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Is There a Downside to Engagement for Employees?

Kabir N. Daljeet*

For many years now, researchers and practitioners have been discovering and promoting the numerous positive effects of engagement in the workplace. Up until recently, much of the research being conducted regarding engagement has focused exclusively on its positive impact on the lives of employees. Recently, a number of researchers have started to pay attention to the negative impact it can have on the lives of employees. Work by Halbesleben, Harvey & Bolino, (2009), Bolino & Turnley (2005) and Kim, Shin & Swanger (2009) has explored the variety of ways engagement can have an adverse effect on an individual in the workplace; the details and implications of their findings are discussed in this paper.

For many years now, researchers and practitioners have been discovering and promoting the numerous positive effects of engagement in the workplace. Engagement has been defined as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá & Bakker, 2002). Up until recently, much of the research being conducted regarding engagement has focused exclusively on its positive impact on the lives of employees. For example, research has found that engagement is related to increased job performance, higher self-efficacy, improved mental and physical health, increased optimism and a number of other, generally speaking, positive outcomes (Bakker et al., 2008). However, recently, a number of researchers have started to pay attention to a side of engagement that has been largely ignored; the negative impact it can have on the lives of employees. This paper aims to present an overview of the empirical evidence supporting the existence of a downside to engagement for individuals in the workplace (Halbesleben, Harvey and Bolino 2009; Bolino and Turnley 2005; Kim, Shin and Swanger 2009).

Much of the research on engagement revolves around the theoretical framework of the job demands-resources model (JD-R; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli 2001). Originally developed by Demerouti et al (2001) and revised by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), the JD-R model proposes that

characteristics of a given job can be categorized as being either a job demand or a job resource. Job demands are components of one’s job that contribute to stress, strain, exhaustion and burnout; whereas job resources are components of one’s job that contribute to goal achievement, personal growth and development, motivation as well as engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

In accordance with the JD-R model, Halbesleben, Harvey and Bolino (2009) argue that individuals who are highly engaged are more likely to find their work life interfering with their family life. Macey and Schneider (2008) suggest that employees only have a finite quantity of resources and energy, and regularly using them to maintain a high level of engagement may prove challenging in the long run (as cited by Halbesleben, Harvey & Bolino, 2009). One implication of this is that, those who regularly invest their energy and resources in their work-life may have little to none left for their family-life (Halbesleben, Harvey & Bolino, 2009). That is to say, those who are more engaged at work will be more likely to experience work interference with family due to having spent so much of their energy and resources being engaged at work. Using what is known as Organizational Citizenship Behaviour as an index of employee engagement, Halbesleben, Harvey and Bolino (2009) examined how an employees’ family life could be adversely impacted by being too engaged at work.

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A DOWNSIDE TO ENGAGEMENT

Defined as “individual behaviour that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward” (Organ, 1988), research by Macey and Schneider (2008) suggests that Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCBs), more specifically, interpersonally directed OCBs (OCB-Is), are performed more frequently by an employees who are engaged (as cited by Halbesleben, Harvey & Bolino, 2009). As such, Halbesleben, Harvey and Bolino (2009) also proposed that the relationship between engagement and work interference with family would be mediated by how much an employee engages in OCB-Is. This is believed to be the case because an individual who goes out of their way to perform duties not required of them must be investing even more resources and energy into their work life, leaving less available for their home and family life (Halbesleben, Harvey & Bolino, 2009).

Similar to the work of Halbesleben, Harvey and Bolino (2009), Bolino and Turnley (2005) also conducted research on the relationship between OCBs and work interference with family. They hypothesized that OCB would be positively related to job stress, role overload, and work interference with family. In order to test these predictions, they collected data from a random sample of 196 university alumni using psychometrically sound measures of job stress, role overload, work interference with family and OCBs (Bolino & Turnley, 2005). Supporting their predictions, it was found that OCBs positively correlated with job stress, role overload and work interference with family. If participating in OCBs is taken to be a sign of engagement, as suggested by Macey and Schneider (2008), the implications of this study are that, too much engagement can be seen as contributing to job stress, work overload and, again, work interference with family. Therefore it can be said that the results of this experiment conducted by Bolino and Turnley (2005) provide support for the argument that there is such a thing as a downside to engagement for individuals in the workplace.

Much like OCBs, other individual differences, such as personality, have also been

found to be related to employee engagement. In a recent study by Kim, Shin and Swanger (2009) the relationship between personality and engagement was examined. Personality has a long standing history of being used to predict behavior in the workplace. Traditionally, personality has largely been used as a tool to assist with personnel selection and recruitment by helping an employer identify and predict favorable and unfavorable traits amongst a pool of potential employees (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Using the five-factor typology of personality, Kim, Shin and Swanger (2009) hypothesized that extraversion and conscientiousness would be positively related to engagement whereas neuroticism would be negatively related to engagement.

In order to test their predictions, Kim, Shin and Swanger (2009) collected data from 187 participants using a variety of well-established and psychometrically sound measures to assess participants' personality, job engagement, burnout and job resources. Analyzing their data using hierarchical regression, the results of their study found that two of their predictions were correct; conscientiousness (i.e., I pay attention to details) was found to be a significant, positive predictor of engagement ($\beta = .18, p < .01$) and neuroticism (i.e., I get stressed out easily) was found to be a significant negative predictor of engagement ($\beta = -.14, p < .05$). In another study, it was postulated that personality, more specifically, conscientiousness will moderate the relationship between OCB-Is and work interference with family. They believed this to be the case because an individual who is described as conscientious is methodical, well organized and more likely to perform well on the job (Barrick & Mount, 1991). This led the researchers to believe an individual who is higher on this personality trait will be, accordingly, better equipped to manage their personal resources such that it would mitigate the negative effect of being highly engaged on work interference with family. Likewise, this would mean an individual lower on conscientiousness would have a substantially more difficult time managing their personal resources, such that it would in fact exacerbate

A DOWNSIDE TO ENGAGEMENT

the negative effects of being highly engaged (i.e., interference with family; Halbesleben, Harvey & Bolino, 2009).

In order to test these predictions, they collected data from a total of 844 participants from three separate work contexts at different time points, measuring their level of engagement, conscientiousness, OCB-Is and work interference with family (Halbesleben, Harvey & Bolino, 2009). It was found that, as predicted, engagement is significantly positively related to work interference with family and that OCB-I does, in fact, mediate the relationship. It was also found that conscientiousness moderated the relationship between OCB and work interference with family.

The findings of these studies show that personality can be used to predict how and where an individual will choose to allocate their energy and various personal resources. More importantly, these findings support the claims made by the researchers previously discussed, specifically that resources are limited and that an individual's decision to invest resources in becoming more engaged reflects a strategic decision, informed by their personality and other individual differences, to not invest resources in other areas of their life, such as in their family lives (Halbesleben, Harvey & Bolino, 2009; Halbesleben, 2011). Therefore the results of the experiment conducted by Kim, Shin and Swanger (2009) provide support in favor of the argument that there is such a thing as a down side to engagement for individuals in the workplace.

In conclusion, while previous research on engagement has focused almost exclusively on the positive impact it can have, the work done by Halbesleben, Harvey & Bolino, (2009), Bolino & Turnley (2005) and Kim, Shin & Swanger (2009) has explored the variety of ways engagement can have an adverse effect on an individual in the workplace. By primarily focusing on the notion that one only has a limited amount of energy resources to spend on their life, these studies have shown that by investing a significant amount of energy and resources in becoming engaged often results in having an insufficient amount of energy and

resources for the remaining domains of one's life (Halbesleben, Harvey & Bolino, 2009; Bolino & Turnley, 2005; Kim, Shin & Swanger, 2009). A result of this is, other domains of one's life typically end up suffering in a variety of ways, the most notable domain being one's family and home-life. Therefore, it can be said that the literature does in fact support the notion that there is a down side to engagement for individuals in the workplace (Halbesleben, Harvey & Bolino, 2009; Bolino & Turnley, 2005; Kim, Shin & Swanger, 2009).

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