

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT (HRM) PRACTICES AND WORK ENGAGEMENT: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT: *Modern organizations embrace redesigning businesses. Organizations adopt new ideas and strategies to attain sustainable growth and development. Building and developing work engagement culture could bring about competitive advantage needed in organizations. Human resources management as organizational practice can create and sustain work engagement culture. This research therefore examined human resource management (HRM) and its work engagement competitive advantage. Practically, employees' work engagement facilitates HRM practices - selective hiring, socialization, performance management, and training - to create competitive advantage. The implications of the approach and recommendations were highlighted concerning the need for work engagement to be strategically embedded and supported across the selection, socialization, performance management and training, learning and development practices, processes and systems for competitive advantage.*

KEYWORDS: Human resource management, selective hiring, performance management, training/development, work engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The most often cited definition of work engagement within the academic domain has been that offered by Schaufeli *et al* (2002) as “a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (p.74). Vigor refers to high level of energy and mental resilience while working, and readiness to exert effort in one’s work and persevere even in the face of difficulties. Dedication refers to high commitment and involvement in one’s work, and experience of sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Absorption refers to a state of complete concentration and happy engrossment in one’s work whereby time passes quickly without noticing thereby making it difficult detaching from work.

Studies indicate that engaged employees possess high level of energy, high level of self-efficacy and tend to control events that affect their lives (e.g. Christian, Garza & Slaughter, 2011; Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010; Mauno *et al.*, 2010). However, engaged workers are ordinary people who tend to feel tired after a long

day of hard work, but their tiredness is associated more with pleasant state as it is related with positive accomplishments. Moreover, engaged workers are not workaholics who are work addicts.

Need for Engaged Workforce in Modern Organizations

The need for engaged workforce in modern organization cannot be over emphasized. This is more so as the former traditional organizational systems of control mechanism, vertical structure in terms of chain of command and strong reliance on economic principles of cost reduction, efficiency, cash flow, and dependency on company’s training for survival and employee satisfaction can no longer guarantee organizational effectiveness and efficiency (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003). As organizations expect their workforce to be proactive and show initiative, work harmoniously in teams, be in control of their own professional development, and exhibit high-quality performance (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2008). Ulrich (1997) argues that “employee contribution becomes a critical business issue because in

trying to produce more output with less employee input, organizations have no choice but to try to engage not only the body but the mind and soul of every employee” (p. 125).

Empirical evidence suggests that engaged workforce can be a source of competitive advantage. For instance, Macey *et al* (2009) reports substantial differences between firms with highly engaged workforce and those without engaged workforce, demonstrating that firms having highly engaged workforce perform better with respect to return on assets, profitability, and market value. Also, engaged workforce has been associated with valuable organizational outcomes concerning positive work-related attitudes, individual health, extra-role behaviors and performance (Wefald & Downey, 2009; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2007). Thus, work engagement has demonstrated considerable promise in understanding the process through which positive organizational outcomes pertaining to increased productivity, high quality services, job satisfaction, customer satisfaction and loyalty, proactive behaviors and organizational commitment might be achieved (Wefald & Downey, 2009; Shimazu *et al.*, 2008). Thus, as researchers focus on exploring and understanding the phenomenon of workplace engagement, issues such as human resource management (HRM) strategies expected to contribute significantly to building and fostering employee work engagement requires serious attention.

Human Resource Management (HRM) Practices

Khan, Khan and Ahmed (2013) refer to human resource management (HRM) as the harnessing of individuals’ talents, abilities, skills and attitudes for personal growth and self-actualization which enables the individuals to contribute towards the achievement of organizational goals. Ugwu and Okojie (2016) contend that efficient and effective harnessing of these human resources remains a critical factor in achieving organizational goals especially at this era of competitiveness arising from globalization.

On the other hand, HRM practices refer to all the strategies (e.g. selective hiring, training and development, performance appraisals),

specific policies (e.g. equal opportunities, flexible work hours), and tools (e.g. employee survey) or techniques (e.g. management-by-objective) which contribute to harnessing of human resources in organizations (Armstrong, 2012). Nyandema (2015) contend that HRM practices are concerned with the implementation of human resource activities, policies and strategies necessary for changes to enhance a firm’s strategic and operational objectives and the use of individuals to achieve competitive edge.

Literature suggests a good number of well-developed theoretical frameworks that explains how human resource management systems can help organizations attain competitive advantage. For instance, HRM-performance model by Becker *et al* (1997) explains how the policies of HRM systems that support and develop employee skills and motivation bring about increased productivity, creativity and extra-role behavior that will in turn lead to improved performance, profitability, and growth. Also, the popular AMO model (A = abilities, M = motivation, O = opportunity to participate) proposed by Purcell *et al* (2003) focuses on key roles individuals’ motivation play in the translation of human resource strategies into organizational effectiveness and sustained competitive advantage. Similarly, Posthuma *et al* (2013) taxonomy of high-performance work practices (HPWP) and Kehoe and Wright’s (2013) high performance human resource practice (HPHRP) framework equally propose links between HRM practices and organizational performance and effectiveness.

Drawing from the perspective of Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, the present study attempts to integrate literatures to conceptualize a framework on how HRM strategies can be harnessed to achieve work engagement in order to achieve a competitive advantage. HRM systems can influence organizational climate as the application of a strategic HRM policies convey to individual members of organization expectations concerning skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviors expected of them in order to confront the job demands in workplaces. According to Macey and Schneider (2008), when the climate is cordial and individuals experience a coherent and

consistent pattern of policies, practices, and procedures aimed at optimizing individual, group and organizational effectiveness, the tendency to strive towards the achievement of organizational goals increases.

HRM Practices and Work Engagement

In the present study, four main HRM strategies – selective hiring, socialization, performance management, and training – critical to fostering employee work engagement are examined. The four strategic practices remain the core HR functions needed to attain organizational effectiveness irrespective of their focus on particular HR strategy (Macey & Schneider, 2008). For instance, irrespective of whether an organization has a strategic focus on HPWS through self-managed teams or flexible work arrangements (Jiang & Liu, 2015) or on engagement, they will nevertheless focus on selection, socialization, performance management, and training. However, despite separate discussion of each of the four HR practices, they are considered as part of an integrated HR strategy and system (Gratton & Truss, 2003; Guest, 2014).

Selection and Work Engagement

Selection and socialization are often touted as the key to retaining a flexible and committed workforce necessary for contemporary competitive challenges. However, the potential utility of selection processes with regard to strategic HR focus on engagement as a source of competitive advantage has been neglected (Inceoglu & Warr, 2011). Therefore, for organizations to have a competitive advantage, HR practitioners should adopt evidence-based selection processes to select from the pull of applicants that are likely to possess the vigor, dedication, and absorption necessary to achieving organizational goals.

In line with interaction's approach (Terborg, 1981) which argue that behavior is the outcome of a continuous interaction between persons and their environments, Vance (2006) contends that organizations can create and foster work engagement among employees "by selecting the candidates who are best suited to the job and the organization's culture" (p.19). According to Inceoglu and Warr (2011) because

engagement is a relatively activated and energized state, "it can be predicted that aspects of personality that are themselves more activated and energized will be reflected in engagement" (p. 177). Similarly, Guest (2014) observed that if individual differences affect their tendency to be engaged, it then presupposes that "engagement criteria" should adopt personality as selection criteria.

Inceoglu and Warr (2011) acknowledge the wide and popular consensus that engagement is driven by personal and job (environmental) factors, yet "theoretical discussions and empirical investigations have so far emphasized mainly engagement as a response to characteristics of the job" (p. 177). Even though the Big Five-Factor model remains the most acceptable and widely used in personality research, it has been challenged recently by the HEXACO personality model with the inclusion of the sixth factor known as honesty-humility trait which promises a better outcome and a better understanding of phenomena beyond the Five-Factor model (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Ashton, Lee & de Vries, 2014; Lee & Ashton, 2004). The major difference between HEXACO and Five-Factor model of personality is in the inclusion of a sixth factor known as honesty-humility trait in the HEXACO model which tend to make it unique.

Conceptualizing the relationship between personality and engagement, honesty-humility domain of HEXACO model is likely to achieve positive relationship with engagement as honest and humble individuals are known for sincerity, truthfulness, honesty, fair and genuine in interpersonal relationship likely to impact their performance of work roles. Also, conscientiousness as a personal trait is likely to have positive relationship with engagement "because conscientious individuals have a strong sense of responsibility and are thus more likely to involve themselves in their job tasks" (Christian, Garza & Slaughter, 2011, p. 100). Similarly, extraversion ought to have positive relationship with engagement as individuals high in the trait are described as optimistic, feels positively and confidently secure in social gathering and interactions, and are enthusiastic and energetic. According to Christian, Garza and Slaughter (2011), positive affect individuals are

“predisposed to experiencing activation, alertness, and enthusiasm” (p. 100).

Again, agreeableness ought to be positively correlated with engagement as individuals with high level of the trait are described as cooperative, patient and lenient and are better able to “mobilize social supports and resources to engage more directly in their job roles and organizational context” (Wildermuth, 2010, p. 204). Openness to experience ought to have positive relationship with engagement because such people tend to be imaginative and creative and take kin interest in unusual ideas or peoples and more likely to be innovative, open to change and to be engaged in their job roles (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Lastly, neuroticism may be negatively associated with engagement because individuals with high level of the trait are characterized by fear and anxiety, and prone to vulnerability, sentimentality and fearfulness, therefore, more likely to perceive their work-setting as threatening, unsafe, and more demanding of their emotional resources (Wildermuth, 2010). Empirical evidences are in supports of the potential utility of personality on engagement. For instance, Christian, Garza and Slaughter (2011) in a multiple study reports moderately high relationship between conscientiousness and engagement and extraversion/positive affectivity and engagement but did not find significant relationships between openness to experience, agreeableness, or emotional stability and engagement.

Socialization and Work Engagement

The entry period of newcomers into organizations is a critical time for attitude formation (Mestre, Stainer, & Stainer, 1997; Schermerhorn, 1993) which can go a long way in affecting their long-term attitudes and behavioral intentions (Vandenberg & Self, 1993). For instance, Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) (2010) reports that most turnovers in organizations take place among new employees. It is therefore necessary to identify effective socialization tactics for the interest of both the employer and the employee, as it tends to reduce turnover cost for the employer and bring about rapid adjustment to the new work environment and feeling of well-being and self-

esteem for the employee (Davis, Nigah & Hurrell (2012).

New hires are typically excited about their jobs and organization at the entry level and at the same time surrounded by the feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. In this regard, organizations ought to do something to douse their anxiety and uncertainty as well as build on their entry excitement and enthusiasm to translate it into high level of motivation and engagement. The process through which this occurs is known as organizational socialization defined as “the process by which an individual comes to appreciate the values, abilities, expected behaviors, and social knowledge essential for assuming an organizational role and for participating as an organizational member” (Louis, 1980, p. 229). It is the process by which newcomers are transformed from strangers to active participating members of an organization (Bauer *et al.*, 2007).

Generally, organizational research has focused on the efficacy of socialization strategies in terms of uncertainty reduction, information and knowledge acquisition (Ashforth *et al.*, 2007; Klein & Heuser, 2008). However, in today’s organization, the traditional approach of socialization for the purpose of uncertainty reduction, information and knowledge acquisition may no longer be enough to tap the potential strengths and capacities individuals bring to bear in organizations. According to Saks and Gruman (2011), socialization merely for the purpose of information dissemination and knowledge acquisition limits the potentials and strengths of individuals and their active roles in building positive capacities for themselves and their organizations.

Recently, positive psychology movement has led organizational researchers to focus attention on human strengths and positive psychological capacities (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003). Drawing from the tenets of the positive organizational behavior (POB), effective socialization should target tapping the individuals’ strengths and personal resources considering the active roles individuals can play in building positive capacities for themselves and their organizations. Therefore, socialization that

results in engaged workforce rather than merely information dissemination and knowledge acquisition may better serve the needs of contemporary organizations as well as the needs of the individuals themselves.

Drawing from the POB perspective, Saks and Gruman (2011) propose that socialization provides personal resources for the newcomers by activating their personal resources in form of psychological capital referred to as “an individual’s positive psychological state of development and is characterized by: (1) having confidence to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks (self-efficacy); (2) making a positive attribution about succeeding now and in the future (optimism); (3) persevering towards goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals in order to succeed (hope); and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond to attain success (resilience)” (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio, 2007, p. 3). Psychological capital, regarded as higher-order construct drawn from positive psychology (PP) and positive organizational behavior (POB) (Avey, Luthans & Jensen, 2009), has been shown to be a positive resource for improving employees’ job performance, job satisfaction (Larson & Luthans, 2006), employees’ well-being overtime (Avey, Luthans, Smith & Palmer, 2010), and for combating employees’ stress and turnover (Avey *et al.*, 2009).

Empirical evidence shows that the composite domains of psychological capital may be a better predictor of outcomes than the four individual facets. For instance, Xanthopoulou *et al* (2007) found that the combined power of the personal capacities has been shown to be associated with higher levels of work engagement and lower levels of absenteeism. Also, Wernsing (2014) report that when the four psychological resource capacities are combined, they provide a source of motivational energy that fuels goal-striving that enables employees to persist at work, regardless of their circumstances. Therefore, activation of the personal resources (i.e. psychological capitals) in newcomers during socialization may play an important role in mitigating the potential negative outcomes associated with work such as depression, burnout,

and turnover intention as well as “reality shock” of unmet expectations (Major, Kozlowski, Chao & Gardner, 1995).

Thus, Luthans *et al*’s (2007) model of psychological capital potentially offers a better explanation of newcomers’ socialization and work engagement. According to Luthan *et al* (2007), work engagement is a function of the four personal resources, namely self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience; and they seem especially relevant and important for newcomers. As the newcomers at this stage are more prone to vulnerability and anxiety, socialization process should target activating in them these personal and psychological resources in order to perform their work roles and cope with the demands of the work necessary for work engagement. Therefore, HR socialization strategies should target providing newcomers with resources that will activate the four psychological capacities needed for work engagement. For instance, job that is designed to be challenging, clearly specified and delineated, creative, varied and autonomous is likely to activate the feeling of confidence (self-efficacy) needed to accomplish the assigned task. Studies have shown (e.g. Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Saks, 2006) that job characteristics such as skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and performance feedback (Hackman & Oldham, 1980) are examples of job resources found to be positively associated with work engagement. Katz (1980) discovered that task significance and performance feedback are quite critical for newcomers within the first three to four months of joining organizations.

Performance Management and Work Engagement

The main concerns here include aligning individual objectives to organizational objectives and encouraging individuals to uphold corporate core values; enabling expectations to be defined and agreed upon in terms of role responsibilities and accountabilities (expected to do), skills (expected to have) and behaviors (expected to be); and providing opportunities for individuals to identifying their own goals and developing their skills and competencies (Armstrong, 2012). Building on the traditional performance management model, Gruman and Saks (2011)

conceptualized a performance management model designed to generate high level of engagement that will ultimately lead to high level of performance. The model consists of three key elements which include performance agreement, engagement facilitation, and performance and engagement appraisal and feedback.

Performance agreement concerns mutual agreement between employees and their supervisors on the set-out goals to be achieved. One of the first issues in this process is that any goal set out to pursue should reflect organizational objectives as well as the personal objectives of the employee. Such mutually beneficial goals are more likely to lead to employee involvement in their jobs and to activate the sense of personal resources in form of psychological capital needed for work engagement and higher level of performance.

The second issue in performance agreement concerns psychological contract fulfillment which is the extent to which employees believe that implicit or explicit promises and agreements about work are honored and fulfilled by the organization. According to Schaufeli and Salanova (2010), psychological contract fulfillment is one of the ways personnel assessments and evaluation process will impact work engagement. Studies (e.g. Parzefall & Hakanen, 2010; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2010) have shown that psychological contract fulfillment is positively associated with engagement. It is also expected that psychological contract fulfillment may likely activate hope and optimism facets of personal resources of psychological capital necessary for work engagement.

Engagement facilitation involves activities such as job design, coaching and social support, and training. Previously, it has been observed that job characteristics such as autonomy, task variety, skill sets, performance feedback etc are associated with engagement (Bakker *et al.*, 2004; May *et al.*, 2004; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). It then follows that performance management focused on engagement should therefore have mutual understanding and agreements about how jobs should be designed in ways that foster engagement and optimize performance.

Engagement appraisal and performance feedback is the last of the three key elements in the Gruman and Saks (2011) performance management model. It is a management system concerned with assessing levels of employee engagement by providing feedback about their engagement and performance. The process requires that employees have the feeling of equity, fairness and justice on the part of the management so as to achieve fruitful result. According to Macey *et al* (2009), perception of trust and fairness is critical to building and fostering engagement among employees. Research evidence (e.g. Maslach & Leiter, 2008) shows that just and fairness is positively associated with engagement. Importantly, Gupta and Kumar (2013) have demonstrated that perception of justice and fairness is positively associated with engagement during performance appraisals. It is therefore important that HR professionals should encourage organizational climate that promote justices i.e. distributive, procedural, and interactional justice and allow employees to have a voice on issues that concern them.

Constructive feedback is also important during engagement appraisals as it will afford employees the opportunity to increase engagement in the future. According to Aguinis *et al* (2012), feedback will build and foster engagement if it focuses on strengths rather the weaknesses of the employees. However, areas of weaknesses need to be emphasized so as to make correction and improve in the future. Empirical evidence (e.g. Menguc, Auh, Fisher & Haddad, 2013) has shown that supervisory feedback correlates positively with engagement as well as engagement fully mediating the relationships between feedback and performance. Gruman and Saks' (2011) performance management framework provides HR practitioners another way to look at how to foster high levels of performance in employees. Previous effort (e.g. DeNisi & Pritchard, 2006) has focused on expectancy theory and dwelt on areas employees will invest effort. However, Gruman and Saks' (2011) model is an additional effort which addresses activities that make employees become engaged.

Training, Learning and Development

The essence of training, learning and development is to ensure that organizations have the knowledgeable, skilled, engaged and committed workforce it needs. HRM practices entail providing the systems and processes that identify and ensure that the needs of organizations and employees are satisfied through training, learning and development. Studies suggest that training aimed at learning and developing the skills needed to perform the job satisfactorily can be used to increase employee work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Luthans *et al.*, 2010).

As proposed by JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014; Demerouti *et al.*, 2001), work engagement is likely to develop when employees are faced with jobs that are demanding and at the same time equipped with high level of resources to confront the job demands. Job resources are motivational in nature such that when jobs are designed to be challenging, creative, varied and autonomous it is likely to activate the feeling of confidence (self-efficacy) needed to accomplish the assigned task. Personal resources which create positive self-evaluations predict goal setting, motivation, performance, job and life satisfaction, and other desirable outcomes (e.g. Judge *et al.*, 2004). This is because the higher an individual's personal resources, the more positive the person's self-regard and the more goal self-concordance is expected to be experienced (Judge *et al.* 2004). Individuals with goal self-concordance are intrinsically motivated to pursue their goals which in turn trigger higher performance and satisfaction (Luthans & Youssef 2007).

Research evidence (Luthans *et al.*, 2010) shows that employees can develop their personal resources through training aimed at learning and developing the required skills. This however shows that such personal resources as self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience collectively known as psychological capital (PsyCap) can be learned and developed through training. Also, Demerouti *et al.*'s (2011) study which tested the effects of "personal effectiveness" training targeted at helping employees cope with challenging work situations showed that personal resources can be developed

through training, learning and development. As such, HR professionals can channel training towards learning and developing skill sets for improving individuals' personal resources targeted at fostering engagement and achieving high work performance. Such training can make use of psychological principles derived from rational emotive therapy, tension control, vicarious learning and goal setting to modify cognition, behaviors and emotions.

Thus, research evidences highlighted above show clearly that human resource training with the purpose of learning and developing skill sets needed for the optimal job performance can be used to develop and foster work engagement. Through learning and development initiatives and through self-initiated action, employees can learn to manage their job demands through the development of personal resources. The bottom line is that HRM professionals, through learning and development initiatives, can help employees acquire and develop resources (skills) needed to foster work engagement for optimal job performance.

Practical Implications

The research has provided practical guide on how to structure and what to include in engagement focused HRM policies, practices, and procedures. Concerning socialization, it was suggested that organizations should provide newcomers with resources that will satisfy their needs for personal resources in order to capitalize on the energy and enthusiasm they initially bring to their role. This approach is a kind of paradigm shift from the traditional approach to socialization that provides newcomers with resources that aid their learning that foster engagement rather than information to reduce uncertainty alone. As regards performance management, it was suggested that high levels of performance may best be achieved by facilitating the conditions that foster and support engagement. It was stated that performance management processes should focus on three primary elements: performance agreement, engagement facilitation, and performance and engagement appraisal and feedback. Regarding training, learning and development, apart from providing employees with appropriate job

resources, it was pointed out that HR professionals can use training programs to help employees optimize their personal resources needed to foster work engagement for optimal job performance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Engagement is touted as strategically important by which organizations can achieve competitive advantage. This study therefore provides a comprehensive account of how HRM system can be harnessed to foster work engagement for sustained competitive advantage.

Recommendations

1. To achieve high level of performance and maintain competitive advantage, engagement needs to be integrated and focused across all facets of the employer-employee relationship.
2. Engagement ought to be strategically embedded and supported across selection, socialization, performance management and training, learning and development practices and systems.
3. As the study has conceptually linked some HRM practices with engagement, systematic research and rigorous evaluation processes are now needed to establish the direct and indirect effects of the four HR practices on work engagement and high work performance.
4. Stimulated research is needed for greater understanding of the importance of establishing HRM practices and climates that are strategically focused on employee work engagement for competitive advantage.

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