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Becoming engaged: situating employee engagement in a changing work context

Abstract

As a human resource management (HRM) tool, Employee Engagement (EE) has been advocated for its role in increasing competitive advantage. However, this approach focuses primarily on leveraging outcomes toward performance without considering conditions that nurture performance. It thus steers away from Kahn's original conception of EE and creates problems when work is situated in a changing context. Conceptualising "engagement as becoming practice", this paper provides a processual lens that extends the "engagement of condition" literature. By examining the implementation of an EE initiative in one organisation over 30 months, we demonstrate that both employer and employees can benefit from the heightened experience of EE when decision-making concerning the boundaries, competency measures and material configurations of work is allowed for. We therefore suggest that the academic rigour around EE is better directed towards understanding its context of implementation rather than proving the impact of EE on performance at a general level.

Introduction

As a new human resource management (HRM) tool, Employee Engagement (EE) has been advocated by HR practitioners and/or senior management mostly for its role in increasing levels of competitive advantage at the firm level. Present research and perspectives on EE, however, have focused primarily on leveraging outcomes toward performance rather than enacting conditions that nurture performance. This unidimentional approach thus steers away from Kahn's original conception of EE that frames it within a context in which the purpose and meaning of work is emphasised. It also creates a two-fold problem in practice when work is situated in a changing context. In the few studies that have turned attention towards understanding engagement and performance as a secondary consequence to work, the actual processes through which EE may be enacted over time in everyday work practices are still largely unknown.

Predicted on the notion of "engagement as becoming practice", this paper seeks to provide a processual lens that shows how organisational actors' everyday experiences of work might create conditions for their engagement in a context highlighting the importance of situated change. By examining the implementation of an EE initiative in one organisation in Spain through interviews, documents, and observations over 30 months, we were able to document the design and implementation of an EE initiative by actors in and around the case organisation. The findings demonstrate that both the employer and its employees can both benefit from the outcomes associated with the

heightened experience of employee engagement. However, this result is achieved on the premise that the power relations embedded in everyday work procedures and practices are not congealed and instead allow for organisational actors' involvement in the everyday decision-making processes concerning the boundaries, competency measures and material configurations of their work arrangements.

The paper offers a new conceptualisation that extends the "engagement of condition" literature by responding to Kahn's original conceptualisation of EE. Embracing a more analytical, critical and contextual approach to EE (Johns, 2017; Kaufman, 2015), we provide an empirical case that demonstrates the possibility for studying EE as it unfolds in a changing work context without assuming a universally valid 'best practice' framework (Cooke, 2018). As such, we demonstrate that the academic rigour around the notion of EE is better directed towards understanding the context of action rather than trying to measure and prove the impact of EE on performance at a general level. We would therefore reaffirm Bailey et al.'s (2017, p.37) suggestion that the future scholarship of EE should take seriously "the introduction of additional theoretical insights from organisational sociological perspectives [that] would further enrich our understanding of engagement".

The paper is structured as follows: we first problematise the mainstream approach to EE, i.e. engagement as outcome, from a Kahnian perspective. We then explain why an alternative approach, i.e. "engagement as condition", may carry the intellectual

weight of Kahnian's original conception of EE further. Building on this approach, we further propose to consider EE as becoming practice. The findings and discussions are presented before we discuss the implications of this new conceptualisation.

Literature review

1. Problematising "engagement as outcome": a Kahnian re-check

Grounded primarily in Kahn's (1990) original research on psychological engagement and disengagement, scholars have suggested that EE, as presently operationalised in practice, is a three dimensional construct consisting of cognitive, emotive, and physical properties. Kahn's (1990) original intention was to encourage researchers to adequately conceptualise engagement process through which employees may interpret work practices within a meaningful social context. For instance, he develops the concept of psychological presence (1992) to emphasis the experiential state that enables organisation actors to express thoughts and feelings, question assumptions, and innovate. Moreover, he points out every process of enacting engagement is unique and should be approached with some awareness of its particularity. Clearly, Kahn's (2010) focus here is primarily on developing organisational actors as full human beings by acknowledging their specific psychological and emotional needs and that performance is only created through positive conditions that tie in with their individual and social circumstances.

Unfortunately, the mainstream discourses on EE tend to prioritise the connections

4

between work and the unique performance measures associated with an employee's level of engagement. Engagement from this perspective has been positioned as "engagement as outcome", where the construct of engagement, as antecedent, outcome, moderator or mediator, is examined in connection to other performance-related variables, such as leadership style, job climate, turnover intention, task performance, knowledge creation, and organisational citizenship behaviour, to name but a few (Bailey et al., 2017; Brunetto et al., 2012; Strobel et al., 2017; Van De Voorde & Van Veldhoven, 2016). These lines of development have primarily sought "engaged" outcomes that have an impact on performance, and implicitly assumed that engagement must be positively related to performance. For example, the widely seen Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) defines "engagement" as a positive, stable and enduring attitudinal frame of mind, which can be assessed in relation to the competitive advantage at the firm level. And yet the construct is notoriously known for its limited relevance to HRM from an employee-centred perspective (Purcell, 2014), questionable discriminant validity (Bailey et al., 2017; Viljevac et al., 2012), and lack of international transferability (Wefald et al., 2012). This kind of measuring exercise posits EE as a variable to be manipulated and controlled managerially. EE is thus only taken seriously as a performance or efficiency enhancing imperative towards which relevant knowledge and practice are geared (Purcell, 2014).

Indeed, the UWES and its alike represent an unidimensional approach that steers away from Kahn's original conception of EE that frames it within a context in which

the purpose and meaning of work is emphasised. The danger of this approach is that it can quickly drain the construct of its contexts and regards engagement as adaptive behaviours purposefully focused on meeting or exceeding organisational outcomes. Not surprisingly, employees are treated as resources to be instrumentally used by employers rather than real people to be developed professionally along this line of thinking (Van Buren-III et al., 2011). This is particularly problematic when one's job is situated in a changing context where the purpose and meaning of work are subject to change. In practice, it can be inferred that the unidimenstional approach may well suffer from two major drawbacks: (1) the actions and goals of HR practitioners and/or senior management who advocate EE as a useful tool are usually separated from the context of its implementation,; (2) organisational actors' sense-making and practices are not perceived as an integral part of a context in which a multitude of logics of action of work come together to shape the implementation of EE strategies or programmes. To go beyond this reified understanding of EE, we argue for a need to consider the conditions that may foster EE at work.

2. Extending "engagement as condition": a becoming practice lens

In complement to the "engagement as outcome" perspective, Shuck and Rose (2013) argue that engagement must also be situated within the conditions from which it emerges: the "engagement of condition". From this perspective, engagement presents a unique, often perplexing and complicated puzzle for scholars and practitioners to solve. On the one hand, engagement is a performance related variable that has

demonstrated empirical linkages to appealing organisational competitive advantage. One the other hand, the manifestation of engagement and by its empirical linkage, i.e. the increased levels of performance, is only a by-product or a secondary consequence to work that is interpreted as meaningful and purpose-driven. In other words, it is work itself that stimulates the "engagement of condition". In our view, this line of research bears a closer resemblance to the conception of EE offered by Kahn (1990, 1992, 2010).

Scholars have also suggested that the emergence of engagement in practice is nuanced and individually offered from within rather than demanded or artificially created from without. Thus the outcome of increased performance connected to engagement is not obligatory on the part of the employee. As a matter of fact, the empowerment of engagement lies proportionately and sometimes problematically with the organisation. Unfortunately, organisations often want more engagement outcomes than they know how to develop or are willing to invest in developing EE. Without a deeper understanding of the underlying motivations that drive the engagement of condition, the construct of engagement runs the risk of becoming another passing fad. As such, learning how to shape experiences of work that engage, that build passion, and that are interpreted as meaningful and purposeful are gaining momentum (Shuck & Rose, 2013).

Within this movement, the focus of attention should not be about how much

performance can be leveraged from any one person, but simultaneously, how performance can be developed and sustained through conditions that enhance the experience of work. In other words, the expression of cognitive, affective, and physical energies into one's work performance, as Kahn (1990, 2010) suggested, should be reflected in the individual interpretations of the work environment and context that represent the processes of engagement. Fundamentally these interpretations must be grounded in the perspective of organisational actors. To determine the context of engagement of condition from an employee lens therefore requires us to address how employees develop contextual sensitivity and real-time interpretations of the meaning and purpose of the work that they do on a daily basis. This is, in effect, the study of 'becoming engaged' as opposed to tending to the 'engaged' outcomes.

Indeed there has been a critical, albeit minor, stream of EE literature that recognises the importance of work environment and context for EE (Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010; George, 2011; Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013; Halbesleben, 2011; Jenkins & Delbridge, 2013; Keenoy, 2014; Lombardo, Meier, & Verloo, 2010; Purcell, 2013; Shuck & Reio, 2014; Shuck & Rose, 2013; Townsend, Wilkinson, & Burgess, 2014). For example, Reissner and Pagan (2013) investigate how engagement strategies are perceived and experienced by employees byshowing the influences of communication activities on individual employees' lived experience of engagement. Similarly, Jenkins and Delbridge (2013) identify a 'soft approach' to engagement, which challenges the view

that the value of employee engagement lies in its ability to improve organisational performance. Instead, they argue that the value of engagement should be recognised in its own right, i.e. engagement in itself is a positive outcome/objective.

In their more recent studies, Shuck and colleagues (2013, 2016) tried to revive Kahn's original conception of EE by either attending to the meaning and purpose of work or confronting the issue of unequal states of power and privilege that prohibit engagement to flourish. Insightful as these studies may be, the way that they perceive what work is or does is still constrained in a relatively stable environment. As such, the conditions or social mechanisms through which EE may be enacted over time in a changing work context remain little understood *processually*. Through developing a deeper understanding of these social mechanisms, we hope to (i) study EE continuously throughout its dissemination process, including the implementation of EE strategies or programmes in practice; and (ii) pay more attention to organisational actors' sense-making of the meaning and purpose of work over time.

Adopting a practice[1] lens, Bjørkeng *et al.*'s (2009) study of alliance collaboration, in which a leadership action team was created as a new organisational level, shows how collaborative practice as situated change is enacted and unfolds over time. By virtue of observing the team's day-to-day activities longitudinally, the authors were able to witness how the three social mechanisms described below manifested themselves

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[1] Social theorists, such as Garfinkel, Foucault, and Bourdieu all address practice explicitly. Building on the common ground shared by these theorists, here we consider practice as the use of a sign system, for which there are shared understandings or norms of right and wrong use (Bjørkeng *et al.*, 2009).

across time and space. They thus provide us with a more fluid and ongoing view on practice: in its perpetual becoming of something else, while continuously being accepted as 'the same' (Bjørkeng *et al*., 2009):

(a) *Authoring Boundaries*, processes whereby activities are constructed as legitimate parts of practising. In our view, these processes are essentially about the legitimate discourses in forming a firm's realms of activity. According to Foucault (1972), we should understand discourse as the taken-for-granted ways that people make collective sense of an experience. Different discourses provide different frameworks and different logics of reasoning that form different realms of activities (Bjørkeng *et al*., 2009). It is a framework of this kind that becomes instantiated in the written, spoken and other communicated texts that are constitutive of organisational realities. To study EE as discursive practice, therefore, is to look at how EE is enacted through these discourses, which may provide patterned ways of understanding and dealing with possible choices and decisions. In other words, discourses can be understood as resources that legitimatise behaviour and construct frameworks to justify the boundaries of activities within an organisational context.

(b) *Negotiating Competencies*, processes whereby practising and practitioners are constructed as competent. These processes are concerned with the mechanism of subjectivity in shaping actors' behaviours. According to Foucault (1977), different discourses not only form different realms of activity, but also objectivise people into

different subject positions. Subject positions refer to the locations in social space from which certain delimited agents can act. Subjects are socially produced as individuals who take up positions within discourses (Clegg & Kornberger, 2007). In this process, discourses are the principal means by which organisational actors create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are and by implication, how they should act. Viewed in this light, to argue EE as discursive practice is to study how EE-related discourses in an organisation give rise to the possibility of various subject positions and how these positions are taken up or resisted by organisational actors and eventually shape their behaviours and organisational realities. Our position here, as with Foucault, is that a subject can constitute itself in an active fashion through its own practices (Clegg et al., 2011).

(c) *Adapting Materiality*, the processes whereby material configurations are enacted and entangled in practising, linked with the identification of subjective positions and construed as essential elements of a practice. According to Foucault (1977), discourses generate not only subject positions, but also materiality (e.g. in the form of tools, methods, or spatial arrangements) by reference to the immediate material settings and intersubjective understandings of the activities explored (Bjørkeng *et al*., 2009). To treat EE as discursive practice, in this regard, is to study how a specific material configuration functions as a medium that allows EE-related discourses to compete and/or to collaborate with each other in constituting a collectively negotiated identity as part of the organisational reality.

In what follows, we adapt the above framework for the analysis of our case organisation. The research questions that guide our analysis are: (1) how do the social mechanisms enable us to capture the processes of EE at work? and (2) what implications do those social mechanisms hold for studying EE in an ongoing process?

Research context and methodology

One of the authors participated in research activities in an EU programme within 30 months of implementation. The ultimate goal of the EU programme was to strengthen the competitiveness and innovation potential of European firms by means of utilising their intangible resources, however, the precondition of achieving that was to create dedicated and engaged workforce. This agenda was therefore translated into the implementation of an EE initiative, through conducting an employee survey and its follow-up activities, before assessing the impact of EE on the utilisation of intangible resources and ultimately on the competitive advantage at the firm level. S-CO was one of the 25 pilot firms participating in the EU programme. In what follows, we delineate the methods of data collection and analysis before reporting on how S-CO enacted situated change in the name of EE and on the effect of this initiative.

Data collection

Data collection at S-CO was conducted in three phases over a 30-month span when the EU programme was running, which involved the use of unstructured and semi-structured individual or group interviews, observations and document reviews.

In total, 25 interviews (see Table 1) ranging from 29 to 108 minutes in length were conducted across the three phases. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The participants spanned administrative levels and functional groupings (see Table 2) and involved EE consultants, employees at the Engineering Business Unit (EBU), employees at other business units, EBU's suppliers, collaborators, and clients, and S-CO's senior management. Observations occurred when site visits were arranged to understand the day-to-day work procedures and practices of EBU and hear the actors' reflection on the experience of implementing an EE initiative; field notes were taken where possible. The materials reviewed included different sets of programme artefacts, such as the pilot firms' evaluation reports, the programme proposals, and the implementation guidelines.

Data analysis

We assembled the three phases of data and reflected on our own experiences of taking part in this longitudinal EU programme. These activities became the foundation for our writing and re-writing of the characters involved and their social milieus. In other words, although the quotations presented below were taken mainly from interviews, the narratives presented below have also been reinforced by informal conversations and observations. We used Atlas.Ti software to derive themes and concepts, starting from a free-coding process. This process was generally supported by the literature, as discussed above, which embraces a situated change perspective, i.e. the stable and changing patterns of a practice (Bjørkeng *et al.*, 2009). In other words, we did not

13

treat practice as something constituted by discrete entities which become related through a specific array of activities (Sandberg & Dall'Alba, 2009). Instead, we explored it in the light of emergence, which was carefully approached by detecting the themes that make a practice "changing and transforming while at the same continuing to be referred to as 'the same'" (Bjørkeng *et al.*, 2009, p. 145).

Here insert Table 1&2

Implementing an EE initiative on the ground

S-CO is a family-owned Spanish firm, which has specialised in surface treatment processes since 1952.[2] The firm's headquarters is situated in Barcelona and it has operational sites in eight cities in Spain. As a first step, S-CO decided to implement the EE initiative in its Engineering Business Unit (EBU). The core business of the firm has always been the supply of global solutions for surface treatment, e.g. chemicals (Chemical Business Unit – CBU), surface treatment devices (EBU) and environmental solutions (ES). The yearly turnover of S-CO is around 40 million Euros in total, of which 10 million Euros are secured through EBU. EBU serves clients in France, Germany, Brazil and other countries, including automotive tier 1 manufacturers and suppliers, the aircraft industry and provides the aluminium for the cosmetic and construction industries.

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2 Surface treatments processes include a wide range of products and chemicals specialties for surface treatment, as well as plants for their application in electroplating, metalworking, lubricants, aluminum, environment, paint, polishing and installation. The firm has a complete range of products and services, a wide geographical covering together with a highly experienced team in this area.

CBU, however, is the largest and most profitable unit. The chemicals that CBU produces require specific devices to be applied. This was precisely the reason why EBU was set up in the 1980s: as an appendix of CBU providing auxiliary facilities to meet the requirements of CBU's clients. While EBU gained a more independent status over the years, the tension caused by internal competition for resources and rewards between the firm's 8 business units was easy to see. Externally, S-CO faced fierce price competition from the emerging markets in Eastern Europe and Asia. One of its main competitors in Spain for the last 50 years, for example, decided to close down its engineering division and to buy all its installations from China.

At the time the EU programme was introduced to EBU, people there had little idea what IC was. Moreover, the internal and external environment where EBU operated seemed to be characterised by the conditions of uncertainty described above. EBU thus felt obliged to "do something about it" even without knowing "what's in it for us". To start with, two junior employees and two senior employees were selected from EBU's main operational domains to form an EE implementation team. As the project proceeded, employees from other business units, from S-CO's senior management covering all major strategic functions (general administration, finance, and R&D), and also from EBU's stakeholder groups (suppliers, clients, distributors and collaborators) were all mobilised along the way to support the emergent changes in EBU's way of performing. In retrospect, the inclusion of people with different levels of experience and backgrounds in the implementation of the EE strategy was deemed essential to

the enactment of EE in action:

> "*[T]he fact that people from different functions and of different ages were communicating together determined the results; [and these] would otherwise have been very different if only I and the Managing Director had done this exercise by ourselves*" (RP, General Manager)

Initially, EBU, like other pilot firms, ended up measuring most of the EE items in an employee survey prescribed by the programme consortium. To help pilot firms understand the three aspects of EE and their effect on improving a firm's business performance, the consortium provided a list of 'commonly seen' EE items according to the Job Engagement Scale (JES). In particular, 18 EE items were selected (see Appendix I): the first 6 items were used to account for the physical properties of EE, the middle 6 represented the affective properties, and the last 6 referred to the cognitive properties. Yet, EBU in general felt "*they were going through a list of items as if it were a restaurant menu*" (JJ, Trainer). In fact, most pilot firms, including S-CO, failed to see how the items of EE could capture the complicated nature of their work due to the underlying assumption made to EE as being a positive, stable and enduring attitudinal frame of mind. For instance, many employees experienced problems with item "P4: I try my hardest to perform well on my job" by pointing out that they are willing to try their hardest to perform well but they are constrained to do so, or with item "A11: I am feel positive about my job" by reporting they feel both positive and

negative about their job, and interestingly, when the positive was not officially recognised or rewarded it turned to the negative.

To overcome the above difficulties, EBU realised that it should spend more time on framing their imminent business issues and developing an in-depth understanding of its everyday work practices before finding context-specific meanings for its measured EE items and indicators. Table 3 provides a summary of what EBU actually did, with the details fleshed out below.

Here insert Table 3

Authoring boundaries

The initial constructs guiding the work to be performed by EBU revolved around an 'engineering' discourse, named by us, which was closely related to S-CO's historical development: in the 1970s and 1980s, EBU functioned as a workshop affiliated to CBU providing in-house engineering services. In the late 1980s, however, as soon as EBU became more independent, it began to explore market opportunities worldwide. Consequently, many services previously supplied in-house were gradually contracted out. This 'engineering' discourse was exemplified by three sets of activities that constituted EBU's formalised practice: first, the *Sales and Projects* team takes charge of contacting a client firm, identifying its requirements, and opening a project study file for the client; second, and most importantly, the *Engineering and Assembly* team

carries out a "deep study" of the client and designs a device prototype before selecting and contracting suppliers, in addition to arranging logistics for the device to be assembled and installed on client sites; third, the *After-Sales* team takes over and deals with the client's repair and maintenance requests after the assembly-installation stage.

While the programme was running, we noticed that EBU as a whole seemed to spend a substantial amount of its time discussing Research and Design (R&D) activities relating to new markets. In doing so, EBU was attempting to offer its clients 'a complete solution' with a higher profit margin than a set of coating devices. It did so even though R&D activities fall outside EBU's formalised business processes and thus are considered by many to be no legitimate part of EBU's working sphere. Besides, the R&D activities that EBU focused on were more concerned with market-based innovation than with technology-based innovation. Hence, this focus could not be sustained by EBU alone without building a strong collaborative relationship with its business partners, suppliers and other business units. For instance, resources, such as CBU's diversified client base, expanded business networks, and its up-to-date knowledge of chemicals could have served as resources for EBU's R&D processes to tap into. Unfortunately, the premise that all business units within S-CO functioned as independent cost, investment and profit centres made internal information exchange and collaboration increasingly scarce.

In these circumstances, a number of EE elements were activated by EBU to address the tensions between its existing practice and a possible way of performing in the future, including, most notably, "A10: I am proud of my job" and "P2: I exert my full effort to my job". EBU specified one of the reasons that people feel proud of their work (A10) lies in the fact that "the way by which employees, business units, and different organisational levels exchange information and collaborate among them". Simultaneously, they identified that their struggle to exert full effort at work (P2) was caused by the difficulty to maintain "relationships with professional associations, bodies, and societies". To manage these relationships, EBU considered indicators such as "the number of knowledge transfer meetings with R&D partners". In the later phases of implementing the EE initiative, EBU called four reconciliation meetings with CBU and ES to review and plan for "common projects". More significantly, it hosted a knowledge transfer meeting in which two collaborators were invited to share their first-hand experiences of supporting market-based R&D activities. This meeting sought to address the issue of the lack of collaboration and recognition in EBU's performance:

> *"EBU was a 'workshop' ... we had plenty of people downstairs making machines ... we had to change people and [their] mentality… to go from this workshop to an innovative unit that is able to sell around the world…"* (RP, General Manager).

Both collaborators had previously held managerial positions at S-CO, yet both left when they sensed that the internal communication and coordination was becoming increasingly difficult:

"*I travelled periodically to Madrid to meetings where we exchanged experiences [and] analysed systems, but the transfer of knowledge never happened at the head office... the last meeting of this kind was... 14, 15 years ago*" (AG, Collaborator/Former-manager at S-CO).

"*I brought my notes from 30 years ago, no one had asked for these before*" (VF, Collaborator/Former-manager at S-CO).

The reception to the knowledge transfer meeting by the EBU staff was exceptionally positive. Two collaborators' first-hand experiences of supporting market-based R&D activities were considered "inspirational". It was at this meeting that EBU's focus on R&D activities for new markets was made explicit, and subsequently a narrative was created calling for systematisation as part of its work practices:

"*I felt privileged to talk to them ... [We came to understand] in Valencia people were following a different set of procedures, using new chemical products, and doing installations collaboratively... we need to rethink our*

design ... systematic innovation should be part of our business process (JD,

Technician)

"Innovation needs to be systematised, in how we work, in how we behave"

(SC, Sales and Projects Manager)

By the time the EU programme was concluded, the changing constructs that guided EBU's way of performing were more concerned with an "innovation" discourse, which was exemplified by the fact that the R&D function was externalised as a legitimate part of EBU's business processes. This discourse embodied EBU's endogenously defined value proposition in terms of seeking a higher profit margin by embracing market-based innovation. From a practice perspective, what we observed was that EBU enacted a number of interrelated EE elements, regardless of the boundaries of each capital category, to find a way to perform within its redefined value creation discourse.

Negotiating competencies

The initial constructs that helped us make sense of EBU's subjective position were the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) briefly touched upon in the ISO 9001 documents that EBU prepared. The KPIs, which built upon the criteria used for measuring engineering service delivery in a timely (schedule), price-competitive (cost), and reliable (quality) manner, evoked the image of an engineer in our heads. Admittedly,

schedule, cost, and quality are the typical measures used for assessing engineers' work, but these could not account for the other characteristics of EBU's workforce. While the ICS project was running, what we observed was that most of EBU's staff were required to deal with clients from all over the world and therefore they must be "flexible", e.g. travel frequently, speak different languages, work online and offline, and adjust their timetables from time to time; but they needed to be "collaborative" as well, since EBU's suppliers, returning customers, as well as CBU's products and clients all exerted a great influence on EBU's new product design and innovation, which in turn affected its profit margins. Being "collaborative" would thus allow EBU staff to listen to the firm's stakeholders and to explore opportunities of developing projects of common interest.

Given this situation, EBU enacted "C15: I concentrate on my job" to demonstrate the issue of partial assessment in the existing performance evaluation system. EBU further specified that "C18: I devote a lot of attention to my job" is conditioned on one's "ability to coordinate with people, communicate and discuss in a constructive way, generating a kind of behaviour that brings up trust and makes possible a quiet and relaxed cooperation", and used "the percentage of matching each person with his/her work profile" as an indicator. The subsequent actions that EBU took involved consulting employees informally before reviewing and redefining work profiles, including career development plans, for each staff member. In a retrospective group discussion within EBU at a later date, we noted the following conversations:

JV: *How do you find the internal coordination and communication [within EBU]?*

JD: *I start from the idea that I am an individual, in a department that operates and works as a team… I am a person who relates to the rest of my colleagues through a common objective, in this case, an installation project.*

SL: *In my case, it's about satisfying a client … if there is a problem experienced by my colleague, I can't just say, 'yes, I will help you'. No, the problem with her today could be with me tomorrow … if it's not resolved systematically, they [clients] may not consult us on another project …*

BM: *… and what kind of initiative, if managed systematically, would you welcome?*

SS: *… RP fought for us to be enrolled on an English course so that we can communicate with clients from English speaking countries… our department will fly to Paris to attend an exhibition there… learning about new things …*

The above excerpt can be construed as a snapshot of the continuous negotiating of competencies that we observed in EBU. This type of conversation brought to mind the image of a consultant who works in a project-based, team-oriented, and client-facing environment in which continuous training and learning are treated as a crucial element of the job. Indeed, towards the end of Phase II implementation, EBU ended up with approximately 60% of updated work profiles and career development plans at both a strategic and an individual level which accommodated a new set of performance evaluation criteria. Without enacting "C15: I concentrate on my job" and

"C18: I devote a lot of attention to my job", EBU as a whole had to meet the performance evaluation criteria predetermined for assessing an engineer's work. And its staff's skills and expertise in terms of (a) maintaining a degree of flexibility at work and (b) collaborating with stakeholders would never have been taken seriously. Viewed in this light, what we observed is that the enactment of EE elements created a space for negotiating a subjective position and the related performance measure that rendered novel value-creation activities possible.

Adapting materiality

The initial constructs featuring EBU's materialisation of its practice were installation manuals, budgets, formal contracts and protocols etc., which can be understood with reference to the immediate material settings of EBU's business activities. While these constructs were useful in the management of traditional design and construct projects, EBU and its stakeholders soon overturned this fragmented materiality in the course of implementing an EE initiative. In its places, they developed an alternative approach to materialising their practice, which was largely concerned with constructing an overarching material setting in which they could discuss, negotiate and work with each other around emergent issues and initiatives. Specifically, the reception of the knowledge transfer meeting in terms of boosting confidence and trust and materialising new business ideas was extremely positive and it actually triggered EBU's desire to organise similar networking events.

Given this development, EBU enacted a number of EE items, including, "A12: I am excited about my job", and "C17: I am absorbed in my job" in order to build up a narrative showing that the management of relationship with suppliers and clients can contribute to the optimisation of business processes, especially from the perspective of co-authoring and implementing novel business ideas. For example, "A12" which refers to the excitement of work was defined by EBU collectively as "pursuing inspiring projects with significant others" and its indicator was subsequently defined as "the number of reported ideas for new developments/the number of implemented ideas". Following these ideas, EBU decided to host a "Procurement Event" in order to liaise with suppliers and clients so as to pursue its exporting ambitions. By the time the event was hosted by EBU, its materiality was reflected in EBU's selection of participants, artefacts, and topics for the event.

"... *Many companies closed down, [so] 'to do things correctly is not enough*" (RP, General Manager).

This kind of pre-conception set the scene for the event. Staff members at EBU then presented sales figures and concluded that returning clients not only made a valuable contribution to its sales volume but also became a source of inspiration for improving the products and services that EBU staff deeply care about:

"*We have a good number of returning clients… we studied their cases and made other machines at a cheaper cost… clients' feedback became part of*

our know-how…" (SS, Purchasing specialist).

"*… We subcontract plenty of things, so supplies are part of this picture too*"

(FB, Technician).

Although the event was hosted by EBU, the presence of senior management in S-CO gave it a "strategic tone". In addition, the General Manager RP at EBU introduced an initiative that it had implemented to ensure customer loyalty, i.e. a web-based tool that allowed clients from all over the world to exchange ideas about the same products as they had bought from EBU. RP emphasised that it was a system through which the company could learn from clients and clients could learn from each other. No tangible outcomes were produced immediately after this one-day event. However, an important message was brewing and spreading about affirming the material significance of the event and generalising desirable patterns of behaviours for ongoing collaborations:

"*The relationship is not with a person but with the company, it is the company that offers trust… it [the event] even goes beyond that [since] this shows … S-CO's philosophy: an open company, in possession of and giving a lot of trust…*" (MM, Supplier).

"*If S-CO changes, we want to change with it…*" (AJ, Client).

A few months after the EE project was concluded, we learned that a joint project co-developed by EBU and one of its suppliers was in progress. This reinforced our impression that EBU had adapted its materiality from a simple focus on the immediate material settings to a commitment to building a wider and overarching material context, in which the significant role of events and ongoing achievement were emphasised. Within this picture, the enactment of EE factors and indicators is crucial for addressing the gap between EBU's fragmented materiality and sustainable materiality that aims to capture future opportunities for value creation.

Discussion

There is a general acceptance that an HRM system should consist of HR philosophy, policies, practices and practices (Monks et al., 2013). While most studies focus on HR policies and practices at the firm level, our research focuses on exploring the processual mechanisms that may enable or prohibit the emergence of EE by embracing a more critical and contextualised approach to HRM (Truss et al., 2013). Examining EE from a critical and contextualised perspective means that we need to acknowledge the messy outcome of "human interpretations, conflicts, confusions, guesses and rationalisations, albeit with these aspects of human agency operating within a context of societal and political economic circumstances" (Watson 2004, p453).

Specifically, our analysis above suggested that work practices and procedures inside

S-CO's EBU had changed considerably over the 30-month period following implementation of an EE initiative. The significant transformation, while made possible by EE, was not caused by it directly. Rather it occurred through situated change enacted in the name of EE by the organisational actors in EBU and around it. The conceptualisation of EE as becoming practice drawn on here thus posits EE not as a fixed technical entity or a social construct, but as a set of inhibitors and enablers realised in practice by the appropriation of its feature as a three-dimensional classification system, shaping the production of situated actions, and being in turn shaped by these actions. Overall, the new conceptualisation has two implications below.

(I). Conceptualising EE as becoming practice has provided insights in the adoption of new tools of HRM embedded in their contexts of implementation, as an integral part of its dissemination. Our case study illustrated that EE was particularly useful in situations characterised by uncertainties and ambiguities because it can be used to arrange, coordinate and control action through the following mechanisms. First, "*Authoring Boundaries*" is essentially about constructing discourse *in situ*, and involves the members of EBU constructing formal and informal boundaries of practice, thus enabling them to perform and to identify activities as either falling inside or outside the particular practice which they collectively constructed to be a part of (Bjørkeng *et al*., 2009). The enacted EE elements and their corresponding indicators externalised the tension between two-value creation discourses

("engineering" vs "innovation") through which EBU's possible ways of performing were investigated. As an enacted element, EE is accorded an "in-between" status for examining endogenously defined value propositions and thus accommodating different "logics of action" (Gendron, 2002), which are loosely defined as a way of reasoning, or as an interpretative scheme that influences organisational actors' ways of thinking and behaving. This status makes the translation between the actual and the potential logics of action possible and thus transcends the agenda of leveraging outcomes toward performance and moves towards enacting conditions that nurture performance (Shuck and Rose, 2013).

Second, "*Negotiating Competencies*" represents a recurring theme of subjectivity in EBU's daily practice with regard to the issue of good performance and competent practicing. The enactment of "C15" or "C18" for example created a space in which different subject positions taken up by EBU and their related performance measures were negotiated and reinterpreted in light of the redefined value creation discourses. A deliberate focus on if and how a subject can constitute itself in an active fashion through their practices would enable us to take seriously individual actors and their first-hand experience of engaging with EE. In other words, while it is possible that organisations and employees both benefit from the outcomes associated with the heightened experiences of EE, we maintain that organisations desiring high levels of engagement should be prepared to confront issues such as unequal states of power, access, and status (Shuck et al., 2016). This premise is crucial to set EE free from the

concern of managerial control and manipulation (Purcell, 2013; Townsend et al., 2014; Bailey et al., 2017).

Third, "*Adapting Materiality*" reminds us to examine the theme of materiality in the becoming of practice. As we have seen, the formal work of the EBU was to begin with an organisational unit situated in its immediately material settings; however, its practising was actively grounded in the materiality of networking events and became inherently meaningful in those contexts. The enactment of "A12", for example, revealed the gap between fragmented and sustainable materiality in EBU, which paved the way for capturing its future opportunities for value creation. Materiality as a social mechanism is thus essential for us to apprehend the performativity of EE, the transformative qualities of EE and the accomplishment of EE in the sense of exploring what EE-related discourses "do to things" (Foucault 1981, p.67).

(II). Conceptualising EE as becoming practice has enabled us to understand the case firm's organisational processes when they were used to accommodate the conflicts and contradictions embedded in its different "logics of action" (Gendron, 2002). In particular, our case study confirmed that the logics of action are produced and reproduced through organisational actors' daily activities and decisions in accordance with their own situated interests. It thus demonstrated that organisational actors are capable of making interpretations and inventing responses according to the circumstances. As such, we responded better to the call to study "employees, their

beliefs, values, behaviours, and experiences at work in a way not seen before the mainstream" (Purcell 2014, p.251).

Concluding remarks

This paper makes possible an analysis of EE-based organisational transformation. It therefore shifts the focus of attention from perceiving "engagement as outcomes" to "engagement as conditions" in a context that highlights the changing context of work and the purpose and meaning that employees assigned to their work over time. For this reason, the paper enriches our understanding of the contribution made by EE that builds on a more critical and contextualised approach. Thus, while the advocates of EE promote it as a useful tool for HRM that links its outcomes to performance, our study, contrariwise, found cause to cautiously celebrate the agentic learning and innovation of organisational actors in their everyday work-related activities and decision-making. As such, EE should not be tied up to managerial thinking of control and manipulation only, but also about opportunities and conditions enacted by and for organisational actors. This also means that the academic rigour around the notion of EE is better directed towards understanding the context of action as opposed to trying to measure and prove the impact of EE on performance at a general level.

The paper has also sought to contribute to an emerging critical stream of EE literature that emphasises the need to understand performance as a secondary consequence to work (Shuck and Rose, 2013). The new conceptualisation offered above provides a

useful insight into situated change enacted in the name of EE by individual actors following their implementation of an EE initiative. In it, we have unpacked the social mechanisms through which EE can be enacted over time processually. Studying EE from a becoming practice lens in light of the three mechanisms discussed above prevents EE from being perceived as a fixed entity; instead, its transformational qualities, as inhibitors or enablers, emerge only through applications. In contrast to the mainstream view that perceives EE as a positive, stable, and enduring state of mind, we would therefore argue "to be engaged or not" is a question informed by employees' own interests and reflexive capacities, which unfold in conjunction with their interpretations of the meaning and purpose of work over time. Our paper thus offers a new avenue to examine EE as a way to set in motion significant processes that altered organisational actors' ways of thinking and doing as enacted in their everyday work practices. This is precisely the reason why our paper is entitled 'becoming engaged'.

The case of S-CO offers rich practical insights for practitioners who are interested in learning more about the details of implementing an EE initiative systematically in an organisational setting. This long-due acknowledgement would require HR practitioners and senior management to consider work in its manifestations and situated context, rather than the engaged or disengaged outcomes. The becoming practice lens is also useful to identify and understand unintended consequences of practices, and to value the inputs of people who carry out the work of implementing

EE and live with the impact of EE on a day-to-day basis.

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Table 1 Individual/Group interviews across three phases

	Phase I (Jun. 2006 – Apr. 2007)	Phase II (Apr. 2007 – Feb. 2008)	Phase III (Feb. 2008 – Dec. 2008)	Total
EE consultants	3 individuals	4 individuals	2 groups	9
Employees at EBU	1 group	1 group	1 group 1 individual	4
Employees at other business units and collaborators	NA	2 individuals	1 group	3
Suppliers and clients	NA	NA	2 groups	2
Senior management at S-CO	2 individuals	2 individuals	1 group 2 individuals	7
Total	6	9	10	25

Table 2 Functional groups participating in the interviews

Code	Roles of respondents	Functional areas
JJ	Trainer, EU programme consortium	Consultants
BM	Country Coach, EU programme consortium	
JV	Country Coach, EU programme consortium	
SS	Purchasing specialist, EBU	Employees in EBU
FB	Mechanical technology support, EBU	
SL	Commerce, EBU	
JD	Electronic technology support, EBU	
SC	Project manager, EBU	
FM	IT support, EBU	
VF	Metal, former manager at CBU & collaborator	Collaborators
AG	Environment, former manager at CBU & collaborator	
AM	Aluminium, manager at CBU	
JM	Supplier, Manager of Stem	Suppliers
MM	Supplier, Managing Director of Atotech	
AJ	Client, Director of Chrom	Clients
JB	Client, CEO of Anodizing Technology	
JA	R&D Director of S-CO	Top Management
RC	Vice President of S-CO	
RP	General Manager, EBU	
CC	Financial Director of S-CO	

Table 3: Implementing an EE initiative in S-CO

The becoming of EBU's practice	Employer centred perspective	Enacting EE in practice	Employee centred perspective	Implications for studying EE in action
Authoring boundaries - What are deemed as the legitimate activities inside EBU?	The "engineering" discourse ● Sales & Projects ● Engineering & Assembly ● After-sales	A10: I am proud of my job P2: I exert my full effort to my job	The "innovation" discourse ● Sales & Projects ● Engineering & Assembly ● After-sales ● R&D	Probing possible work procedures and business processes in relation to the endogenously defined value creation discourses
Negotiating competencies - What does it take to perform as a competent practitioner at EBU?	The "engineer" imagery ● KPIs adopted in the ISO 9001 documents	C15: I concentrated on my work C18: I devote a lot of attention to my job	The "consultant" imagery ● Updated work profiles and career development plans	Negotiating subjective positions and related performance measures in tune with novel value creation activities
Adapting materiality - Through which devices are EUB's practices materialised?	The immediate material setting ● Installation manuals, budgets, formal contracts or protocols etc.	A12: I am excited about my job C17: I am absorbed in my work	The wider material setting ● Affirming the material significance of events ● Ongoing achievements	Addressing the gaps between fragmented and sustainable materiality for capturing future value creation opportunities

Appendix

Appendix I **Job Engagement Scale (JES)**

(Note: 1–6 Assess the Physical property; 7–12 Assess the Affective property; 13–18 Assess the Cognitive property)

P1. I work with intensity on my job.
P2. I exert my full effort to my job.
P3. I devote a lot of energy to my job.
P4. I try my hardest to perform well on my job.
P5. I strive as hard as I can to complete my job.
P6. I exert a lot of energy on my job.
A7. I am enthusiastic about my job.
A8. I feel energetic about my job.
A9. I am interested in my job.
A10. I am proud of my job.
A11. I feel positive about my job.
A12. I am excited about my job.
C13. At work, my mind is focused on my job.
C14. At work, I pay a lot of attention to my job.
C15. At work, I concentrate on my job.
C16. At work, I focus a great deal of attention on my job.
C17. At work, I am absorbed in my job.
C18. At work, I devote a lot of attention to my job.
Source: Rich et al., 2010