In other words, the overall employee experience is a positive one. Conversely, any prolonged absence of resources increases the risk of job strain and an employee will eventually succumb to burnout.

It is important to note that engagement, enablement and empowerment are regarded as three distinct but inter-related components of employee experience, each influenced by a broadly different set of job resources. To elaborate on this:

- Engagement, enablement and empowerment can vary between organisations and from person to person. Their distinctiveness means one can perceive high enablement (e.g. the right tools) but poor empowerment (e.g. constantly waiting for managerial approval). In this scenario, improving empowerment through removing unnecessary managerial approval

may not only create a rise in individual empowerment, but also enablement as the employee's perception of their ability to complete a job improves. So, while impacted by differing job resources, changing one can influence another too.

- Job resources are recognised as predicting one of three components, but they shouldn't be regarded as mutually exclusive. Rather, in practice, some may extend beyond impacting solely the component it is mapped to. For example, development opportunities is regarded as predictive of engagement, but it may also contribute to empowerment if, for example, an employee is prevented from making decisions due to their lower ranking in the organisational hierarchy.

Practical Applications

A major strength of the EX³ model is the ease at which its components can be brought to life in real-world settings. This section provides practical accounts of the model.

Frustration

High engagement & empowerment, low enablement

If an employee is highly engaged but lacks necessary resources to complete their job, they are more likely to experience frustration from having their motivation to work hard and reach their goals scuppered. Failure to overcome these barriers can lead to decreased effort, weariness and sometimes, attrition. This is a support issue and the responsibility lies with the organisation to recognise and respond to employees' needs.

Distrusted

High engagement & enablement, low empowerment

Equally, consider an employee committed to achieving their goals, who has an understanding of how to do so but who hasn't been given authority to suggest how this should be achieved. This can lead to the employee feeling distrusted and unappreciated. 'Goal Setting Theory' (Locke



Image 4 above: EX³: optimising employee experience framework

& Latham, 2006) describes when employees are involved in setting their own goals or can contribute to defining organisational targets, they experience higher levels of motivation which improves performance and increases commitment to the goals.

Detached

High empowerment & enablement, low engagement

Employees who are enabled and empowered but are detached from the organisation (thus disengaged), won't put in discretionary effort or strive to perform to the best of their ability. Reasons for detachment can include doubts in the company vision/leadership, disgruntlement at reward or career development, or belief that the organisation does not connect with one's core beliefs or values.

Auto-engagement

Auto-engagement is a phenomenon more likely to exist in organisations with an exciting brand or product, or where the work is highly stimulating/fulfilling. In such contexts, employees often exude engagement and pride in the organisation. Where this happens, the manager's role may be subtly different in that efforts should instead be focussed on channelling engagement (e.g. the extra effort). Managers can achieve this, and in turn drive higher performance through creating the right conditions for their team to be successful, or in other words, by enabling and empowering employees. Auto-engagement could also partly explain why some organisations who experience high engagement fail to see a correlation with performance outcomes. Just because an employee is willing to apply extra effort, it doesn't mean they are able to if the organisational infrastructure prohibits them.

Job crafting

The EX³ model advocates 'Job Crafting' as introduced earlier. Negative job crafting arises when an engaged employee reactively attempts to re-craft their job to compensate for lacking job resources. Specifically, we might expect to see the following three-step strategy:

1. Determination

An employee uses energy to overcome scarce or inadequate resources. They expend more energy to obtain them or will seek short-cuts to complete their job in a way that minimises strain.

2. Termination

Such a sustained energy expenditure is not sustainable, and over time the employee will become weary of re-crafting their job (exhaustion), eventually stopping altogether (cynicism).

3. Extermination

Usually in the form of resignation, the individual will seek new opportunities where their energy can be better utilised, allowing them greater opportunity to be successful.

Final word – managers to the fore

Our ETS model of employee experience makes clear the distinction within the people-performance relationship, whereby engagement isn't the sole consideration. Instead, to capture a broader and more complete understanding of an employees' experience, we must measure enablement and empowerment.

In helping to realise employee potential, line managers play a pivotal role. Firstly, they must act as change agents when issues with engagement, enablement or empowerment are reported. Employees reporting inadequacy often feel powerless and so managers must listen, understand and act so their employee's voice may be heard. Secondly, and on a more day to day basis, managers should ensure they are laying the foundations for employees to be engaged through enabling and empowering them. This starts with fostering a work environment in a way that promotes, rather than prohibits, engagement.

Managers who understand how to optimise their employees' experience through not only creating, but facilitating workplace engagement are likeliest to enjoy the most favourable performance outcomes.

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