TITLE: THE ENGAGEMENT OF ACADEMICS AT WORK: A RESEARCH STRATEGY

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THE ENGAGEMENT OF ACADEMICS AT WORK: A RESEARCH STRATEGY

ABSTRACT

Employee engagement stems from a body of research focusing upon the ‘human’ aspect of production. Research has provided clear links between organisational investment in human capital and greater productivity. The term ‘engagement’ stems from the work of Kahn (1990) who distinguished between being engaged and disengaged at work. Since Kahn’s study, a number of other factors have been linked to engagement leading to an overlap and confusion of the definition. The aim of this paper is provide a research strategy to investigate the interrelated factors of employee engagement and the extent to which they contribute to engagement. From this, a more inclusive definition and theory of employee engagement may be developed using the Higher Education Sector as the testing ground.

Key Words: employee engagement, human capital, adaptive theory

INTRODUCTION

Historically, there has been a body of research that has shaped the way people view organisations and the interactions that occur within them. Prior to Mayo’s work in the 1920’s a mechanistic, or scientific approach to the organisation of work predominated (Mayo 1988). Mayo’s contribution, the ‘Hawthorne Studies’ in particular, shifted the focus of production from systems to the significance of humans in industrial society and as an integral part of organisation life and functioning. In other words, the identification of the particularly human traits of motivation, trust and discretion were elevated as key factors to increased production. The so called ‘human relations movement’ thus commenced.
The expansion of research into humanistic factors influencing production continued with ideas such as organisational commitment (Becker 1960; Porter, Steers, Mowday & Boulian 1974), job satisfaction (Brayfield & Rothe 1951), motivation (Maslow 1943), loyalty and trust. These theories impelled the development of personnel management and its successor, human resource management as a discipline. Putting many of these factors together, Beer, Spector, Lawrence, Quinn- Mills and Walton (1984) created the ‘Harvard Business School’ model of human resource management (HRM). The model focused upon the people in an organisation being the key resource. Since then, the practice of HRM has entailed the development and maintenance of policies, practices and procedures that impact upon employees’ attitudes, behaviours and their overall performance in the workplace (De Cieri & Kramar 2003).

More recently, the development in the search for human factors of production is the recognition that investments in ‘human capital’ and ‘social capital’ result in increased organisational performance (Echols 2005; Boxhall 1993). Both these concepts centre on the empowerment of individuals or groups through training or provision of resources such that they have a level of autonomy and discretion, which they use to contribute to the production system. Human capital is believed to be the key in successful organisations with; greater profit margins, increased productivity, lower absenteeism and its benefits (Crabtree, 2005; Echols 2005; Gubman 2004).

Other constructs identified as linked to the human contribution to the production system include organisational commitment (OC), organisational citizenship behaviours (OCB) and job satisfaction (JS). Briefly, organisational commitment measures the extent to which employees feel loyalty and a sense of belonging to the company; organisational citizenship behaviours similarly reflect the traits that contribute to organisational performance and job satisfaction reflects the extent to which employees receive pleasure from their work. These factors have been key drivers in organisational and employee effectiveness within the organisation.
Another contributor to this line of human factors of production has been employee engagement, a measure of employee effectiveness and an organisation’s investment in human capital (Echols 2005). Research has suggested that OC (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes 2002; Robinson, Perryman & Hayday 2004), OCB (Robinson et al. 2004) and JS (Harter et al. 2002; McDade & Mackenzie 2002) are considered to be the crucial constructs of employee engagement.

Much of the employee engagement research has stemmed from the work of Kahn (1990; Harter et al. 2002; Luthans & Peterson 2002; May, Gilson & Harter 2004). Kahn was the first researcher to coin the term ‘engagement’ and relate it to employees working within an organisation. In Kahn’s (1990) groundbreaking work, he was able to distinguish between being engaged or disengaged at work. He believed that each role a person performs, is only as good as the degree of ‘self’ that was incorporated into that role. The more involved employees are at work the greater their performance. Another body of research emphasising engagement has been that of Harter et al. (2002) and McDade & Mackenzie (2002). Their ideas of engagement are based upon the concept of JS (Brayfield and Rothe 1954); if employees are satisfied with their job then they have some degree of engagement with the organisation.

From the above discussion it is clear that the concept of employee engagement has evolved from the development of a range of similar and interrelated constructs. This has contributed to a large variation in the definitions of employee engagement in the literature and a conceptual overlap with other factors. The main gap in this literature is that few if any studies have comprehensively tested the broad, interrelated factors to determine which ones are more likely to contribute to employee engagement than others. Focusing on the University sector, this research strategy will provide a more complete picture of employee engagement and its measures.
The University sector in Australia in recent decades has been subjected to much change, which has impacted upon the role of the academic. The devolution of the binary system of higher education was the catalyst to the beginning of change. The higher education sector is now one unitary system, incorporating universities, colleges and institutes. Further government reforms have seen the introduction of a more manageralist approach to service delivery and administration (Bellamy, Morley & Watty 2003; Harman 2003; Marginson 2000) rather than what was considered a more traditional collegial approach. The focus of the higher education sector is now on greater accountability and quality (Bellamy et al. 2003; Taylor, Gough, Bundrock & Winter 1998). The sector has also faced other changes, such as significant increases in student numbers, less government funding and advances in technology (Harman 2003; Marginson 2000).

Research suggests that the impact that these changes have had on academics is somewhat negative. Academics have been described as being more dissatisfied with their jobs (Harman 2003; Coaldrake & Stedman 1998), have greater levels of stress and they have a greater sense of alienation than in the past (Everett & Entrekin 1994). Academics are now working harder and longer (Harman 2003), they have higher qualifications but they are enjoying their jobs less (Harman 2003; Everett & Entrekin 1994). In this context, the study of academic engagement is timely. Many of the changes hinge on a productive and engaged workforce. In a competitive global economy, Australian universities face considerable challenges (Marginson 2000).

Academics have the capacity to have more variable engagement to their organisation. Their work role is typified in high autonomy and greater ability of decision making, than as compared to other professions. Changes in higher education make this research poignant, for the benefit of university for policy and procedure. Further, this research will further extend, develop and adapt definitions and theory of employee engagement.
RATIONALE FOR THE RESEARCH

International research has emerged gauging the organisational benefits of an engaged workforce. In Australia, it has been estimated that engaged employees only account for 20 percent of the workforce, 62 percent are seen as not engaged and 18 percent are seen as disengaged (Hooper 2006:17). This disengaged workforce is said to cost the National Economy 31.5 billion a year through decreased productivity, sick and stress related leave and sabotage. A recent study in the US by the Gallup Institute (Echols 2005) noted that the use of engagement initiatives in organisations resulted in higher profit margins (44%), increased employee productiveness (50%) and customer loyalty increased by up to 50% (Echols 2005). Furthermore, Echols (2005) reported that disengaged employees cost the US economy approximately 300 billion dollars a year due to low activity from disengaged workers. Similarly, Crabtree (2005) posited that engaged employees are less likely to suffer from stress and health implications related to work. These statistics present the economic imperative underpinning engagement research for the Australian National Economy and organisational effectiveness and thus represent a key rationale for the current research proposal.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Employee engagement is presented in the literature in a context of importance to organisations. Harley, Lee and Robinson (2005:24) present a theory of employee engagement, where “…an engaged workforce is motivated, self-improving and productive, so gives a competitive edge”. Engagement is seen as integral to the organisation, and it should be part of, and share, relative importance in the organisation’s business strategy (Harley et al. 2005).

As discussed above, employee engagement has been linked positively to organisational productivity (Echols 2005). However, there is much confusion in the literature regarding the
concepts and theories identified as contributing to employee engagement. Employee engagement is composed of many interrelated factors that impact upon employee performance. It is the interrelated factors that this research project will focus upon. The salient variables that have been linked to employee engagement will now be considered. Other salient variables that the literature review has revealed will also be considered.

Employee Engagement

Engagement as a term in management research first appeared from the work of Kahn (1990), who suggested that each performance is as good as the amount of self that is presented. To measure this degree of self, Kahn (1990) developed and defined the concept of personal engagement and disengagement, which refers to the harnessing of employee selves to work roles; through expressing themselves cognitively, emotionally and physically. Engagement is the degree and amount of involvement in the organisation, and disengagement is the degree of withdrawal.

Organisation Commitment and Organisational Citizenship Behaviour

OC is most commonly defined as employees’ involvement and identification with their respective organisation (Porter et al. 1974; Becker 1960). Porter et al. (1974) identified three components of commitment; employee belief and acceptance of the organisations values and goals; the want to exert an extra effort on behalf of the organisation and a desire to remain with the organisation. The main body of commitment research uses the definition derived from Porter et al. (1974) or variations upon this definition (Benson 1988; Bishop, Dow Scott & Burroughs 2000; Deery & Iverson 1998; Mowday, Steers & Porter 1979; Price & Mueller 1986). This definition extends beyond loyalty to the organisation, which is a common variation. Loyalty to the organisation is seen as a very parsimonious and simplistic way of referring to commitment as a general term (Price & Mueller 1981). Commitment encompasses ‘…an active relationship with the organisation such that individuals are willing to give something of themselves in order to
contribute to the organisation’s well being’ (Mowday et al. 1979, p.226). The ideas of commitment have some connection with the definitions of employee engagement, such as employees having a sense of feeling involved and actually enjoying their work (Greenfield 2004; May et al. 2004), and employees having a strong and valuable connection to the organisation (Gubman 2004; May et al. 2004). The work of Appelbaum E. Bailey, Berg and Kalleberg (2000) investigates high performance work systems, which takes into consideration ideas such as autonomy, skill development, decision making, job security to name a few, as having a causal effect on OC. With further research these ideas will also be considered when looking at the impact on engagement.

The definition of employee engagement provided by Robinson et al. (2004), focuses on the constructs of OC and OCB. OCB can be defined as ‘individual behaviour that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognised by the formal reward system, and on the aggregate promotes the efficient and effective functioning of the organisation’ (Organ, Podsakoff & Mackenzie 2006). In other words, the employee will put in extra effort for the benefit of the organisation, without reward.

**Motivation**

Motivation has been highlighted in the employee engagement research as requiring some consideration. Since the work of Maslow during the 1940’s, there has been an avalanche of psychological based motivation research building upon this early theory (Tiejen & Myers 1998). With regards to the relationship of motivation and employee engagement, Harter et al. (2002) and Harley et al. (2005) acknowledge that an engaged employee is one who is motivated at work.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTOR</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
<th>REFERENCE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>The degree of influence or decision making that an employee has over their job.</td>
<td>Appelbaum E et al. (2000); Iverson &amp; Buttigied (1999); Iverson (1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Employees taking the initiative on behalf of the organisation.</td>
<td>Appelbaum S. et al. (1999)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Job Satisfaction</td>
<td>Employee feelings about their job.</td>
<td>Brayfield &amp; Rothe (1951)</td>
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<td>Job Security</td>
<td>Extent to which the organisation provides stable employment</td>
<td>Herzberg (1968) In Iverson &amp; Roy (1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Employee attitude to job and conditions of work</td>
<td>Maslow (1943); Tiejen &amp; Myers (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational Citizenship Behaviours</td>
<td>‘Individual behaviour that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognised by the formal reward system, and on the aggregate promotes the efficient and effective functioning of the organisation’ (Organ et al. 2006:3).</td>
<td>Smith, Organ &amp; Near (1983); Organ et al. (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational Commitment</td>
<td>Employee’s involvement and identification with their organisation.</td>
<td>Porter et al. (1974)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>The degree of employee involvement in the workplace</td>
<td>Fernie &amp; Metcalf (1995)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Organisational Support</td>
<td>The degree that an employee believes that the organisation supports them.</td>
<td>Bishop et al. (2000); Eisenberger, Fasolo &amp; Davis-LaMastro 1990; Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison &amp; Sowa (1986)</td>
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Table 1 - Predicted Contributing Factors of Employee Engagement

There is some employee engagement research that suggests that engagement is linked to JS (Harter et al. 2002; McDade & MacKenzie 2002). Brayfield and Rothe (1951) identify JS as encapsulating how a person feels about their job (Smith, Kendall & Hulin 1969). In relating JS to engagement, McDade and MacKenzie (2002) offer a very simplistic definition of employee engagement as incorporating overall JS of the employee. Harter et al. (2002) take engagement further by suggesting that JS as well as employee motivation are important considerations when discussing engagement.
Other Factors

Apart from OC, OCB, motivation and JS, other factors can also be linked to employee behaviour and performance within an organisation, which informs employee engagement. These factors include issues of organisational justice, autonomy, job security perceived organisational support, workplace participation and empowerment. Others yet to be explored are those embedded in high performance work systems. A preliminary analysis of the literature provided the definitions of the factors are presented in Table 1. A more exhaustive list of variables will be developed through the literature review as part of the research.

A PROPOSED MODEL OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

The proposed conceptual model of the research is presented in figure 1. It provides an outline of the related factors which the literature demonstrates is linked to employee engagement.

Figure 1 – Conceptual model of employee engagement

Testing the factors of Employee Engagement: A Proposed Methodology

The method proposed for analysing this research is adaptive theory (Layder 1993, 1997, 1998) and structural equation modelling. Structural equation modelling will be utilised to identify the
extent to which each variable contributes to employee engagement. This method was chosen because of its modelling ability, which will allow for further testing of each of the factors in the semi-structured interviews and case studies. Figure 2 outlines the methodological approach.

*Figure 2 – Methodological Approach*

Adaptive theory is an extension on Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Grounded and Adaptive theory allow for theory generation based on the gathered data. Grounded theory suggests that the theory is embedded in the data, which will emerge through the research process: ‘*generating a theory involves a process of research*’ (Glaser & Strauss 1967: 6). Grounded theory introduces agency variables at the case study level. The data collected is typically qualitative in nature and is based on the immediate features of the interaction between agents; in this case the employees. Layder (1993) extended the theory generation approach of grounded theory by adding
a structural component. Structural features are those that are incorporated in the context and setting of the research. Structural data is typically quantitative (for instance large scale social science surveys) although it is not limited to this and can include extant theories applying to the area. This approach is referred to as adaptive theory (Layder 1994).

The argument for the extension on grounded theory was that agency data is limited to recording the exact events that occur whereas Layder (1993) argued that these events are not autonomous from the structural features in which they operate. For effective theory generation, Layder (1993) believes that there needs to be a combination of agency and structural data. This provides both for theory generation and triangulation of the data and the results. This approach translates to most typically a qualitative and quantitative approach to the methodology.

**Population and Sample**

The population of this study will comprise academic employees from the 37 universities throughout Australia. The sample will thus be a non-probability sample, of academic staff rather than a combination of academic and general staff. As discussed earlier, university academics are unique in their professional role with the capacity and potential to have greater engagement to their employing organisations. The research on engagement or the contributing factors have not focused upon this professional group of employees. Typically, the research has been on predominately professional line and floor employees (Robinson et al. 2004; Baruch & Winkelmann-Gleed 2002; Luthans & Peterson 2002; Iverson & Buttigieg 1999; Deery & Iverson 1998; Kahn 1990). This provides an avenue of analysis that has not been readily investigated with regards to engagement or the contributing factors. Further, a sector wide analysis allows greater generalisability of the results within that sector. The results will provide a guide and measure for universities to use to identify employee engagement. This will allow Universities the ability to
design policy and practice regarding employee engagement, specific to academic staff. This is especially necessary in the changing culture of universities in Australia.

The minimum sample size will be based upon Hair, Anderson, Tatham and Black (1995) who suggested a ten-to-one ratio of observation to items for significant survey analysis. In this study 10 factors have been identified so far, with an average of five items per factor, the minimum total sample needed would be 500. In order to achieve a satisfactory response rate it is anticipated that at least 600 participants will be required (a 20% safeguard).

**Research Questions**

In the following section the research questions are outlined. Including a discussion how each question will be answered with relation to data collection and results?

**Question 1** – What are the overarching extant theories that could contribute to employee engagement?

This question will be operationalised through an international literature review to identify the extant, or existing overarching theories (Layder 1994, 1998) that impact upon employee engagement by forming the structure or setting of organisational life. The literature review will also provide the factors that could contribute to employee engagement that will form the survey.

**Question 2** – What are the factors currently attributed to contribute to employee engagement?

The factors will be derived from a review of the international literature relating to employee engagement and related theories. Further, the factors will be statistically tested against the current definitions of employee engagement. Figure 1 provides a map of the factors derived from the preliminary literature review that could contribute to employee engagement.
Further, a survey will be developed based upon the factors that the extant theories and the literature review have identified that are believed to contribute to employee engagement. A pilot study will test the reliability and validity of the survey and perhaps identify further contributing factors. The survey will be administered to staff in all 37 universities throughout Australia. The intention of the survey is to test all the factors that could contribute to employee engagement. Structural equation modelling will be used to develop a model of employee engagement.

**Question 3** - What further factors could contribute to employee engagement?

In order to conduct an exhaustive inventory of engagement factors, three in-depth case studies will be investigated through semi-structured interview and focus groups. These areas of data collection will also determine if there are any other factors that arise from the interviews that the literature review did not reveal. The semi-structured interviews will be administered to staff from a selection of universities. Approximately 20 interviews will be administered. The questions will be derived from the model of employee engagement as developed for research question 2. The subjects will be asked to provide examples or documented evidence during the interview in order to develop case studies.

The case studies will provide a working example of employee engagement that will further develop the model and definition of employee engagement. This layer will provide further triangulation and validation of the previous levels of data collection and analysis. Finally, an expert panel, consisting of academic experts and human resource representatives, will be used to provide further validation of the research results. The expert panel will both provide another avenue for triangulation as well as provide a discussion of how the findings might translate to universities and the management of their employees.
CONCLUSION

Employee engagement consists of many interrelated factors which have contributed to some confusion in the definition of engagement. This research proposal has provided a structure for further factor identification and analysis. The significance the study will be to provide an exhaustive investigation into the factors associated positively with employee engagement in an academic setting. This will assist both definition building as well as contributing to a theory of employee engagement relevant to academics in Australian universities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


