



Employee Engagement: A Literature Review

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Foreword

This working paper reports the findings of a literature review dissertation undertaken by Sandeep Kular in 2007, which formed part of her MA Human Resource Management degree at Kingston University. The dissertation contributed towards the development of a conceptual framework for the establishment of the Kingston Business School Employee Engagement Consortium, a research partnership aimed at developing knowledge and understanding of employee engagement, its drivers, and its consequences.

Our interest in employee engagement began in 2006, when we were approached by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) to undertake a survey of levels of engagement in the UK workforce. Our findings were published in the CIPD report *Working Life: Employee Attitudes and Engagement* (Truss *et al* 2006). We found that levels of engagement nationally were low, but that high levels of engagement were associated with a host of positive outcomes for individuals and their employers. Our study revealed the value of engagement, but we wanted to know more about how engagement levels vary across different sectors and contexts. Sandeep's work formed part of the next steps in developing this further research process.

The Consortium is now moving ahead with sharing knowledge and developing new insights into the nature of employee engagement and its impact on organisations.

Five key areas are being explored: What does 'employee engagement' mean?; How can engagement be managed?; What are the consequences of engagement for organisations?; How does engagement relate to other individual characteristics?; How is engagement related to employee voice and representation? Sandeep's dissertation involved exploring some of the relevant literature around each of these issues. Specifically she focused on three key questions:

1. How has employee engagement been conceptualised?
2. How do individual differences relate to employee engagement?
3. How does employee involvement relate to employee engagement?

This working paper summarises a broad range of academic literature under each of these headings. We found it a useful contribution to our subsequent work, and we are grateful to Sandeep for pursuing her dissertation research with such depth and rigour. I trust it will be of interest to anyone wishing to know more about this increasingly important area of management practice.

Professor Katie Truss
Director, Kingston Business School Employee Engagement Consortium

Introduction

Employee engagement has become a hot topic in recent years. Despite this, there remains a paucity of critical academic literature on the subject, and relatively little is known about how employee engagement can be influenced by management. Although there is a great deal of interest in engagement, there is also a good deal of confusion. At present, there is no consistency in definition, with engagement having been operationalised and measured in many disparate ways.

This literature survey examined peer-reviewed journal articles, working papers, textbooks, and other published resources relevant to employee engagement. Articles were found through the search facility of on-line journal databases such as EBSCO Business Source Premier, Emerald Full text and ABI Inform. The review indicates that there are more employees who are disengaged or *not* engaged than there are engaged employees. Despite this, many organisations believe that engagement is a dominant source of competitive advantage. Results from research organisations and corporate results have demonstrated there may be a strong link between engagement, employee performance and business outcomes. The key drivers of employee engagement identified include communication, opportunities for employees to feed their views upwards and thinking that their managers are committed to the organisation. Whilst key drivers of engagement have been identified it is also clear that ‘one size does not fit all’.

The review also identifies gaps and issues that have not so far been investigated, making clear the focus of where further enquiry should be. It is apparent that there is a lack of research around the predictors of engagement and whether or not interventions, such as training managers on how to communicate effectively, could help to increase engagement. There is also a need for future research to concentrate on individual differences and whether variables such as personality impact engagement. Finally, much of the research has been conducted in the US, therefore future research must further explore other countries where less is known about engagement levels.

The review aims to add value to the current state of knowledge by critically evaluating the existing literature on employee engagement and providing a reflective stance on existing debates and findings. As a result, it addresses concerns about the lack of agreement on what engagement is and how issues surrounding it can be addressed.

Research by the CIPD has repeatedly demonstrated the links between the way people are managed, employee attitudes and business performance (Purcell 2006 and Truss *et al* 2006). Moreover, engaged employees have been found to outperform their disengaged counterparts. However, recent research in the UK and other countries shows that there are more *disengaged* employees than there are engaged employees in today’s organisations. Employee engagement can and has been found to make a difference. However there is great disagreement surrounding how to define engagement, how it should be operationalised and whether or not it is actually a valid construct at all. Furthermore, it is evident that sound, academic research lags somewhat behind practice given that the literature is under developed, and the concept of engagement is still in its infancy.

The review addresses three sets of key questions in turn, as follows:

1. How has employee engagement been conceptualised?
 - 1.1 What is employee engagement?
 - 1.2 How has it been defined?
 - 1.3 How has it been operationalised?
 - 1.4 What are the constituent elements of employee engagement?
 - 1.5 What evidence is there about levels of employee engagement? (UK and worldwide)
 - 1.6 What are the suggested antecedents and consequences of employee engagement?
2. How do individual differences relate to employee engagement?
 - 2.1 How is employee engagement related to how work is perceived?
 - 2.2 To what extent is engagement related to emotional experiences and wellbeing, and why?
 - 2.3 How does engagement influence outcome variables?
3. How does employee involvement relate to employee engagement?
 - 3.1 What kinds of voice mechanisms seem to offer employees a greater sense of involvement?
 - 3.2 What evidence is there of mutual decision-making and problem solving?
 - 3.3 To what extent are management willing to share control with employees?

Part 1: Conceptualising Employee Engagement

Defining Engagement

One of the first challenges presented by the literature is the lack of a universal definition of employee engagement. Kahn (1990:694) defines employee engagement as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances”. The cognitive aspect of employee engagement concerns employees’ beliefs about the organisation, its leaders and working conditions. The emotional aspect concerns how employees feel about each of those three factors and whether they have positive or negative attitudes toward the organisation and its leaders. The physical aspect of employee engagement concerns the physical energies exerted by individuals to accomplish their roles. Thus, according to Kahn (1990), engagement means to be psychologically as well as physically present when occupying and performing an organisational role.

Most often employee engagement has been defined as emotional and intellectual commitment to the organisation (Baumruk 2004, Richman 2006 and Shaw 2005) or the amount of discretionary effort exhibited by employees in their job (Frank *et al* 2004). Although it is acknowledged and accepted that employee engagement is a multi-faceted construct, as previously suggested by Kahn (1990), Truss *et al* (2006) define employee engagement simply as ‘passion for work’, a psychological state which is seen to encompass the three dimensions of engagement discussed by Kahn (1990), and captures the common theme running through all these definitions.

The existence of different definitions makes the state of knowledge of employee engagement difficult to determine as each study examines employee engagement under a different protocol. In addition, unless employee engagement can be universally defined and measured, it cannot be managed, nor can it be known if efforts to improve it are working (Ferguson 2007). This highlights the problems of comparability caused by differences in definition. Furthermore, whilst it is acknowledged that employee engagement has been defined in many different ways, it is also argued the definitions often sound similar to other better known and established constructs such as ‘organisational commitment’ and ‘organisational citizenship behaviour’ (OCB) (Robinson *et al* 2004). Thus Robinson *et al* (2004) defined engagement as ‘one step up from commitment’. As a result, employee engagement has the appearance of being yet another trend, or what some might call “old wine in a new bottle”.

Engagement vs Other Constructs

It would appear that there are sufficient grounds for arguing that engagement is related to, but distinct from, other constructs in organisational behaviour (Saks 2006). For example, Robinson *et al* (2004) state that:

“...engagement contains many of the elements of both commitment and OCB but is by no means a perfect match with either. In addition, neither commitment nor OCB reflect sufficiently two aspects of engagement - its two-way nature, and the extent to which engaged employees are expected to have an element of business awareness.”

Saks (2006) argues that organisational commitment also differs from engagement in that it refers to a person's attitude and attachment towards their organisation, whilst it could be argued that engagement is not merely an attitude; it is the degree to which an individual is attentive to their work and absorbed in the performance of their role. In addition, while OCB involves voluntary and informal behaviours that can help co-workers and the organisation, the focus of engagement is one's formal role performance rather than purely extra-role and voluntary behaviour.

According to May *et al* (2004) engagement is most closely associated with the constructs of job involvement and 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Job involvement is defined as 'a cognitive or belief state of psychological identification' (Kanungo 1982:342). This differs from engagement in that it is concerned more with how the individual employs him/her self during the performance of his/her job. Furthermore, whilst the focus of job involvement is on cognitions, engagement, according to most definitions, also encompasses emotions and behaviours.

The second related construct, the notion of 'flow', is defined as the "holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975:36). It is argued that individuals in a flow experience need no external rewards or goals to motivate them, as the activity itself presents constant challenges (*ibid*). However, whilst flow is primarily the cognitive involvement of the individual in an activity on a momentary basis, definitions of engagement imply a longer-term and more holistic involvement in work tasks (Kahn, 1990; Holbeche and Springett, 2003).

Researching Engagement

One of the most influential studies of engagement was carried out by Kahn (1990). Conceptually, Kahn began with the work of Goffman (1961) who proposed that, "people's attachment and detachment to their role varies" (Kahn 1990:694). However, Kahn argued that Goffman's work focused on fleeting face-to-face encounters, while a different concept was needed to fit organisational life, which is "ongoing, emotionally charged, and psychologically complex" (Diamond and Allcorn 1985).

To gain further understanding of the varying levels of attachment individuals expressed towards their roles, Kahn (1990) examined several disciplines. It was found that psychologists (Freud 1922), sociologists (Goffman 1961, Merton 1957) and group theorists (Slater 1966, Smith and Berg 1987) had all recognised the idea that individuals are naturally hesitant about being members of ongoing groups and systems. As a result they "seek to protect themselves from both isolation and engulfment by alternately pulling away from and moving towards their memberships" (Kahn 1990). The terms Kahn (1990) uses to describe these calibrations are 'personal engagement' and 'personal disengagement', which refer to the "behaviours by which people bring in or leave out their personal selves during work role performances" (Kahn 1990:694). These terms developed by Kahn (1990) integrate previous ideas taken from motivation theories that people need self-expression and self-employment in their work lives as a matter of course (Alderfer 1972, Maslow 1954).

Kahn undertook a qualitative study on the psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement by interviewing summer camp counsellors and staff at an architecture firm about their moments of engagement and disengagement at work. He defined disengagement as the decoupling of the self within the role, involving the individual withdrawing and

defending themselves during role performances (May *et al* 2004). Disengaged employees displayed incomplete role performances and were effortless, automatic or robotic (Kahn 1990). Kahn found that there were three psychological conditions related with engagement or disengagement at work: meaningfulness, safety, and availability. He argued that people asked themselves three fundamental questions in each role situation: (i) How *meaningful* is it for me to bring myself into this performance; (ii) How *safe* is it to do so?; and (iii) How *available* am I to do so? He found that workers were more engaged at work in situations that offered them more psychological meaningfulness and psychological safety, and when they were more psychologically available.

In the only study to empirically test Kahn's (1990) model, May *et al* (2004) found that meaningfulness, safety, and availability were significantly related to engagement. They also found job enrichment and role fit to be 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. Resources were a positive predictor of psychological availability, while participation in outside activities was a negative predictor. Overall, meaningfulness was found to have the strongest relation to different employee outcomes in terms of engagement.

An alternative model of engagement comes from the 'burnout' literature, which describes job engagement as the positive antithesis of burnout, noting that burnout involves the erosion of engagement with one's job (Maslach *et al* 2001). According to Maslach *et al*, six areas of work-life lead to either burnout or engagement: workload, control, rewards and recognition, community and social support, perceived fairness and values. They argue that job engagement is associated with a sustainable workload, feelings of choice and control, appropriate recognition and reward, a supportive work community, fairness and justice, and meaningful and valued work. Like burnout, engagement is expected to mediate the link between these six work-life factors and various work outcomes. May *et al's* (2004) findings support Maslach *et al's* (2001) notion of meaningful and valued work being associated with engagement, and therefore it is important to consider the concept of 'meaning'.

According to Holbeche and Springett (2003), people's perceptions of 'meaning' with regard to the workplace are clearly linked to their levels of engagement and, ultimately, their performance. They argue that employees actively seek meaning through their work and, unless organisations try to provide a sense of meaning, employees are likely to quit. The research findings suggest that many people experience a greater search for meaning in the workplace (70 per cent) than in life in general (*ibid*). There are numerous possible reasons for this, for example, it may be because people generally spend longer at work than on other parts of their lives. Holbeche and Springett (2003) argue that high levels of engagement can only be achieved in workplaces where there is a shared sense of destiny and purpose that connects people at an emotional level and raises their personal aspirations.

Kahn's (1990) and Maslach *et al's* (2001) models indicate the psychological conditions or *antecedents* that are necessary for engagement, but they do not fully explain why individuals will respond to these conditions with varying degrees of engagement. According to Saks (2006), a stronger theoretical rationale for explaining employee engagement can be found in social exchange theory (SET). SET argues that obligations are generated through a series of interactions between parties who are in a state of reciprocal interdependence. A basic principle of SET is that relationships evolve over time into trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments as long as the parties abide by certain 'rules' of exchange (Cropanzano and

Mitchell 2005). Such rules tend to involve reciprocity or repayment rules, so that the actions of one party lead to a response or actions by the other party. For example, when individuals receive economic and socio-emotional resources from their organisation, they feel obliged to respond in kind and repay the organisation (ibid). This is consistent with Robinson *et al*'s (2004) description of engagement as a two-way relationship between the employer and employee.

Saks (2006) argues that one way for individuals to repay their organisation is through their level of engagement. In other words, employees will choose to engage themselves to varying degrees and in response to the resources they receive from their organisation. Bringing oneself more fully into one's work roles and devoting greater amounts of cognitive, emotional, and physical resources is a very profound way for individuals to respond to an organisation's actions, as suggested earlier by the work of Kahn (1990). Thus, employees are more likely to exchange their engagement for resources and benefits provided by their organisation.

In summary, SET provides a theoretical foundation to explain why employees choose to become more or less engaged in their work and organisation. In terms of Kahn's (1990) definition of engagement, employees feel obliged to bring themselves more deeply into their role performances as repayment for the resources they receive from their organisation. When the organisation fails to provide these resources, individuals are more likely to withdraw and disengage themselves from their roles. Thus, the amount of cognitive, emotional, and physical resources that an individual is prepared to devote in the performance of their work role may be contingent on the economic and socio-emotional resources received from the organisation.

Antecedents and Consequences of Engagement

In recent years, more studies have begun to look at the antecedents and *consequences* of employee engagement. For example, Saks (2006) found a distinction between two types of engagement, job engagement and organisation engagement, which he argues are related but distinct constructs. In addition, he argued that the relationships between both job and organisation engagement, and their antecedents and consequences differed in a number of ways, suggesting that the psychological conditions that lead to job and organisation engagement, as well as their consequences, are not the same. Whilst this study has provided a new insight into employee engagement, it is important to note the survey was completed by a small sample of 102 employees in Canada. Therefore, the results may not be generalisable to employees in the UK, for example, as definitions of engagement vary in different countries and national differences may play a part in what leads to engagement in the first place. Nevertheless, it adds a new insight into the existing body of literature as it is the first study to make a distinction between job and organisation engagement and to measure a variety of antecedents and consequences of job and organisation engagement; previous research has focused primarily on engagement at the individual level.

Practitioners and academics tend to agree that the consequences of employee engagement are positive (Saks 2006). There is a general belief that there is a connection between employee engagement and business results; a meta-analysis conducted by Harter *et al* (2002:272) confirms this connection. They concluded that, "...employee satisfaction and engagement are related to meaningful business outcomes at a magnitude that is important to many organisations". However, engagement is an individual-level construct and if it does lead to business results, it must first impact individual-level outcomes. Therefore, there is reason to

expect employee engagement is related to individuals' attitudes, intentions, and behaviours. Although neither Kahn (1990) nor May *et al* (2004) included outcomes in their studies, Kahn (1992) proposed that high levels of engagement lead to both positive outcomes for individuals, (eg quality of people's work and their own experiences of doing that work), as well as positive organisational-level outcomes (eg the growth and productivity of organisations).

The Gallup Organisation (2004) found critical links between employee engagement, customer loyalty, business growth and profitability. They compared the scores of these variables among a sample of stores scoring in the top 25 per cent on employee engagement and customer loyalty with those in the bottom 25 per cent. Stores in the bottom 25 per cent significantly under-performed across three productivity measures: sales, customer complaints and turnover. Gallup cites numerous similar examples. The International Survey Research (ISR) team has similarly found encouraging evidence that organisations can only reach their full potential through emotionally engaging employees and customers (ISR 2005).

In an extension of the Gallup findings, Ott (2007) cites Gallup research, which found that higher workplace engagement predicts higher earnings per share (EPS) among publicly-traded businesses. When compared with industry competitors at the company level, organisations with more than four engaged employees for every one actively disengaged, experienced 2.6 times more growth in EPS than did organisations with a ratio of slightly less than one engaged worker for every one actively disengaged employee. The findings can be considered as reliable as the variability in differing industries was controlled by comparing each company to its competition, and the patterns across time for EPS were explored due to a 'bouncing' increase or decrease which is common in EPS (Ott 2007).

Whilst this research does not show investors and business leaders exactly what organisations are doing on a day-to-day basis to develop engaged employees, the findings do demonstrate differences in overall performance *between* companies, and Gallup's meta-analyses present strong evidence that highly engaged workgroups *within* companies outperform groups with lower employee engagement levels, and the recent findings reinforce these conclusions at the workgroup level. The meta-analysis study shows that top-quartile business units have 12 per cent higher customer advocacy, 18 per cent higher productivity, and 12 per cent higher profitability than bottom-quartile business units. In contrast, bottom-quartile business units experience 31 per cent to 51 per cent more employee turnover and 62 per cent more accidents than those in the top quartile of workplace engagement. This research into EPS provides a degree of proof that employee engagement correlates to crucial business outcomes.

Employee Engagement in Context

It is worth considering how employee engagement levels vary across occupations, industries and globally. Much of the available international evidence comes from Gallup, which has conducted Employee Engagement Index surveys in many countries. We would argue that cross-national comparisons of levels of employee engagement should be treated with some caution due to cultural and definitional differences. However, it is interesting to explore some of the findings of Gallup's surveys.

In 2005, a survey conducted in Thailand revealed only 12 per cent of Thailand's employee population are 'engaged', 82 per cent are 'actively disengaged' and 6 per cent disengaged. Similar Gallup studies have found the levels of engagement in Australia, China, Japan, New

Zealand and Singapore to be 18 per cent, 12 per cent, 9 per cent, 17 per cent and 9 per cent respectively (Gallup 2004).

The study of employee engagement at a global level is worthwhile given the increasing number of multi-national organisations and use of outsourcing. It is important to consider whether or not the same engagement techniques work for employees in countries with different economies and cultures. In 2004, International Survey Research (ISR), the international research consultancy, completed a major survey into the nature and causes of employee engagement and how companies can improve engagement to enhance business performance. The survey was conducted across ten of the world's largest economies - Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, Singapore, the UK and the USA, involving nearly 160,000 employees from across a broad spectrum of industries. The survey highlights large variations among the 10 countries in terms of employees' overall commitment to, and involvement with their employers. For example, in Brazil and in the US, 75 per cent of employees were found to be engaged with their companies, whilst only 59 per cent of French employees were engaged. The research demonstrates that one size does not fit all when it comes to motivating employees to engage with their company and work. For example, in Australia, Singapore, and Hong Kong, the extent to which company management is respected emerged as an influential determinant of engagement. In the UK and US, on the other hand, a more important factor was the degree to which organisations provide long-term employment and career opportunities.

Evidence from the USA (Johnson 2004) indicates roughly half of all Americans in the workforce are not fully engaged or they are disengaged. Furthermore, a Global Workforce Survey conducted in 2005 by consultancy firm Towers Perrin found disconcerting findings, again in the USA (Seijts and Crim 2006). The survey involved about 85,000 people who worked full-time for large and mid-sized firms; it found only 14 per cent of all employees worldwide were highly engaged in their job. The survey also indicated that on a country-by-country basis, the percentages of highly engaged, moderately engaged, and actively disengaged employees varied considerably. Moreover, the results showed some interesting, perhaps counter-intuitive, findings. For example, Mexico and Brazil have the highest percentages of engaged employees, while Japan and Italy have the largest percentages of disengaged employees.

It is argued that global research will help employers gauge their employees' level of engagement against the norm for their own country (ISR 2004). Previous research (Hofstede 1997) has shown that organisations must adapt to different cultural values and norms when it comes to attracting, motivating and retaining staff. ISR's (2004) study identified four issues as global factors in managing engagement; career development, leadership, empowerment, and image (which refers to the company's image to customers and the public). Career development was found to influence engagement for employees in each of the ten countries studied, with the key message being organisations with high levels of engagement provide employees with opportunities to develop their abilities, learn new skills, acquire new knowledge and realise their potential. The logic behind this is that when companies invest in their people in this way, their people invest in them.

The research also identified the need for empowerment; employees want to be involved in decisions that affect their work. It was found that leaders of high-engagement workplaces do not create fear or blame cultures, where employees are reluctant to express their ideas or

exercise their initiative. Instead, they create a trusting and challenging environment, in which employees are encouraged to input and innovate to move the organisation forward.

A useful comparison between a range of demographic segments, from job level (senior executive, director/manager, supervisor/foreman, specialist/professional, non-management salaried and non-management hourly) to industry category (non-profit, high tech, heavy manufacturing, insurance, pharmaceuticals, hospital and finance/banking) was carried out by researchers at Towers Perrin (2003), who found a pattern across the segments. Each group had only a small group of highly engaged respondents, a slightly larger disengaged group, with the majority in the 'moderately engaged group'.

However, in each case there was one exception to the pattern that is worth noting; senior executives were found to be more highly engaged than any other group and were less likely to be disengaged. Cynics might suggest this may be linked to income level and, while this certainly emerged as important in this study, it was not the only contributory factor. More important were role characteristics, such as challenge, authority, autonomy, stimulation, access to information, resources and growth opportunities, that research has shown are linked to high levels of engagement. The lowest levels of engagement have been found among hourly workers, who arguably have the least control or influence over their jobs and work experience.

Across industries, engagement is substantially higher in the non-profit sector than in every other sector looked at by Towers Perrin (2003). This would appear logical, given that people tend to be drawn to this sector through a sense of mission, rather than from any prospect of high pay or wealth accumulation. This finding is also consistent with the numerous definitions and views surrounding engagement, which identifies a 'passion for work' as being a key component factor (Truss *et al* 2006, Brim 2002 and Holbeche and Springett 2003). Indeed, the fact that the sector is traditionally not a high-paying one, relative to the others studied, emphasises the fact that it is not possible to 'buy' engagement in the conventional sense by offering better than average monetary awards. Conversely, in another study comparing the public and private sectors, Truss *et al* (2006) found that group in the public sector had a more negative experience of work, they reported more bullying and harassment than those in the private sector, and were less satisfied with the opportunities they had to use their abilities. This reinforces the findings of previous studies and underlines the scale of the challenge facing public sector managers in particular, and the negative impact that bullying and harassment have on employees and their levels of engagement (Emmott 2006).

Part 2: Engagement and Individual Differences

Here, we turn our attention to how engagement levels may be linked to individual differences by examining literature from the psychology field.

There are various and conflicting definitions of employee engagement in the psychological literature. Some definitions claim that employee engagement is something that is *produced by* aspects in the workplace (as suggested by McCashland 1999, Miles 2001 and Harter *et al* 2003), while others assert that it is something that the individual *brings to* the workplace (as suggested by Harter *et al* 2002 and Goddard 1999). Extraneous variables such as individual differences may not be trivial and could have significant effects (Ferguson 2007).

There is much evidence in the literature to support the notion that individual differences impact on work performance. Kahn (1990), for instance, argued that psychological differences may impact on individuals' ability to engage or disengage in their role performance, just as they shape a person's ability and willingness to be involved or committed at work. Accordingly, people would engage differently "given their experiences of psychological meaningfulness, safety and availability in specific situations" (Kahn 1990:718). For example, when people experience situations as unsafe, it is a matter of individual difference what coping strategies they deploy, and the extent to which they engage or disengage (Portello 1996).

Moreover, it is argued that individual differences play a vital role in determining an employee's potential level of engagement (Robinson 2006). The process of perception is a key factor in individual behaviour. Buchanan and Huczynski (2004:215) define perception as "the dynamic psychological process responsible for attending to, organising and interpreting sensory data". To a large extent, perception relates to the way in which individuals make sense of their environment and interpret and respond to the events and people around them. Equally, it is important to emphasise that each individual *receives* information differently. This is because individuals do not receive information about what is happening around them passively and dispassionately or in the same way as others. According to Robinson (2006) individuals categorise and make sense of events and situations according to their own unique and personal frame of reference, which reflects their personality, past experiences, knowledge, expectations and current needs, priorities and interests.

Personality is a key influence on the process of perception. Bowditch and Buono (2001:46) suggest that, "our personality acts as a kind of perceptual filter or frame of reference which influences our view of the world". Therefore, it is argued that it is our personal perception of our social and physical environment that shapes and directs how engaged an employee is, rather than some objective understanding of an external reality.

It has also been argued that employee engagement is related to emotional experiences and wellbeing (May *et al* 2004). Despite this, studies of organisations often overlook the effects on behaviour of feelings and emotions. Emotions are a natural feature of our psychological make-up and affect not only individuals' personal lives but also their behaviour at work. Wilson (2004:99-100) argues that "feelings connect us with our realities and provide internal feedback on how we are doing, what we want and what we might do next ... Being in organisations involves us in worry, envy, hurt, sadness, boredom, excitement and other emotions."

The Towers Perrin (2003) study of engagement identified both emotions and rationality as core components. They found that emotional factors are linked to an individual's personal satisfaction and the sense of inspiration and affirmation they get from their work and from being a part of their organisation. For example, a key element here is having a sense of personal accomplishment from one's job. By contrast, the rational factors generally relate to the relationship between the individual and the broader corporation, for instance the extent to which employees understand their role and their unit's role, relative to company objectives. It was found that scores for key aspects of rational engagement (such as I 'understand how my role relates to company goals and objectives' and 'I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond what is normally expected') are generally higher than those for emotional engagement (such as, I 'would say my company is a good place to work' and 'am proud to work for my company').

However, looking deeper into the more emotional aspects of working, a different picture emerges. Just under two-thirds of the respondents to the Towers Perrin survey agreed their company is a good place to work, and even fewer (half of the respondents) agreed their company inspires them to do their best work. According to research, this is where the impact of employees' dissatisfaction is found, with various aspects of their work experience, such as overwhelming workloads, distant and non-communicative senior leadership, and the lack of developmental opportunities (Towers Perrin 2003). This shows the significance of management actions in determining levels of employee engagement.

According to Towers Perrin (2003), building engagement is a process that never ends and it rests on the foundation of a meaningful and emotionally enriching work experience. Furthermore, it is not about making people happy, or even paying them more money. As important as pay and benefits are in attracting and retaining people, it was found they play a less important role in engaging people in their work. The elements found to be fundamental for engagement were strong leadership, accountability, autonomy, a sense of control over one's environment and opportunities for development; there are no substitutes for these fundamentals.

Personal relationships have also been found to impact work engagement. Recent research has found that family stress and work-related stress may be interlinked (Moore, 2004; Crabtree, 2005). A Gallup survey asked employees whether they had three or more days in the past month when work stress caused them to behave poorly with their family or friends. The findings indicated 51 per cent of actively disengaged employees say yes, compared to 35 per cent of not-engaged employees and 18 per cent of engaged employees. Relationships in the workplace have also been found to have an impact on 'meaningfulness', which as we saw earlier, relates to engagement (May *et al* 2004). Locke and Taylor (1990) recognised the relatedness needs individuals possess, arguing individuals who have rewarding interpersonal interactions with their co-workers also should experience greater meaning in their work. Kahn (1990) also suggested that client relations for some individuals (eg camp counsellors) may play a role in providing a meaningful work experience.

Gender differences have also been found, such that men experience enrichment from work to family, while women experience depletion from work to family. While women experience enrichment from family to work, men experience no links from family to work (Rothbard 1999). Furthermore, Gallup's US research concluded that women tend to find more fulfilment in their jobs and are more engaged than men are (Johnson 2004). However, no clear difference was found between employee engagement levels of Thai men and women (*ibid*).

Gallup did observe a difference between employees who are single and those who are married. It was found that married employees tend to have a higher level of engagement than those who are single. This suggests that these employees have come to point where they are more settled in both their personal and professional lives. Another difference related to gender is that female managers or supervisors tend to have a higher percentage of actively disengaged workers than male managers do. Differences of health and personal values may also impact employee engagement such that some people 'work to live', while others 'live to work'. Differences of skills, ability and dispositional variables are also expected to impact levels of employee engagement. However, the most critical finding is that it is the way in which people are managed that has the most significant impact on engagement levels (Truss *et al*, 2006).

According to Robinson (2006), employee engagement can be achieved through the creation of an organisational environment where positive emotions such as involvement and pride are encouraged, resulting in improved organisational performance, lower employee turnover and better health. West (2005) argues that when individuals feel positive emotions, they are able to think in a more flexible, open-minded way and are also likely to feel greater self-control, cope more effectively and be less defensive in the workplace.

Emotions can also be related to wellbeing (Robinson 2006). Perhaps some of the clearest evidence on wellbeing and employee health is evident in the research of the Roffey Park Institute (RPI). The RPI shares the belief of various authors who suggest a potential causal relationship between a more holistic approach to management, one that takes account of emotions and people's deeper needs, and improved business performance. Cooper (1997) argues that research shows that if emotions are properly managed rather than shut out at work, they can drive trust, loyalty and commitment and great productivity gains by individuals, teams and organisations. Similarly, Heimer (1999) argues that innovation, increased profitability, good decision-making and effective performance are brought about by managed emotions (Holbeche and Springett 2003). Other studies have found clear links between work lives in individual health (Crabtree, 2005). The importance of wellbeing is further reinforced by researchers at Towers Perrin (2003) who found that the most important driver of engagement was senior management's interest in employee wellbeing. However, only 42 per cent of respondents agreed their senior management showed an interest in this. Job categories that were more likely to be physically demanding, such as service workers, skilled tradesmen, semi-skilled workers and labourers, were isolated to enable a comparison to be made between physically demanding and non-physically demanding roles. Interestingly, the isolation of the categories yielded little difference, 43 per cent of workers in physically demanding roles stated their day-to-day jobs affect their physical health positively, as did 43 per cent of those more likely to have desk jobs.

Whilst isolating job categories revealed no apparent differences, significant differences were found between employees according to their engagement level, regardless of job type. Among engaged employees, a clear majority, 62 per cent, feel their work lives positively affect their physical health. That number drops to 39 per cent among not-engaged employees and 22 per cent among the actively disengaged. More disturbing is the fact that a majority of actively engaged employees (54 per cent) say they think their work lives are having a negative effect on their physical health. However, the numbers were slightly better concerning psychological wellbeing, with 52 per cent of employees stating their work lives positively affect their home lives; this number increased to 78 per cent for engaged employees.

Research on wellbeing and engagement leads to the obvious question; what is the connection between engagement with one's job and one's health? Crabtree (2005) notes that correlation does not necessarily imply causality. It may be that those who feel their jobs positively affect their health are simply more optimistic overall and are therefore more likely to be engaged in their work. Nevertheless, this does not change the implication that engaged employees are more likely than others to view their jobs as healthy.

The experience of engagement has been described as a fulfilling, positive work-related experience and state of mind (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004), and has been found to be related to good health and positive work affect (Sonnentag 2003). These positive experiences and emotions are likely to result in positive work outcomes. An individual's expressed intention to leave their organisation is generally regarded as an important measure of how they are feeling about their work. As noted by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), engaged employees are likely to have a greater attachment to their organisation and a lower tendency to quit. The findings from Truss *et al* (2006) confirm this. They found that, overall, engaged employees are less likely to leave their employer. However, the longer employees stay with an organisation the less engaged they appear to become (Ferguson 2007). The findings of the 2006 CIPD survey on engagement confirm this also (Truss *et al* 2006). Such findings emphasise the importance of continually advancing the understanding of engagement in the workplace.

Overall, research has found that employee engagement is on the decline and there is a deepening disengagement among employees today (Bates 2004 and Richman 2006). A study by the Gallup organisation based on a large sample of the UK workforce (Buckingham 2001), identified three discrete groups of employees; engaged employees, non-engaged employees and actively disengaged employees. The findings indicated the majority (63 per cent) of employees fell into the 'non-engaged employees' category. These employees were characterised as being productive in the sense of doing what was asked of them but were not psychologically bonded to the organisation. Furthermore, employees in this category were instrumentally motivated; they could be tempted by job vacancies elsewhere and were responsive to financial incentives, but cynical about higher-order appeals to loyalty. Of the sample, 17 per cent fell into the 'engaged employees' category; these employees were characterised as being loyal, committed, productive and task-effective. Actively disengaged employees formed the remaining 20 per cent of the sample and comprised employees who were physically present, but psychologically absent. These employees demonstrated behaviours and attitudes that were negative, unco-operative and even hostile. Clearly, these findings show that there is scope for employers to engage in positive management actions to raise engagement levels in their workforce.

According to Buckingham (2001:37) such employees were "intent on sharing with colleagues the many reasons for which they believe their organisation is such a rotten place to work". The study also found that the longer employees remained with an organisation, the more disengaged they became. Similarly, researchers at Gallup (Brim 2002) and Truss *et al* (2006) identified an inverse relationship between employee engagement, or the degree to which a worker is fulfilled by his or her job, and the length of service. According to Brim (2002) such evidence indicates that for most employees, the first year on the job is their best and thereafter it is 'downhill'. One challenge for employers is to find ways of renewing employees' engagement levels through the duration of their employment.

This finding was surprising; Gallup researchers expected to find an increasing sense of belonging over time with new hires expected to be tentative. Clearly, the inverse relationship

between engagement and length of service suggests a disconnection between how organisations intend to treat their workers and how workers feel about their jobs. Brim (2002) argues instead of making the most of the strengths of employees, organisations continually remind employees of their shortcomings through training programmes that focus on fixing an employee's weaknesses, which in turn can lead to a disengaged workforce.

Many commentators argue that employee engagement is influenced not only by individual differences but also by socio-cultural factors (Ferguson 2007). The culture and climate of an organisation are expected to influence levels of engagement. Climate includes aspects such as systems and satisfaction with the organisation; culture includes aspects such as community (Schein 1987). The use of outsourcing and virtual workstations and teams has increased dramatically in recent years. However, there is a need for future research to establish exactly how such changes in climate and culture affect employee engagement.

In summary, the research suggests that despite the existence of common drivers of engagement, different groups and individuals are influenced by different factors. The literature in the field of individual differences is split. Some suggest that engagement is produced by aspects in the workplace, whilst others suggest that engagement is something that the individual *brings* to the workplace. Furthermore, it is argued that an individual's personality and perception, ie the way in which they view the world, shapes and directs how engaged an employee will be. Emotions and wellbeing have also been found to be related to engagement, however many studies overlook the importance of these two concepts. The individual differences which affect engagement also impact outcome variables such as intention to quit and create differences in how various groups, for example men and women, are engaged. Nevertheless, all the research has shown that there is much that employers can do to raise levels of engagement, and that all employees, regardless of demographic factors, have the potential to be engaged in their work.

Part 3: Engagement and Employee Involvement

Whilst some argue that employees are ‘engaged’ if they have a positive attitude towards work, others such as Purcell *et al* (2003) suggest that employee engagement is only meaningful if there is a more genuine sharing of responsibility between management and employees over issues of substance. The CIPD survey conducted by Truss *et al* (2006) suggests that strengthening *employee voice* can make a difference to organisational performance.

Employee voice can be defined as the ability for employees to have an input into decisions that are made in organisations (Lucas *et al* 2006). It has been argued that one of the main drivers of employee engagement is for employees to have the opportunity to feed their view upwards (Truss *et al* 2006). Their survey concluded that currently many organisations are not very successful in doing this and as a result many employees felt they lacked opportunities to express their views and be involved in decisions. On the other hand, researchers at Towers Perrin (2003) found employers are doing well in giving employees the freedom to make decisions relating to their jobs; 62 per cent of respondents argued they have an appropriate amount of decision-making authority to do their job well.

Research by Robinson (2006) suggests there is considerable evidence that many employees are greatly under-utilised in the workplace through the lack of involvement in work-based decisions. Employee involvement is seen as a central principle of ‘soft’ HRM, where the focus is upon capturing the ideas of employees and securing their commitment (Beardwell and Claydon 2007). The concept of employee involvement is strongly grounded in unitarist views of organisations, as it assumes that managers and employees have the same interests. Critics have argued that employee involvement has management firmly in control and very limited real influence is given to employees (*ibid*).

Hyman and Mason (1995) argue that employee involvement schemes “extend little or no input into corporate or higher level decision making” and generally do not entail any significant sharing of power and authority. Similarly, Blyton and Turnbull (2004:272) argue that employee involvement is ‘soft on power’. However, Purcell *et al*’s (2003) study found involvement in decisions affecting the job or work to be an important factor, which was strongly associated with high levels of employee engagement thus demonstrating it is an important driver.

In any work role or situation, employees have a degree of choice and discretion over how they perform their tasks and responsibilities (Robinson 2006). Furthermore, Appelbaum *et al* (2005:25) argue that, “in any formal system of work controls, some effort remains that workers contribute at their discretion”. The behaviours required by a work role can be specifically defined and offer little choice in the way the work is done as in the case of an assembly line operative required to routinely and repetitively perform a simple set of tasks. Alternatively, work role behaviours can command the use of a considerable amount of discretion in the way the job is performed as in the case of senior managers (Robinson 2006). According to Fox (1974) ‘Taylorism’ and ‘scientific management’ focused on limited discretion. Such methods of managing employees involved breaking down jobs into simple component elements, prescribing the way in which tasks were performed, providing close supervision and bureaucratic rules and regulations which served to create a mutually reinforcing cycle of low trust relations.

Nevertheless, Fox (1974) argued that despite an elaborate external controlling structure being in place, no role can be totally diffuse or totally specific; even in jobs which are tightly controlled, some outstanding element of discretion always remains. In cases where employees have been given some control over how they do their jobs, positive benefits have appeared to emerge. For example, previous research in the UK has looked at job redesign and the impact this has had on engagement. In 1990 research was carried out by the University of Sheffield on factory workers and the number of injuries they reported given the differing levels of control over their work (Beardwell and Claydon 2007). It was found that, after the workers were given the training and freedom to make repairs to their own equipment rather than having to call a supervisor every time they experienced a problem, they reported fewer occupational injuries. This would suggest that workers who feel they have control over their destiny at work, a key aspect of employee engagement, are more likely to stay focused and less likely to make preventable mistakes.

Management control is thought to hinder an employees' perception of safety, which has been found to be one of three psychological conditions affecting engagement at work (May *et al* 2004). According to Deci and Ryan (1987) management which fosters a supportive work environment typically displays concern for employees' needs and feelings, provides positive feedback and encourage them to voice their concerns, develops new skills and solve work-related problems. Employees who are self-determined experience a "sense of choice in initiating and regulating one's own actions" (ibid:580). As a result, these individuals are likely to feel safer to engage themselves more fully, try out novel ways of doing things and discuss mistakes (Edmondson 1999). Where management is supportive of an employee's self-determination, the trust between the two parties is enhanced (Deci and Ryan 1987). Given that managers have a tremendous influence on employee engagement, levels can vary widely from workgroup to workgroup within one company (Ott 2007). Gallup's research has shown that leaders and managers play a key role in lifting engagement levels.

Research in the UK, based on an electronic survey of 2,000 employees from across the UK, found that only 35 per cent of employees were actively engaged in their work (Truss *et al* 2006). A significant majority had a fairly low opinion of their senior managers, with only a third seeing them as trustworthy. The research clearly shows that whilst senior managers can make a real difference to people's working lives and performance, many have issues around visibility, communication and employee involvement.

Robinson *et al* (2004) identified key behaviours, which were found to be associated with employee engagement. The behaviours included belief in the organisation, desire to work to make things better, understanding of the business context and the 'bigger picture', being respectful of and helpful to colleagues, willingness to 'go the extra mile' and keeping up to date with developments in the field. Furthermore, the research found that employee engagement was closely linked to feelings and perceptions around being valued and involved, and that the key drivers of engagement included effective leadership, two-way communication, high levels of internal co-operation, a focus on employee development, a commitment to employee wellbeing and clear, accessible human resources policies and practices to which managers at all levels were committed.

Recent research suggests that high-involvement work practices can develop the positive beliefs and attitudes associated with employee engagement, and that these practices can generate the kinds of discretionary behaviours that lead to enhanced performance (Konrad 2006). High involvement workplaces use "a system of management practices giving their

employees skills, information, motivation, and latitude and resulting in a workforce that is a source of competitive advantage” (Guthrie 2001:181).

According to Lawler and Worley (2006) for a high-involvement work practice to be effective and for it to have a positive impact on employee engagement, employees must be given *power*. They argue this will lead to employees having the ability to make decisions that are important to their performance and to the quality of their working lives, thus engaging them in their work. Furthermore, Lawler and Worley (2006) contend that power can mean a relatively low level of influence, as in providing input into decisions made by others or it can mean having final authority and accountability for decisions and their outcomes. Involvement is maximised when the highest possible level of power is pushed down to the employees that have to carry out the decision, resulting in gaining the maximum level of engagement possible from employees.

Purcell *et al's* (2003) study found a number of factors to be strongly associated with high levels of employee engagement. The one thing all of these factors had in common was that they were connected with an employee's involvement in a practice related to their work. For example, effective communications was found to be a factor as engagement levels were affected by the amount of information employees received about how well the company was performing and how they contributed to the company achieving its business objectives. Furthermore, employees having involvement in decisions' affecting their job or work was also associated with high levels of engagement.

Clearly employee engagement also depends on the manager or supervisor. Cufaude (2004) argues that when managers employ a philosophy of 'servant-leadership', whereby a manager's primary role is in supporting and serving those around them, the environment becomes 'highly engaged'. Soltis (2004) argues in order to create a highly engaged environment managers must be engaged; "if managers aren't engaged its unlikely employees will respond to any efforts to engage them" (p2). Research has demonstrated that employee engagement tends to be based on factors such as the relationship they have with their managers (Blizzard 2003). Yet other theorists claim that employee engagement depends on offering empowerment and that jobs should fit employees' interests (Lloyd 2004 and MacDonald 2002).

In summary, the literature surrounding employee involvement suggests that the root of employee disengagement is poor management, whereby employees do not have good working relationships with their managers and are denied the opportunity to communicate and have some power in decision-making, let alone receive information from their managers. Employees are in need of managers who care and who are seen to be committed to their organisation. Only then can managers lure employees into putting discretionary effort into their work. However, the problem is that managers themselves need to be engaged before they can engage their subordinates; it is evident that levels of engagement must rise in management before they can be expected to rise in employees given the impact management can have on employees.

Part 4: Summary and Conclusions

This literature review has revealed that employee engagement has been conceptualised in many different ways. There is no single agreed definition and research has shown that, however engagement is defined, it is a multi-faceted construct (Kahn, 1990). The existence of various conceptualisations makes the state of knowledge around employee engagement difficult to determine, as each piece of research is undertaken under a different protocol, using different measures of engagement under different circumstances. Despite this potential problem, a similar pattern was found by all regardless of the country or context where the research was undertaken; the highest numbers of employees were found in the 'not engaged' category. This finding is disappointing, although perhaps not very surprising, and clearly many people do not enjoy going to work and gain little meaning from what they do for a living.

People's perceptions of meaning with regard to the workplace has connections with how engaged they are and their level of performance (Holbeche and Springett 2003). Findings suggest people seek more meaning in their day-to-day work than they do in their personal lives. This implies employers should be seeking to make work meaningful by finding out what matters to their employees, especially since evidence suggests that meaningfulness impacts not only on the individual, but also on the bottom line (Holbeche and Springett 2003). Research has also suggested a connection between employee engagement and business results, eg the Gallup Organisation cite numerous examples of increased corporate profitability due to increased employee engagement.

Looking more broadly, the evidence surrounding levels of engagement worldwide paints a negative picture; in Japan and Singapore levels of engagement are as low as 9 per cent, and levels of those 'not engaged' are as high as 82 per cent in Singapore and Thailand (Johnson 2005). Such findings indicate that one size does not fit all when it comes to motivating employees to engage with their company and work. This is in part due to differences in culture, values, politics, management styles and the economy. Those managing across borders must be fully aware of what leads to engagement in the countries in which they are operating; antecedents of engagement which work in the host country may have no effect, or the opposite effect, in other countries.

There is clear evidence in the psychological literature of the effect of individual differences on work performance. Kahn (1990) suggested that individual differences shape a person's nature, which in turn, affects their ability to personally engage or disengage in all or some types or role performances. Furthermore, perception and personality have been suggested to be key influences on how individuals respond, thus shaping and directing how engaged they are.

Evidence also suggests that employee engagement is related to emotional experiences and wellbeing (May *et al* 2004). Researchers have found that emotional factors are linked to an individual's personal satisfaction and the sense of inspiration and affirmation they get from their work and from being part of their organisation (Towers Perrin 2003). However a considerable number of employees agree that their company is not a good place to work, suggesting they are emotionally unhappy, whilst others argue emotions should not be allowed to flow free, and that employees are more productive when their emotions are managed (Holbeche and Springett 2003).

Personal relationships have also been found to impact work engagement. Research has indicated that family stress is related to work stress. However, the causal relationship between the two variables is unclear. Relationships *within* the workplace have also been found to have an impact on 'meaningfulness', which relates to engagement. Locke and Taylor (1990) indicated that such findings point to the relatedness needs individuals possess, arguing individuals who have rewarding interpersonal interactions with their co-workers also should experience greater meaning in their work. Differences in gender have also been found to impact how engaged individuals are. Evidence shows that women tend to find more fulfilment in their jobs and are more engaged than men (Johnson 2005), although there is no evidence that this finding is not generalisable across the globe. However, such findings need to be treated with some degree of caution. Demographic factors alone cannot predict an individual's propensity to be engaged. More significant here is the way in which people are managed. Management style, employee voice and job design impact on people's level of engagement, regardless of demographic variables.

Engaged employees were found to be almost three times more likely to feel their work lives positively affected their physical health than those employees who were actively disengaged, although the causal relationship between engagement and wellbeing is unclear. Nevertheless, this does not change the implication that engaged employees are more likely than others to view their jobs as healthy.

An individual's intention to leave their organisation is generally regarded as an important measure of how they are feeling about their work. Engaged employees are likely to have a greater attachment to their organisation (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004; Truss *et al* 2006). The implication of this is twofold. Whilst engaging employees can help to reduce an organisation's turnover and recruitment costs, it has also been found that the longer employees stay with an organisation, the less engaged they become (Ferguson 2007 and Truss *et al* 2006). Such evidence stresses the importance of engagement and ensuring employees are engaged in the long term in what they do by addressing issues, which have been found to matter, rather than letting the employee-employer relationship become 'stale'.

It has been argued that employee engagement is only meaningful if there is a more genuine sharing of responsibility between management and employees over issues of substance (Purcell *et al* 2003). One of the main drivers of employee engagement was found to be employees having the opportunity to feed their views upwards. The evidence surrounding whether employers provide enough opportunities for feedback is mixed. Critics argue where employee involvement initiatives do exist, control still resides in the hands of management, with very limited power being given to employees. Nevertheless, research shows where employees have been given control over how to do their work, they are more likely to focus harder on what they are doing.

Engaged employees are also more likely to display discretionary behaviour. Engagement has been found to be closely linked to feelings and perceptions around being valued and involved, which in turn generates the kinds of discretionary effort that lead to enhanced performance (Konrad 2006). Such evidence implies that management needs to share control and allow employees to influence important decisions. If they do not, they risk having a workforce, which is not, and cannot be, engaged.

Part 5: Recommendations

This review suggests that employee engagement is a meaningful construct that is clearly worthy of future research. One area in need of investigation is the predictors of engagement. Whilst May *et al* (2004) found predictors related to the three psychological conditions of engagement identified by Kahn (1990), the evidence suggests that these predictors can only influence one of these conditions at a time, thus calling for the need to uncover predictors which affect engagement as a whole. There are other variables that might also be important for employee engagement. For example, HR practices such as flexible work arrangements, training programmes, and incentive rewards might also be important for employee engagement. Future research could include a broader range of predictors that are associated with particular types of engagement. Thus, future research should attempt to flesh out the types of factors that are the most important for engagement in different roles, jobs, organisations and groups.

Evidence suggests that new employees score the highest on levels of engagement, which may in part be due to the optimism and enthusiasm they experience upon starting a new job. Further research is needed to determine exactly which attitudes they possess at this stage and what elements they are so highly engaged with in their work. Once these have been identified, managers can attempt to maintain that high level of engagement employees experience at the beginning of their employment throughout their entire period of employment by understanding clearly what predicts engagement for those individuals.

Whilst employee engagement surveys are now being used by many organisations, such as the survey used by the Gallup Organisation, it could be argued that surveys fail to show which specific actions can be taken to help employees become more engaged. Therefore, it is suggested that future researchers should create and use ‘actionable’ surveys, whereby the results indicate not just levels of engagement, but also where the problem areas lie and what, in an employee’s opinion, should be done to eliminate the barriers to engagement. A further consideration is that employee surveys should be supported by interviews and contextual analysis in order to gain a more holistic view on engagement and how it is being managed within different organisational settings.

Much of the research to date has concentrated on organisations in the US, although the CIPD and The Roffey Park Institute based in the UK have made a significant contribution to unearthing employee engagement levels in the UK. Although the Gallup Organisation has conducted research in several countries, there is still a need for research to concentrate in depth on other countries throughout the world.

Furthermore, the way in which research is conducted throughout the world differs from country to country. Whilst the differences in measurement are to be expected given the disagreement surrounding what engagement actually is, it makes it very difficult to compare the engagement results reliably, whether the comparison is between organisations, occupations, sectors or countries. When an element of an organisation is measured, be it financial or people related, most organisations will want to know how they compare with others. This suggests future research should focus on creating a standard measure of engagement to allow organisations to see how they measure up to other companies along a simple set of fundamental work qualities.

Future research could also consider individual differences as variables that might predict employee engagement. Several personality variables, such as self-esteem, have been found to be related to the concept of 'burnout'; so this might also be important for engagement, given that engagement is the positive antithesis of burnout. There is also some evidence based on social exchange theory, which suggests that individuals with a strong exchange ideology are more likely to feel obliged to return the benefit bestowed to them. Therefore, the relationship between various predictors and engagement might be stronger for individuals with a strong exchange ideology. Future research could test the effects of exchange ideology for the relationship between predictors and engagement.

A final area for future research is to study the potential effect of managerial interventions on employee engagement. There is already some existing evidence which suggests that exchange-inducing interventions can remind employees of a sense of obligation making them feel obliged to reciprocate (Ganzach *et al* 2002). Therefore, future research could investigate the extent to which interventions can create a sense of obligation that leads to individuals to reciprocate with higher levels of engagement. For example, communication was found to be a key driver of engagement, so training managers on how to communicate effectively might be effective for improving perceptions of involvement and a sense of belonging.

Interventions in job design, which provide employees with more autonomy and freedom as well as career management interventions, might also be effective. These are likely to be rewarding areas for future research due to the growing interest organisations have in improving employee engagement, and may address the problem of the majority of employees being disengaged or not engaged.

The review has also revealed some practical implications for management to consider in terms of the design of jobs and relations with employees. The results of many engagement surveys indicate low levels of engagement among employees. The evidence suggests social exchange at work and support are what employees would like. Therefore, organisations that wish to improve employee engagement should focus on employees' perceptions of the support they receive from their organisation. Organisations which conduct surveys and suggestion programmes, for example, address employees' needs and concerns and those which offer flexible working arrangements, for example, demonstrate caring and support; all of which may cause employees to reciprocate with higher levels of engagement.

Research evidence shows that engagement and an employee's intention to stay with their organisation are influenced by the relationships held at work and the behaviours experienced. Therefore, management must be able to develop a sense of community and ensure favourable behaviours are displayed, such as trusting employees by giving them autonomy to make their own decisions. However, the literature indicates that it is not just what managers do that is important; collegial relations are also important.

Discretionary behaviour has been revealed to be an important element that is correlated with engagement. However, a significant majority find their skills are not fully utilised in the workplace and opportunities to engage in discretionary behaviour are denied. This again suggests that management need to pay more attention to job design, creating more opportunity for people to contribute.

Research on emotions and wellbeing points to a link between positive feelings at work and levels of engagement. Furthermore, if management pay close attention to happiness at work,

they will benefit from well-functioning employees, whilst at the same time enhancing the prospect of future resourcefulness. Organisations are more likely to see results by fostering positive emotions rather than simply concentrating on negative emotions and dealing with problems.

It is evident that giving employees the opportunity to feed their views and opinions upwards is a key driver of employee engagement. In addition, employees want to be kept ‘in the know’ about what is happening in their organisation. People want a sense of involvement with their employer. Employers can increase employee engagement by going beyond downward communication and making sure that people are not just treated as employees; instead they should be treated as valued individuals, as the research on individual differences suggests.

Research has shown that there may be a link between levels of engagement and organisational performance. Human resource practices that have a strong focus on people have demonstrated a significant impact on improvements in productivity, satisfaction and financial performance. In addition, engagement needs to be viewed as a broad organisational strategy that involves all levels of the organisation (Frank *et al* 2004), a string of actions and steps (Shaw 2005), which require the contribution and involvement of organisational members (Robinson *et al* 2004), as well as consistent, continuous and clear communications (Truss *et al* 2006).

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