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Self-Engagement at Work

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As individuals go to work and carry out various tasks, there will be times when they are invested in the quality of their work and feel responsibility for and commitment to superior job performance. There will also be times when they feel disengaged from their work or from certain aspects of their job, consequently withdrawing or disconnecting from a given area of performance. In the present chapter we argue that engaging the self in work serves to commit an individual to superior performance, and that such engagement has consequences for motivation, affect, and performance. Although most prior authors have viewed engagement in work as having primarily positive consequences, we present a more complex analysis, ultimately arguing that engaging the self in work can have positive consequences when the employee has the resources and aptitudes necessary for successful performance, but may have negative consequences when substantial impediments exist to effective performance.

In the present chapter we will first address issues in the conceptualization and operationalization of job engagement. We spend some time on these issues, because researchers have conceptualized and measured job engagement in different ways, and we hope to bring some integrative order to these viewpoints. We then address the predictors of engagement in work. Researchers examining employees in a variety of occupations and organizations have consistently shown specific variables to be predictive of job engagement. We then summarize research on the consequences of job engagement for health and performance. The final section of our chapter addresses areas in need of future research. Throughout this chapter we hope to show that engagement in work is a construct that falls within the purview of positive organizational behavior (Luthans, 2002; Wright, 2003), in that job engagement is a desirable motivational state to possess at work. However, we also note the importance of understanding that even 'positive' variables such as job engagement can have maladaptive

consequences under certain conditions, and that models of positive organizational behavior need to integrate these conditions into comprehensive theories.

The conceptualization and measurement of engagement at work

Different conceptualizations of job engagement

My (TWB) interest in job engagement emerged out of a more general interest in the determinants of responsibility. Schlenker and colleagues (1994) developed the Triangle Model of Responsibility to address issues of accountability, including what it means to hold one another responsible for conduct in a way that leads to social evaluation and sanctioning. The theory integrated prior approaches to responsibility and has been used to predict when people will hold others responsible for their conduct, as well as the types of information people seek when they need to draw conclusions about an individual's level of responsibility (Schlenker et al., 1994). The model has recently been used to understand when an individual will be engaged in particular tasks and domains (Britt, 1999, 2003a; see also Schlenker, 1997). Britt and his colleagues have defined job engagement as feeling responsible for and committed to superior job performance, so that job performance 'matters' to the individual (Britt, 1999, 2003b; Britt and Bliese, 2003).

Because employees who are engaged in their work feel a sense of personal responsibility for their job performance, the outcomes that occur at work have greater implications for their identity. Therefore, to be engaged in work is also to care about and be committed to performing well. Britt et al. (2005) used a political analogy to further illustrate this approach toward defining job engagement. US presidents are sometimes judged on the basis of their level of engagement toward a particular policy or issue. For example, a president may be accused of not being engaged in the Middle East peace process, or in a crisis occurring in another continent. Presidents who are criticized for a lack of engagement in particular issues are often seen as not taking personal responsibility for the outcome of a particular challenge and thus not appearing to care about the issue. On the other hand, a president who is engaged in a particular issue is often viewed as taking on responsibility for solving the problem and being committed to reaching a solution. In a similar manner, our approach to job engagement emphasizes employees feeling personally responsible for and caring about their job performance outcomes. Given the above definition, we have measured job engagement as a variable with items assessing perceived responsibility for job performance, commitment to job performance, and whether performance matters to the individual (Britt, 1999, 2003; Britt and Bliese, 2003; Britt et al., 2001, 2005). These items

assess a single construct with demonstrated reliability, as with Cronbach Alpha's typically approaching or exceeding .90.

Most other researchers have viewed engagement in work as a multifaceted construct consisting of two or more separate components (Harter et al., 2003; May et al., 2004; Rothbard, 2001; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Many of these prior authors developed models of job engagement based on the seminal work of Kahn (1990). In fact, this paper can be seen as jump-starting interest in the construct of job engagement. Using a qualitative, interview-based method, Kahn (1990) explored the conditions that lead to 'moments' of engagement and disengagement at work. Kahn laid out a carefully planned methodology, including the examination of two very different samples: counselors at a children's summer camp and employees of a thriving architectural firm. He chose these two settings because of their dissimilarities, in order to maximize the generalizability of his findings. Kahn observed these two groups of workers, interviewed them, and explored archival data to discover the indicators of engagement at work. Kahn defined engagement in work as self-employment and expression physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances, and asked employees to recall the conditions under which they experienced this state. Kahn found that engagement in work had the ability to fluctuate frequently within an individual, decreasing the potential for it to be fully accounted for by individual differences.

Rothbard (2001) examined engagement in both work and family roles, and whether engagement in one role either depletes or enhances engagement in a second role. In this work, Rothbard conceptualized engagement as two distinct, though interrelated, factors. The first factor was that of attention, operationalized as 'time spent thinking and concentrating on a role'. The second factor was labeled absorption, operationalized as 'losing track of time and becoming engrossed in role performance' (Rothbard, 2001: 665), and can be considered similar to Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) construct of flow. The use of these two factors came from recommendations by Kahn (1990). Rothbard distinguished engagement from other similar constructs, explaining that engagement represents a level of psychological presence in an activity, whereas other constructs such as role identification and role commitment are potential reasons for becoming engaged.

May et al. (2004) conducted a quantitative study of engagement in work also based on Kahn's (1990) ethnographic work. May et al. (2004) first made clear the distinction between job engagement and the related constructs of job involvement (Brown and Leigh, 1996) and flow. First, they explained that job involvement is focused on the degree to which a job is tied to one's self-image, whereas engagement is concerned with the ways in which a person invests in performing a job. Second, while flow has been considered a peak cognitive state during an activity, engagement concerns cognitive, emotional, and physical investment in work.

Therefore, May et al. (2004) defined engagement as Kahn did, as self-employment and expression physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances (Kahn, 1990: 694). They conducted their study with administrative employees of an insurance company, and attempted to measure engagement as three separate cognitive (e.g. 'Performing my job is so absorbing that I forget about everything else'), emotional (e.g. 'I really put my heart into my job'), and physical ('I exert a lot of energy performing my job') factors. However, a factor analysis of survey responses did not converge to this three-factor solution, so scores were averaged across these three dimensions to form a single measure of engagement.

Yet another approach to the conceptualization and measurement of engagement has grown out of research on job burnout. Maslach et al. (2001) have argued that job engagement can be seen as the opposite of job burnout, and is characterized by high levels of energy, involvement in work, and a sense of personal efficacy at work. These authors see job burnout and job engagement as opposite ends of a single continuum, rather than as two separate dimensions. However, Schaufeli et al. (2002) argued that job engagement and job burnout should be conceptualized and assessed as two independent, but correlated, constructs. These authors argued that engagement at work is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption, and provided evidence through structural equation modeling for separate constructs of burnout and engagement.

Finally, Harter et al. (2003) have recently defined employee engagement as 'a combination of cognitive and emotional antecedent variables in the workplace' (p. 206). These authors proposed that employee engagement is best assessed by a diverse set of 12 items addressing such factors as knowing what is expected at work, having the necessary resources to do well, receiving recognition or praise, and having fellow employees who are committed to doing quality work. Although the authors argue that these variables are the antecedents of employee engagement, no evidence is presented to show these variables contribute to an independent assessment of engagement.

Integrating the theoretical perspectives on job engagement

Although there are clearly diverse conceptualizations and assessments of job engagement, these viewpoints share important commonalities. For example, Britt (1999, 2003a), May et al. (2004), Maslach et al. (2001), and Schaufeli et al. (2003) all emphasize that job engagement entails the individual being dedicated to successful performance through emotional investment in performance. Beyond this commonality, there clearly exist differences of opinion regarding which additional factors and measures are necessary to adequately capture job engagement. These differences stem from what we see as a lack of differentiating the outcomes and predictors of job engagement from the assessment of job engagement itself. For example, our conceptualization of job engagement emphasizes

individuals feeling responsible for job performance and caring about the outcomes of performance (Britt, 1999, 2003b; Britt et al., 2005). Therefore, engagement is a motivational state created by beliefs of personal responsibility and caring. We see such components as vigor, physical exertion, attention, effort, and absorption as immediate outcomes of being engaged in work that have implications for the more distal outcomes of job performance and health.

Furthermore, we believe some of the constructs offered by other researchers as indicators of engagement should actually be considered antecedents of engagement. For example, we see efficacy at work (Maslach et al., 2001) as a predictor of job engagement. In addition, we see many items used by Harter et al. (2003) as addressing predictors of job engagement (e.g. knowing what is expected at work, having the resources necessary to do well). Recognizing these distinctions will become especially important later in the chapter when we address the consequences of job engagement. As we shall see, viewing job engagement as involving the investment of the self-system in performance has implications for the effects that engagement in work will have on health and performance.

In addition, we believe that using multiple measures addressing different constructs to assess job engagement will invariably lead to confusion regarding which aspects of job engagement are related to important outcomes (see Carver, 1989). For example, imagine that researchers conduct a study examining the relationship between job engagement and ratings of job performance where job engagement is assessed through separate measures of vigor, absorption, and dedication. How do the researchers test the relationship between job engagement and job performance? Do they perform separate correlations between the predictors and job performance? Do they combine the three dimensions, and then examine the correlation? Do they conduct structural equation modeling where the three subscales assess a higher order construct of job engagement, and then relate this to job performance? Do they conduct a multiple regression showing that each sub-dimension predicts variance in performance ratings? All these strategies leave open the possibility that one or more of the sub-dimensions are more important than the others in explaining the predictive power of the overall construct.

For this reason and because of the reasons outlined above, we have chosen to measure job engagement with a single scale, and to clearly distinguish between the assessment of engagement itself and the predictors and consequences of job engagement. However, in discussing the predictors and consequences of job engagement below, we also review research by the authors described above. Interestingly, researchers using different conceptualizations and assessments of job engagement have found similar sets of variables that predict engagement in work. Figure 1 provides a model that will serve to guide our discussion of the predictors and consequences of job engagement. This model specifies those conditions

hypothesized to give rise to job engagement, and how immediate outcomes of job engagement, such as absorption and effort, and conditions of the work environment, are hypothesized to influence health and job performance.

Predictors of engagement in work

Job-related attributes

Britt (1999, 2003b) used the Triangle Model of Responsibility (Schlenker, 1997; Schlenker et al., 1994) to predict when soldiers would become personally engaged in their jobs in different settings. According to the Triangle Model, felt responsibility for any given event or performance domain is a function of relationships between the event or domain itself, the prescriptions or rules that describe what is required for superior performance, and the identity images possessed by the actor that may or may not be relevant to the event or domain. Personal responsibility, and therefore job engagement, should be high when a set of clear guidelines governs performance in the event or domain (high job clarity), the individual feels a strong sense of personal control and contribution for their performance (high job control), the individual feels the performance domain is relevant to central aspects of his or her identity and/or training (high relevance of job to identity), and when the performance or event in question has important consequences (high job importance). These predictors of job engagement are shown in Figure 1.

Britt (1999) examined job engagement among soldiers on a military operation and at their home base, and found that job clarity, job control, and identity-relevance independently predicted job engagement in two different samples. The ability of these three variables to independently predict job engagement was also replicated in a study of US Army Rangers (Britt, 2003b). In addition, job importance has been found to predict job engagement (Britt et al., 2001). Britt (1999) also found evidence for the utility of the Triangle Model in predicting job engagement by examining differences in engagement between units deployed to Saudi Arabia. All units were Patriot Air Defense Artillery companies trained to fire patriot missiles to intercept scud missiles. However, one of these units was assigned to do a much different task (basically perform the mission of an infantry unit) and was given little control over their job. However, the requirements for their job were clear. Britt (1999) found that this unit scored lower than the other units on job relevance and job control, but not on job clarity. Furthermore, this unit scored lower than the other units on job engagement. Finally, the differences between the units on job engagement were reduced to non-significance when controlling for job control and job relevance, supporting these components of the model as determinants of the unit differences in job engagement.

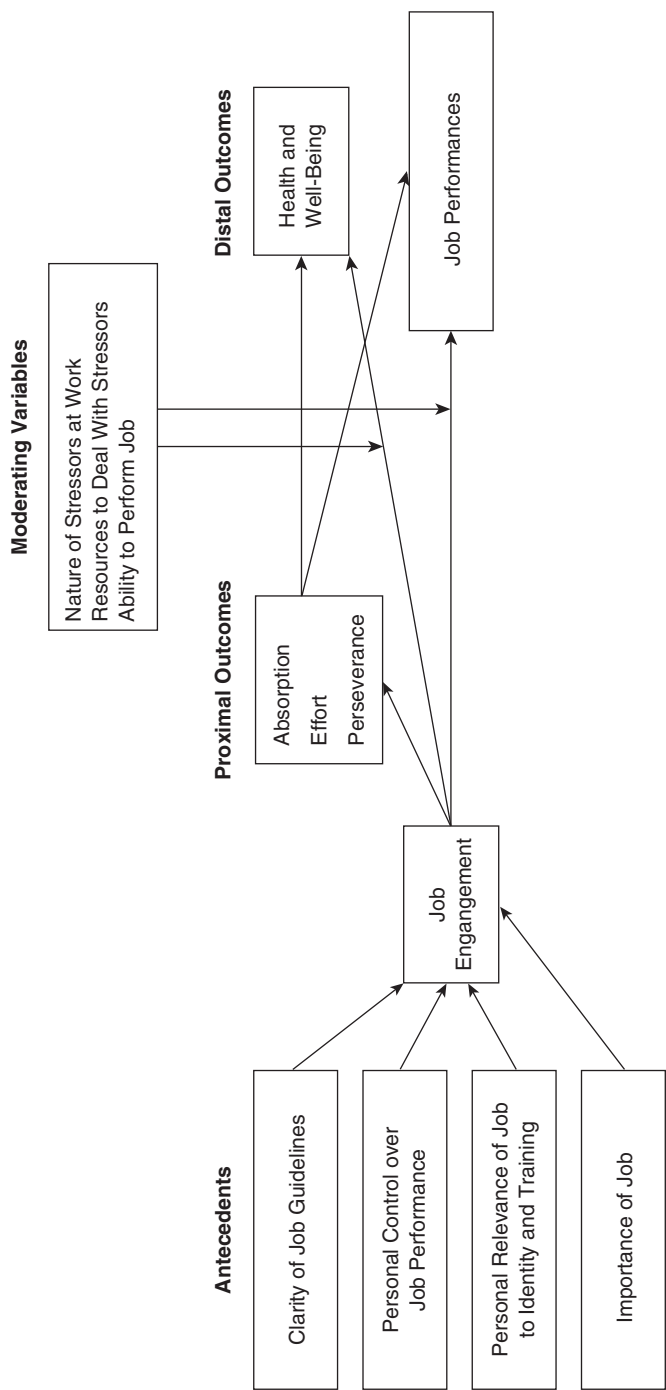


Figure 11.1 Antecedents and consequences of job engagement

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May et al. (2004) also conducted a comprehensive evaluation of predictors of job engagement. Building on the qualitative work of Kahn (1990), these authors argued that the proximal determinants of job engagement would be perceiving work as personally meaningful, feeling confident at being able to meet demands at work, and feeling safe at being oneself at work. The first two of these proximal predictors are best considered job-related attributes. May et al. (2004) also examined correlates of these proximal predictors. Meaningfulness of work was hypothesized to be predicted by having an enriching job and sensing that the job fit with the employee's identity; confidence at meeting work demands was hypothesized to be predicted by having emotional resources at work, being low in self-consciousness, and being involved in many outside activities. Using path analysis, the authors found support for most of their hypothesized relationships. Most importantly for the present chapter, being involved in personally meaningful work and feeling confident at being able to execute performance were related to job engagement. Furthermore, Bakker et al. (2003) found that autonomy was a predictor of engagement in work (see also Maslach and Leiter, 1997). Finally, some of the items viewed by Harter et al. (2003) to be antecedents of employee engagement emphasize both job control/autonomy (e.g. 'At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best everyday') and job clarity (e.g. 'I know what is expected of me at work').

Taken together, these studies suggest that high levels of engagement in work are associated with clear job guidelines, personal control/autonomy over job performance, and performing work consistent with one's identity, which is therefore personally meaningful. In line with the primary model of job engagement used in the present chapter, all of these variables serve to engage the self-system of the individual in job performance. That is, individuals should feel more responsible for and committed to successful job performance when they have personal control over clear and personally meaningful work.

It is also worth noting that the most potent job attribute predictive of job engagement may change depending on aspects of the employee sample or working conditions. For example, consider a sample of elderly employees. For these individuals, feeling a sense of personal control over their work may be the most important predictor of engagement. On the other hand, for employees within an organization undergoing a major transition, clarity of job guidelines and expectations may take on greater importance as a predictor of engagement. When issues of personal control or clarity are not especially pressing, then the identity-relevance of a job may take on greater importance as a predictor of engagement (see Britt, 1999, 2003a).

Leadership and relationships with co-workers

Although the Triangle Model of Responsibility does a good job of specifying the job-related predictors of engagement, it does not adequately

address the leadership and interpersonal factors that may directly or indirectly predict engagement. Kahn's (1990) qualitative work suggested that employees were more likely to feel engaged in work when they experienced a sense of 'psychological safety', which he defined as 'feeling able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career' (p. 708). Kahn determined that relationships with co-workers, positive group dynamics, and a supportive and clarifying leadership style contributed to the condition of psychological safety that gave rise to higher levels of engagement. In a similar vein, Harter et al. (2003) argued that most of their antecedents of job engagement can be influenced by managers through actions that influence the job-related predictors of engagement described above.

Even though leadership and co-worker relationships should influence job engagement, it is informative that in research conducted to date these variables have been found to relate to job engagement through the job-related attributes of engagement described above. In the study described earlier, May et al. (2004) found that relationships between supervisors and co-workers predicted psychological safety, which then predicted engagement in work. Leadership and co-worker perceptions did not directly relate to job engagement apart from their association with being oneself at work. Similar findings were obtained by Britt and Bliese (1998), who examined perceptions of leader consideration and initiating structure as predictors of job engagement among soldiers deployed on a peacekeeping mission to Bosnia. These authors found that perceptions of leader behaviors (especially providing structure) predicted job engagement through their association with the job-related attribute of having clear guidelines for job performance. For these reasons, aspects of leadership and co-worker relations are not indicated in Figure 1 as direct predictors of job engagement. However, it is clear that leadership relates to the job-related antecedents of high job engagement. It remains to be seen whether there are specific categories of leader or co-worker relations that directly predict job engagement apart from their association with the proximal job-related antecedents that predict engagement.

Consequences of job engagement

More research has been conducted on the assessment and predictors of job engagement than on the consequences of job engagement for health and performance. In the model we provide in Figure 1, we believe it is important to distinguish between the proximal, immediate consequences arising from being personally engaged in work (e.g. increased effort and absorption), and the more distal consequences of job engagement (e.g. performance and well-being). As discussed by prior authors, engagement should lead to increased effort to perform well, absorption in the work-related aspects of one's existence, and perseverance (May et al., 2004;

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Rothbard, 2001; Schaufeli et al., 2003). With these immediate consequences, one would expect job engagement to be an inherently positive motivational state that would always produce adaptive consequences. In fact, most of the researchers examining job engagement focus on the positive consequences of job engagement for psychological health and performance. We agree that job engagement is a desirable state that managers should strive to induce. However, we do not expect job engagement to always have positive consequences.

Because job engagement reflects feelings of personal responsibility for and commitment to superior performance, the outcomes of performance should have greater implications for the individual's identity (see Britt, 1999; Britt et al., 2005). Therefore, when the individual has the necessary resources and abilities for successful performance, being highly engaged in work should motivate the individual to excel and to feel personally fulfilled. Under such conditions engagement in work might actually buffer individuals from stressors not relevant to job performance, because the individual is capable of becoming absorbed in meaningful work activities (Britt and Bliese, 2003). However, consider a situation where the employee does not have access to necessary resources or have the aptitudes necessary for effective performance (e.g. Peters and O'Connor, 1980). Under such circumstances where successful performance is doubtful or even unlikely, feeling personally responsible for and committed to job performance may have negative consequences for the individual (Britt, 2003c; Britt et al., in press). These types of moderating variables are depicted in Figure 1.

This same kind of dynamic may occur when employees are experiencing poor or abusive supervision (see Tepper, 2000). Experiencing abusive supervision that detracts from the ability to perform effectively may be especially troubling for people personally engaged in their work. Individuals who are disengaged from their jobs can respond to abusive supervision by further withdrawing effort and resources, but this method of avoidant coping will be difficult for highly engaged workers to adopt. Below we discuss research that has examined the role of job engagement in the stressor-strain relationship, and then turn to research examining the association between engagement and performance.

Job engagement and the stressor-strain relationship

Britt and his colleagues (Britt, 1999; Britt and Bliese, 2003; Britt et al., 2005) have examined job engagement as a moderator of the relationship between different types of stressors and outcomes. As indicated above, job engagement should serve to motivate the individual to perform well, channeling the individual's efforts and attention into job performance (May et al., 2004; Schaufeli et al., 2002). The net effect of such absorption and dedication should be that job engagement buffers individuals from the negative consequences of stressors that do not impede job performance.

Britt and Bliese (2003) examined job engagement as a buffer against stressors among soldiers deployed to Bosnia on a peacekeeping mission. Using hierarchical linear modeling to control for unit-level influences, these authors found that those soldiers high in job engagement reported lower levels of psychological symptoms and health symptoms in comparison to soldiers low in job engagement while under high levels of environmental, family, or unit stress. The authors hypothesized that being engaged in work led to decreased resources for processing the negative implications of stressors occurring outside the immediate work environment.

Britt et al. (2005) replicated these findings in a longitudinal study of soldiers stationed overseas. Soldiers completed measures of job engagement, objective workload (hours worked per day in the past week, training days in the past 6 months) and subjective work overload (e.g. 'I have so much work to do I cannot do everything well'), and physical and psychological health at Time 1 and then completed the same measures 3 to 4 months later (Time 2). The authors found that after controlling for Time 1 measures of physical and psychological health, job engagement buffered soldiers from the negative effects of work hours (for physical symptoms only) and a high numbers of training days (for both psychological and physical symptoms). Soldiers who were highly engaged in their work at Time 1 reported fewer symptoms at Time 2 when working long hours or spending many days away training at Time 1.

The authors hypothesized that highly engaged workers may likely interpret objective work demands differently. Employees who are highly engaged in their work will see longer hours and more training as giving them the skills they need to perform well. However, employees who are relatively disengaged from their jobs will see these objective work demands as causing them to spend more time in areas that do not connect with their self-concept. This research contributed to the literature on the relationship between work hours and health. Prior research had found a relatively weak overall relationship between work hours and health (see Sparks et al., 1997). The results of Britt et al. (2005) showed that disengaged workers may be likely to show a stronger positive relationship between work hours and health.

Although high job engagement buffered soldiers from the objective indicators of workload, a different pattern emerged for the subjective perception of work overload. Feeling one has too much work to do anything well should be especially troubling to individuals engaged in their work, because such a stressor is likely to prevent superior performance. In fact, Britt et al. (2005) found that high job engagement at Time 1 exacerbated the relationship between subjective work overload at Time 1 and physical symptoms at Time 2. Only among individuals high in job engagement did subjective work overload predict increases in physical health symptoms from Time 1 to Time 2. These findings suggest that obstacles to successful performance may be especially difficult for highly engaged workers (see also Britt, 2003c).

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Britt (1999) discovered a conceptually similar finding in a study investigating the relationship between job engagement, perceptions of job success, and stress and depression. He found that job engagement magnified the relationship between perceptions of success and stress and depression. That is, the relationships between perceptions of succeeding versus failing at work and stress and depression were stronger when soldiers reported higher levels of engagement in their job. These results further support the argument that a downside to job engagement is that impediments to successful performance or the realization one is not performing well may be accompanied by heightened stress and depressive symptoms when individuals feel personally engaged in performance.

In summarizing the research on job engagement as a moderator of the stressor/strain relationship, it would appear that job engagement can be a double-edged sword, protecting workers from the negative effects of stressors that do not impede job performance, but enhancing the negative relationship between performance-impeding stressors and outcomes. Although this would be an accurate characterization, it is also important to consider the potential benefits of 'being stung' by the inability to perform effectively. Long ago, Epstein (1973) pointed out that one way individuals discover what is important to them is by observing their emotional reactions to events. Employees may not realize how engaged they are in their jobs until they encounter obstacles to performing well.

As detailed below, more longitudinal research is needed to examine the process by which highly engaged workers deal with impediments to performance. It may be the case that highly engaged employees go through a process of initial stress and disappointment when encountering such obstacles, but they are also especially effective at ultimately overcoming these obstacles and contributing to enhanced organizational development. Although disengaged workers may initially respond better to performance impediments, they are also unlikely to develop innovative solutions to such impediments. Such a scenario seems reasonable in the context of dealing with obstacles that are changeable through the employee's actions. However, engaged employees may respond differently to impediments that are not changeable. The presence of uncontrollable impediments that continuously hinder performance may result in highly engaged workers looking elsewhere for investing their energies (see Britt, 2003c).

Job engagement and performance

Surprisingly little research has investigated the relationship of engagement at work with different aspects of job performance. However, recent research has examined the relationship between the antecedents of employee engagement and performance. Harter et al. (2003) examined consequences of what they refer to as 'employee engagement', using the measure of 12 different perceptions described earlier. Although these

authors did not measure engagement specifically, they did show that antecedents of job engagement were predictive of important outcomes at the business unit level. Harter et al., performed a meta-analysis on a database consisting of 7939 business units that contained 198,514 participants. The authors examined the correlation between both the composite score and the individual predictors that made up the composite score with business outcomes. They found positive correlations between the composite score of engagement and customer satisfaction, productivity, profitability, and reduced employee turnover. This research supported a connection between the antecedents of job engagement and performance. Future research will be necessary to determine if job engagement is responsible for this relationship.

Britt et al. (in press) recently examined engagement in a training course as a predictor of rated performance at the end of the course. In addition, these authors examined a potential moderator of the engagement-performance relationship: whether an individual has doubts about possessing the skills necessary for effective performance. These authors studied ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) cadets who were participating in a leadership training course. The cadet's level of engagement in the camp, perception of whether he or she possessed the skills to be a leader, and conscientiousness were assessed during the training camp. The cadet's leadership performance was rated by experts at the end of the camp. The authors found that engagement in the course was positively related to rated leadership performance, even after controlling for conscientiousness. Doubts about possessing leadership skills were also negatively related to performance ratings. An interaction between the two variables also emerged, showing that the negative relationship between doubts about possessing leadership skills and rated performance was stronger for cadets who were highly engaged in the course. Therefore, engagement not only magnified the relationship between performance-impeding stressors and health, but also between performance-impeding stressors and performance.

Future directions

Many exciting areas exist for future research on engagement at work. Perhaps one of the most pressing areas is the explicit recognition of levels of engagement with different aspects of one's job. Much of the research conducted on job engagement has focused on assessing overall engagement in the job. However, individuals can be highly engaged in particular areas of their job, and disengaged from others. Future research should examine how differential engagement within areas or tasks contributes to specific outcomes within those domains. Consider an academic who is highly engaged in the research component of her job, but is relatively disengaged from teaching and service activities. This differential engagement should be related to different performance in the given areas. In

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addition, interesting hypotheses could be tested regarding what happens when the level of psychological engagement in a given area of work is inconsistent with the weight assigned to that area in the overall performance evaluation. In the above example, a high level of psychological engagement in the domain of research should result in mostly positive consequences when research is given a large weight in the academic's overall performance evaluation, but may cause problems if teaching performance is weighted more strongly. This information would be lost if only overall engagement in work were examined.

Another promising area of future research involves temporal fluctuations in job engagement. For example, Sonnentag (2003) recently argued that an employee's level of job engagement may fluctuate on a daily basis, and that the extent to which individuals experienced a sense of recovery from the work day would predict engagement in work on the following day. Sonnentag (2003) found support for this relationship even after controlling for overall job engagement, and also showed that daily fluctuations in job engagement mediated the relationship between work recovery and proactive behaviors at work. This research suggests that engagement in work does fluctuate, and that such fluctuations are meaningfully related to important outcomes.

Future research on levels and temporal fluctuations in engagement in work illustrates the importance of examining the underlying processes responsible for engagement within different areas and how engagement relates to important outcomes. More diary-type studies examining engagement over time would lead to a better understanding of how engagement in different work areas develops, and the process by which individuals disengage from particular tasks and their overall job. For example, what is the temporal process by which disengagement or engagement occurs? How easy is it to rebound from disengagement to engagement in a given area following interventions designed to increase job clarity, control, and relevance? These types of questions can only be addressed using longitudinal research designs.

Concluding thoughts

Lazarus (2003) wrote a critique of the positive psychology movement shortly before his death. He offered many criticisms of the approach, including the difficulty of identifying a priori strengths that were universally positive and the failure of the positive psychology movement to recognize prior work on stress and coping as 'positive'. Although many of his criticisms were challenged by other authors, two points seemed to resonate with a number of researchers: the difficulty of completely separating the study of positive from negative constructs, and recognizing that many positive psychological constructs can be associated, under

particular conditions, with negative consequences (see Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2003, for an expanded account of these issues).

As discussed above, we view engagement in work as a positive psychological construct, in that engagement is associated with increased caring about performance outcomes, and contributes to meaning that individuals assign to their work (Britt et al., 2001). However, we are also aware that under certain kinds of conditions (e.g. lack of critical resources, work overload), engagement in work may have negative consequences for the individual (Britt, 2003c; Britt et al., in press). We would argue that most constructs falling under the purview of positive psychology have the capacity for negative consequences under specific conditions, and we would encourage researchers to study the processes leading to these consequences in order to provide a complete account of how positive psychological states at work contribute to adaptive functioning.

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