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Employee engagement, human resource management practices and competitive advantage: An integrated approach

Simon L Albrecht Arnold B Bakker Jamie A Gruman William H Macey Alan M Saks

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# Employee engagement, human resource management practices and competitive advantage

Human  
resource  
management  
practices

## An integrated approach

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Simon L. Albrecht

*School of Psychology, Deakin University, Burwood, Australia*

Arnold B. Bakker

*Department of Work and Organizational Psychology,  
Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands*

Jamie A. Gruman

*Department of Business, University of Guelph, Guelph, Canada*

William H. Macey

*CEB, Rolling Meadows, Illinois, USA, and*

Alan M. Saks

*Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources,  
University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada*

### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to argue in support of a model that shows how four key HRM practices focused on engagement influence organizational climate, job demands and job resources, the psychological experiences of safety, meaningfulness and availability at work, employee engagement, and individual, group and organizational performance and competitive advantage.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This conceptual review focuses on the research evidence showing interrelationships between organizational context factors, job factors, individual employee psychological and motivational factors, employee outcomes, organizational outcomes and competitive advantage. The proposed model integrates frameworks that have previously run independently in the HR and engagement literatures.

**Findings** – The authors conclude that HRM practitioners need to move beyond the routine administration of annual engagement surveys and need to embed engagement in HRM policies and practices such as personnel selection, socialization, performance management, and training and development.

**Practical implications** – The authors offer organizations clear guidelines for how HR practices (i.e. selection, socialization, performance management, training) can be used to facilitate and improve employee engagement and result in positive outcomes that will help organizations achieve a competitive advantage.

**Originality/value** – The authors provide useful new insights for researchers and management professionals wishing to embed engagement within the fabric of HRM policies and practices and employee behaviour, and organizational outcomes.

**Keywords** Organization effectiveness, Engagement, HR architecture

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

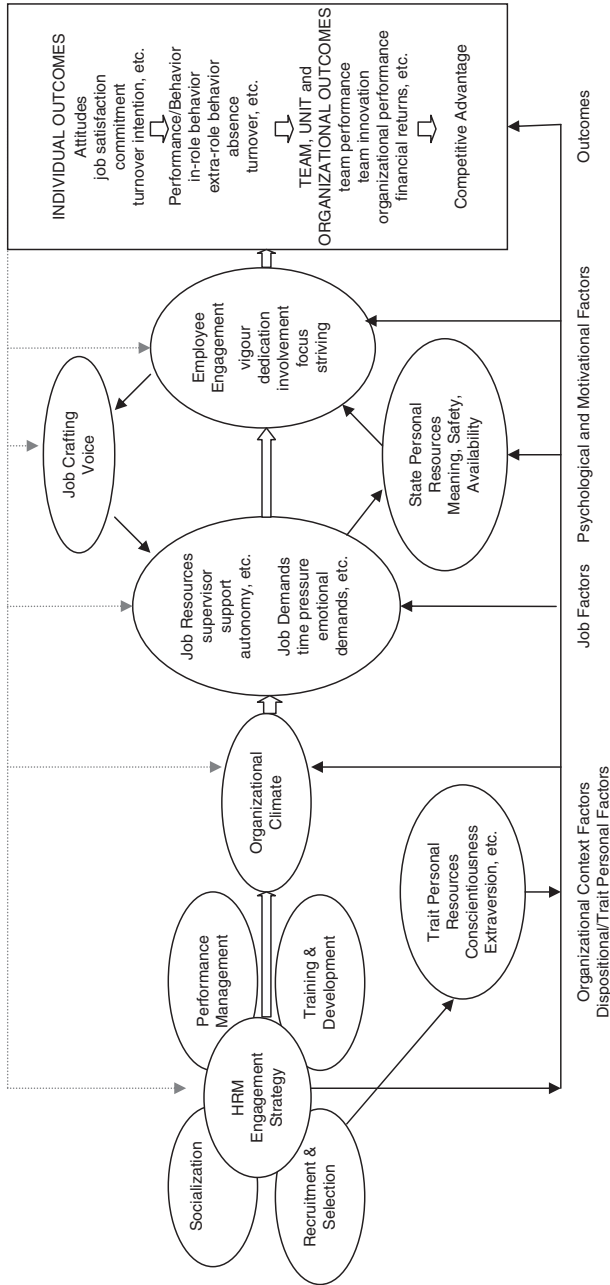


The topic of employee engagement has attracted enormous interest over the past decade or two. Macey *et al.* (2009) commented that “rarely has a term [...] resonated as strongly with business executives as employee engagement has in recent years” (p. xv). Consequently, considerable progress has been made with respect to clarifying

and defining the construct, distinguishing it from related, though not identical constructs (Hallberg and Schaufeli, 2006), and understanding its antecedents and outcomes (see Bakker *et al.*, 2014; Christian *et al.*, 2011; Crawford *et al.*, 2010; Demerouti and Cropanzano, 2010; Halbesleben, 2010; Mauno *et al.*, 2010 for meta-analyses and reviews). Despite this progress, relatively low levels of employee engagement continue to be reported in organizations across the globe. Aon Hewitt (2013), for example, reported that four out of every ten employees they surveyed were not engaged, and two out of ten were actively disengaged.

In this paper we argue that, in order to deliver its purported benefits, engagement needs to be explicitly embedded within an integrated system of HRM policies, practices and procedures (Guest, 2014). We present, as Figure 1, a high level model to help explain how a strategic focus on engagement can lead to competitive advantage. In so doing, we aim to provide integration across the human resource management and engagement literatures that, until now, have largely run in parallel. More specifically, by integrating HRM-performance models (Becker *et al.*, 1997; Guest 1997), high performance human research practices (HPHRP) frameworks (Kehoe and Wright, 2013; Sun *et al.*, 2007), job-demands resources theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014), and SHRM-engagement frameworks (e.g. Sparrow, 2014), we map a series of organizational level, job level, and individual difference factors that help explain how four key engagement-focused HR practices lead to engagement and subsequently to downstream performance outcomes. By drawing on constructs identified in the HR and engagement literatures, we specifically address the mechanisms by which HR practices and engagement contribute to competitive advantage.

In terms of broad empirical support for the proposed model, research has shown that HRM systems can influence perceptions of organizational climate (e.g. Gelade and Ivery, 2003; Zacharatos *et al.*, 2005). Research has also shown that organizational climate can influence job resources and job demands (e.g. Dollard and Bakker, 2010), that in turn influence personal resources such as the psychological experience of safety, meaningfulness, and availability, that in turn influence engagement (e.g. Kahn, 1990; May *et al.*, 2004). Engagement has also been argued to influence the extent to which employees engage job crafting behaviour (Tims *et al.*, in press), and the extent to which they will voice ideas, suggestions, and concerns (Morrison, 2014). Furthermore, employee engagement has been shown to influence a range of attitudinal, behavioural, performance, and financial outcomes (e.g. Christian *et al.*, 2011; Halbesleben, 2010; Macey *et al.*, 2009; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2009a). Halbesleben's (2010) meta-analysis, for example, showed engagement is positively associated with commitment ( $\rho = 0.38$ ), health ( $\rho = 0.20$ ), turnover intention ( $\rho = -0.26$ ) and performance ( $\rho = 0.36$ ). The arrows in Figure 1 suggest direct, indirect, and reciprocal relationships among the elements within the model. The modelling of direct and indirect relationships reflects the proximal and distal influence that HR practices and organizational climate, for example, can have on the individual experience of job resources, psychological safety, engagement, and on further downstream variables such as absence and turnover. Similarly, personality traits such as conscientiousness and extraversion can influence individual experience of job resources, psychological safety, engagement, and further downstream variables such as job satisfaction, commitment, absence, and turnover intention. This argument is consistent with research showing, for example, that individual difference factors influence constructs such as job satisfaction (Connolly and Viswesvaran, 2000; Judge *et al.*, 2002). The reverse direction grey arrows are consistent with research (e.g. Schneider *et al.*, 2003) showing that outcomes such as firm performance



**Figure 1.**  
Strategic engagement model

also predict “upstream” engagement related constructs such as job satisfaction and organizational climate.

There are a number of well-developed theoretical frameworks that help explain how human resource management systems can result in competitive advantage. Becker *et al.*'s (1997) HRM-performance model, for example, explains how the design of HRM systems that support and develop employee skills and motivation will result in increased productivity, creativity and discretionary effort that will in turn result in improved performance, profit, and growth. Similarly, Guest's (1997) HRM-performance model explains how HRM selection, training, appraisal, reward, job design and involvement practices result in employee effort, cooperation, involvement, and discretionary behaviour that, in turn, result in improved individual performance and increased organizational profit and return on investment. Purcell *et al.*'s (2003) widely cited AMO framework (A = abilities, M = motivation, O = opportunity to participate) also emphasizes the key role that employee motivation plays in the translation of HR practices into organizational performance and sustained competitive advantage. Posthuma *et al.*'s (2013) high performance work practices (HPWS) taxonomy and the HPHRP framework (Kehoe and Wright, 2013) also propose links between HRM practices and organizational performance. Selection, performance development, and training and development, as key HRM practices, are common to most of these frameworks. Sun *et al.* (2007), for example, specified selective staffing, general skills training and ongoing appraisal as key processes in their configuration of HPHRPs. Although socialization is less often explicitly recognized in models linking HR practices and performance (Saks and Gruman, 2014), meta-analyses have confirmed the important role that socialization or “on-boarding” has in shaping individual attitude and performance outcomes (e.g. Saks *et al.*, 2007).

Consistent with the theories and frameworks linking HR practices and organizational performance, there is strong and growing evidence showing that HPWS and HPHRP are related to productivity, voluntary turnover, profitability, growth, innovation, customer service, survival, and firm-level performance (e.g. Combs *et al.*, 2006; Jiang *et al.*, 2012; Wright *et al.*, 2005). Jiang *et al.*'s (2012) recent meta-analysis, for example, showed that the AMO dimensions of HRM systems influenced firm financial outcomes directly and indirectly through human capital, employee motivation, voluntary turnover, and operational outcomes.

Despite the accumulating evidence supporting the nexus between HPHRPs and organizational performance, it is widely accepted that there is a lack of clarity as to how such relationships unfold (Becker and Huselid, 2006; Guest, 2011). Messersmith *et al.* (2011), for example, argued that “theorists have lamented a lack of clear understanding of the key mediating factors that link the utilization of HPWS to firm performance” (p. 1105). Becker and Huselid (2006), lamenting the absence of research evidence explaining how HR practices lead to organizational performance, identified the “black box” as the most pressing theoretical challenge facing SHRM” (p. 899). The mediators so far identified have been limited in scope and have not sufficiently acknowledged the influence of intervening variables such as organizational climate, job characteristics, need satisfaction, and motivation. Messersmith *et al.* (2011), for example, while modelling the mediating role of job satisfaction, commitment and empowerment in the relationship between HPWSs and department performance, did not include the known influence of job resources and job demands on job satisfaction, commitment and performance (Humphrey *et al.*, 2007).

Truss *et al.* (2013) recently proposed that employee engagement may finally provide the key to understanding how effective HRM practice can lead to higher individual and

organizational performance. Nonetheless, the conceptual and empirical links between HRM practices and employee engagement, and between engagement and performance, are not well established (Guest, 2014; Sparrow, 2014; Sparrow and Balain, 2010). To date, there has only been limited research examining how HRM practices influence individual and organizational outcomes through employee engagement (e.g. Alfes *et al.*, 2013a, b; Sparrow, 2014; Truss *et al.*, 2013). Given that employee engagement is fundamentally a motivational construct, further integration of the engagement and HR literatures and frameworks (e.g. AMO, HPHRPs) is clearly warranted.

In the following sections, we first provide a brief overview of employee engagement and describe how it can function as an integrating construct explaining individual performance, organizational performance, and competitive advantage. Then, and consistent with Figure 1, we describe how four key engagement-related HR practices (employee selection, socialization, performance management, and learning and development) influence organizational climate, the demands and resources experienced by employees in their work roles, the psychological experience of meaningfulness, safety and availability, employee engagement, and attitudinal, behavioural and performance outcomes. Even though we address each HRM practice as a relatively discrete element of the HRM system, the SHRM and HPHRP literatures suggest that synergistic systems or “bundles” of HRM practices are more effective at influencing individual and organizational outcomes, and ultimately competitive advantage, than discrete or disconnected HRM practices and initiatives (Becker and Huselid, 2006). Overall, with a focus on engagement, we aim to contribute towards explaining the “black boxes” that describe “the strategic logic between a firm’s HRM architecture and its subsequent performance” (Becker and Huselid, 2006, p. 899):

- P1. Human resource practices strategically focused on engagement will directly influence organizational climate and will directly and indirectly influence the demands and resources experienced by employees in their work roles, the psychological experience of meaningfulness, safety and availability, employee engagement and attitudinal, behavioural, and performance outcomes.

### Employee engagement

While there remains some disagreement among scholars and practitioners about how best to define and measure work engagement (see Bakker *et al.*, 2011), engagement is most often defined within the academic domain as “[...] a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002, p. 74). More broadly, Kahn (1990, 2010) described engagement as the harnessing of people’s selves to their work, such that they fully invest their physical, cognitive, and emotional resources in their work roles. In essence, work engagement is manifested as energy, involvement and a focused striving towards the achievement of organizational goals (Macey and Schneider, 2008; Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). Schaufeli (2014) argued that despite having slightly different perspectives there are core commonalities between the Kahn (1990) and the Schaufeli *et al.* (2002) conceptualizations and measures of engagement. Schaufeli noted that both share similar physical-energetic (vigour), emotional (dedication), and cognitive (absorption) components. Although it is unlikely there will ever be universal agreement about a single definition and measure of engagement, energy, involvement and a willingness to contribute to organizational success are nevertheless core to the construct (Bakker *et al.*, 2011). Importantly, researchers (e.g. Christian *et al.*, 2011) have shown that work

engagement can be validly distinguished from related but distinct attitudes such as job satisfaction, job involvement, and commitment.

The job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007, 2008, 2014) is the most widely cited theoretical model of work engagement. JD-R theory delineates how job resources (e.g. autonomy, feedback, supervisor support) and personal resources (e.g. self-efficacy, optimism, resilience) directly influence work engagement, which in turn influences important downstream outcomes such as in-role performance, extra-role performance, creativity, and financial returns. Beyond performance-related outcomes, Bakker and Demerouti (2014) noted that JD-R research has also been used to explain important individual well-being outcomes such as burnout, organizational commitment, work enjoyment, connectedness, job satisfaction, and sickness absenteeism. Similarly, Robertson and Cooper (2010) explicitly recognized the important well-being, positive psychological, and eudaimonic or “sense of purpose” dimensions of engagement in a construct they referred to as “full engagement”. More generally, intrinsic motivation is fundamental to an understanding of employee engagement (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014).

As implied by the use of the word “job” and the corresponding “J” in JD-R, researchers have generally focused on identifying the job level and individual level demands and resources that influence engagement. There has been less research attention devoted to the influence of contextual-level variables such as clarity of organizational purpose and vision, HRM systems, and organizational climate on engagement. Halbesleben’s (2010) meta-analysis, for example, showed that organizational climate has positive links with dimensions of engagement. Alfes *et al.* (2013) showed a positive association between perceived HRM practices and employee engagement in two independent samples. Overall, however, only a limited number of studies have linked such organizational contextual level variables with engagement and more research is required. Figure 1 shows how organizational level variables such as HR practices and organizational climate can be integrated within an elaborated JD-R engagement framework.

### **Engagement and competitive advantage**

Consistent with the modelling in Figure 1, research evidence suggests that employee engagement can be a source of competitive advantage. Macey *et al.* (2009), for example, reported substantial differences between firms in the top quartile of average employee engagement from those in the bottom quartile with respect to return on assets, profitability, and market value. Consistent with the modelling in Figure 1, a number of meta-analyses and reviews have also demonstrated that engagement is positively associated with attitudinal, behavioural, and performance related outcomes (e.g. Christian *et al.*, 2011; Demerouti and Cropanzano, 2010; Halbesleben, 2010; Mauno *et al.*, 2010; Simpson, 2008). Although performance is a complex and multi-faceted construct (see Demerouti and Cropanzano, 2010), consistent with Griffin *et al.* (2007), Figure 1 acknowledges that performance can usefully be examined at the level of the individual, the unit or team, and the organization, and by distinguishing between task, adaptive, and proactive performance at each of the levels. In support of the modelling, meta-analyses (e.g. Christian *et al.*, 2011; Rich *et al.*, 2010) have shown that engagement is associated with individual employee task and extra-role performance. Researchers have also recently focused on team level engagement and its relevance to competitive advantage (Albrecht, 2014; Costa *et al.*, 2014; Richardson and West, 2010). Xanthopoulou *et al.* (2009a) at the organizational level demonstrated a positive relationship between work engagement and daily financial returns in the fast food sector. Our second

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proposition therefore suggests that engagement is associated with individual, team and organizational performance and competitive advantage:

- P2. Organizations that create the conditions that support, enhance and sustain employee engagement will have higher levels of job, unit and organizational performance, and therefore competitive advantage.

In terms of how a strategic focus on HRM systems creates competitive advantage, as previously noted, there are a number of relevant theoretical frameworks. For example, and consistent with Figure 1, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) explained that human resource management systems influence organizational climate (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004) because the implementation of a coherent, consistent and strategically focused suite of HRM policies, practices and procedures communicates to employees expectations about the skills, knowledge, motivations, attitudes, norms, values, and behaviours expected within their organization (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). As a consequence “shared perceptions” emerge about the behaviours, values and norms that are important to an organization’s functioning. As such organizational climate provides an important upstream context for individual and organizational performance. Sparrow (2001) defined organizational climate as perceptions about a relatively stable set of value orientations of the organization as a whole, facets of organization and management style, espoused values and permitted behaviours, which influence the behaviour of organizational members with respect to organizational effectiveness. Furthermore, when employees experience a coherent system of engagement related policies, practices, and procedures, all aimed at optimizing individual, group and organizational effectiveness, the likelihood of focused effort towards the achievement of organizational goals is heightened (Macey and Schneider, 2008). In support of this claim, Takeuchi *et al.* (2009) showed in a multi-sample study that the influence of HRM practices, in the form of high-performance work systems, on employee attitudes was mediated by organizational climate. Thus, our third proposition is:

- P3. Human resource practices strategically focused on engagement will have a direct and positive influence on organizational climate.

### **HRM practices and employee engagement**

In this section, we discuss four core HRM practices that are likely to be important for promoting employee engagement: selection, socialization, performance management, and training. The focus is on these four practices because they are core HR functions that organization’s need to attend to irrespective of their particular HR strategic focus. Irrespective of whether an organization has, for example, a strategic focus on HPWS through self-managed teams or flexible work arrangements (see Jiang and Liu, 2015), or on engagement, they will nevertheless focus on selection, socialization, performance management, and training. Other researchers have focused on similar core HR practices (e.g. Shipton *et al.*, 2006; Sun *et al.*, 2007). As previously noted, although we discuss each of the four HR practices separately, it is important that they be considered as part of an integrated HR strategy and system (Gratton and Truss, 2003; Guest, 2014).

### **Employee engagement and selection**

Contemporary HRM research and practice recognizes that high caliber job applicants are increasingly looking for job roles that include opportunities for challenge, growth and engagement (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Harter and Blacksmith, 2010). Therefore,



to attract and retain high caliber, high achieving, productive, committed and “engaged” employees, organizations need to provide working contexts that provide a good “fit” between the role expectations of prospective employees and their subsequent working environment (Herriot, 2002; Morgeson and Dierdorff, 2011). Kristof (2006) noted in an integrative review of the person-organization fit literature that selection and socialization are often touted as the key to retaining a flexible and committed workforce necessary to meet contemporary competitive challenges. “Fit” has previously been shown to be associated with performance (Verquer *et al.*, 2003) and with engagement (May *et al.*, 2004; Saks and Gruman, 2011).

With respect to a strategic HR focus on engagement as a source of competitive advantage, the potential utility of selection processes has largely been neglected (Inceoglu and Warr, 2011). If organizations want employees who are energetic, dedicated, and focused on achieving organizational goals (Macey and Schneider, 2008) then HR professionals should be able to apply evidence-based selection processes to predict from among a group of applicants those who are most likely to be engaged on the job (Guest, 2014). Such selection processes might, for example, include a combination of personality assessments, structured interviews, assessment centre exercises and reference checks.

Claims that we can select for engagement are not new. Consistent with the interactionist perspective (Terborg, 1981) that behaviour is the result of a continuous interaction between a person and their situational context, Vance (2006) argued that organizations can increase employee engagement “by selecting the candidates who are best suited to the job *and* the organization’s culture” (p. 19). Similarly, Kahn (1990), Macey and Schneider (2008), and Christian *et al.* (2011) argued that individual personality traits are likely to influence the extent to which employees experience and demonstrate engagement at work. More specifically, Inceoglu and Warr (2011) noted that because engagement is defined as 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). Along similar lines, Guest (2014) recently noted that if there are individual differences in the propensity to become engaged then it follows that “engagement propensity” should be used as a selection criteria. Somewhat surprisingly, there has been limited research or practitioner attention devoted to understanding the links between selection practices and engagement (Inceoglu and Warr, 2011; Mäkikangas *et al.*, 2013). Inceoglu and Warr argued that it is widely agreed that engagement arises from both personal and environmental sources, “theoretical discussions and empirical investigations have so far emphasized one of those, mainly examining engagement as a response to characteristics of the job” (p. 177).

Rather than reviewing how a broad range of different selection methods can be used to select for engagement, we focus here on identifying the key personality predictors of engagement. Personality measures are “increasingly being used by managers and human resource professionals to evaluate the suitability of job applicants for positions across many levels in an organization” (Rothstein and Goffin, 2006, p. 155).

The “Big 5” personality dimensions of Neuroticism (or Emotional Stability), Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness (Digman, 1990; Costa and McCrae, 1992) provide a heavily researched and widely accepted taxonomy of personality. With respect to conceptual links between the Big 5 and engagement, conscientiousness should be positively related to engagement “because conscientious individuals have a strong sense of responsibility and are thus more likely to involve themselves in their job tasks” (Christian *et al.*, 2011, p. 100). Extraversion

should be positively related to engagement because individuals high in positive affect or Extraversion should be “predisposed to experiencing activation, alertness, and enthusiasm” (Christian *et al.*, 2011, p. 100). Neuroticism should be negatively related to engagement because anxious or self-conscious employees are more likely to perceive their work environment as threatening, less safe, and taxing of their emotional resources (Wildermuth, 2010). Agreeableness should be positively associated with engagement because employees high in agreeableness should be 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 should be positively associated with engagement because engaged employees are more likely to be innovative and open to change (Macey and Schneider, 2008).

Research evidence supports the potential influence of personality on engagement. Christian *et al.*'s (2011) meta-analysis reported moderately high correlations between engagement and trait Conscientiousness ( $M\rho = 0.42$ ) and between engagement and Extraversion/Positive Affectivity ( $M\rho = 0.43$ ). Christian *et al.* did not report correlations between engagement and Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, or Emotional Stability. Inceoglu and Warr (2011), using the OPQ32n (SHL, 2006) to measure personality, reported sample-size corrected correlations of 0.38, 0.33, and 0.40 between job engagement and Emotional Stability, Extraversion, and Conscientiousness, respectively. The correlations for Agreeableness and Openness to Experience were more modest (0.16 and 0.22, respectively). Overall, these findings and additional reviews by Langelaan *et al.* (2006), Kim *et al.* (2009), and Mäkikangas *et al.* (2013) suggest that trait Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, and Extraversion can potentially be used to predict engagement in organizational contexts.

Beyond “broad” personality dimensions, “narrow” trait personality measures (e.g. sub-facets of the Big 5) might also predict engagement. Inceoglu and Warr (2011), for example, found that the more energized facets of Social Potency (a facet of Extraversion) and Achievement Orientation (a facet of Conscientiousness with sub-facets “vigorous” and “achieving”) were significantly associated with engagement. Other trait-like factors such as Generalized Self-Efficacy, Hope, Optimism, Resilience (see Luthans *et al.*, 2007), Core Self-Evaluation (see Rich *et al.*, 2010), and Proactive Personality (Bateman and Crant, 1993) have also been conceptually and empirically linked to engagement. Employees who are dispositionally self-efficacious and proactive are likely to “use their initiative [...], engage in proactive service performance [...], take charge to bring about change [...], proactively solve problems, and implement ideas” (Parker and Collins, 2010, p. 634). It needs to be noted, that although the research evidence clearly shows that personality is associated with engagement, additional research is needed to assess the relative influence of personality vs contextual level variables (e.g. organizational climate, HR practices) and job-level resources (e.g. job autonomy, skill variety, supervisor support). Furthermore, trait activation theory (Tett and Burnett, 2003) suggests that selecting for engagement will only be relevant if the organizational context supports or “activates” the personality traits most predictive of engagement. Therefore, as per Figure 1, organizations need to create the organizational context, job context, and the psychological and motivational factors that support the authentic expression of personal traits (Kahn, 1990; Tett and Burnett, 2003). Organizations that do not invest in the systems, processes and practices that support engagement should not select for engagement:

*P4.* Both broad and narrow personality dimensions can be included in selection processes aimed at embedding employee engagement in organizational contexts.

The broad traits of Conscientiousness (particularly the achievement dimension), Emotional Stability, and Extraversion will provide utility for selecting energetic and motivated employees who are focused on achieving organizational goals. Finer grain personality traits such as Achievement Striving, Activity Seeking, Social Potency, Generalized Self-Efficacy, Proactivity, Optimism, and Self-Discipline are also likely to predict engagement.

Before concluding this section, it is important to speculate on alternative selection methods that can also be used to predict engagement. For example, structured interviews and assessment centres, given their demonstrated validity as selection methods (Schmidt and Hunter, 1998), might usefully be included in processes designed to select for engagement. Previous research has evidenced the validity of situational structured interviews for predicting emotional intelligence (Sue-Chan and Latham, 2004) and peer ratings of organizational citizenship behaviour (Latham and Skarlicki, 1995). Structured interviews focused on assessing engagement might, for example, include questions such as “can you tell me about a time when you have felt particularly energized or absorbed in your work?” and “how often did you experience such feelings in your previous role?” Structured reference checking might also usefully be targeted at identifying the extent to which applicants have previously demonstrated engagement.

Having selected employees, in part on the basis of the extent they are likely to be engaged, it becomes important to protect and leverage this likelihood by effectively inducting and socializing employees into their organization.

### **Organizational socialization and newcomer engagement**

New hires, when they enter organizations, are typically excited about their new job and organization but also have feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. In this regard, organizations need to do at least two things. First, they need to reduce newcomers' anxiety and uncertainty. Second, they need to build on newcomers' entry excitement and enthusiasm and translate it into high levels of engagement. The process through which this occurs is known as organizational socialization which has been defined as “the process by which an individual comes to appreciate the values, abilities, expected behaviours, and social knowledge essential for assuming an organizational role and for participating as an organizational member” (Louis, 1980, pp. 229-230).

Much has been learned about the socialization process over the last several decades. However, the research has generally focused on the efficacy of socialization tactics and practices in terms of uncertainty reduction, information and knowledge acquisition, and learning socialization content (Ashforth *et al.*, 2007; Klein and Heuser, 2008; Rollag *et al.*, 2005; Saks and Ashforth, 1997). Much less research has been devoted to learning how organizations can nourish and build on the positive energy and excitement of newcomers and to engage them in their new job and organization. This oversight exists despite several decades of research showing that shortly after organizational entry, newcomers' perceptions of job attractiveness, job satisfaction, motivation and commitment decline (e.g. Van Maanen, 1975). Boswell *et al.* (2005) argued that such “hangover effects” occur because the “initial high of a new job is [...] likely to wear off as employees become settled, engaging in more mundane job activities” (p. 884). We suspect that many newcomers enter organizations ready to engage in their new job and role but like their perceptions of job attractiveness, their attitudes, and their motivation, their readiness to engage and their level of engagement also quickly declines.

In one of the few published studies on socialization and newcomer engagement, Saks and Gruman (2011) found that socialization tactics, rather than being directly related to newcomer engagement, were indirectly related to engagement through personal resources such as self-efficacy, positive emotions, and person-job fit perceptions. These findings contrast with previous research showing that socialization tactics are related to outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, in part because they provide newcomers with information and reduce uncertainty (Saks *et al.*, 2007). Thus, socialization tactics appear to be effective with regard to providing information and uncertainty reduction, but less effectual when it comes to getting newcomers engaged.

Kahn's (1990) model of personal engagement and JD-R theory potentially provide a better account of newcomer socialization and engagement. Kahn (1990) found that a person's level of engagement was a function of the experience of three psychological conditions: psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability. Kahn's (1990) three conditions seem especially relevant and important for newcomers. That is, given their vulnerability and anxiety, newcomers need to feel worthwhile, useful, valuable and not taken for granted (meaningfulness); they need to feel that they can express themselves fully and be themselves without fear of negative consequences (safety); and they need to have the physical, emotional, and psychological resources to be available to perform their job and roles and to cope with work and non-work demands (availability).

Furthermore, following from the JD-R model and the importance of job resources for engagement, we suggest that certain resources may be especially important for newcomers to experience Kahn's (1990) three psychological conditions. A resource-based approach to socialization has been suggested as a meaningful way to understand and improve newcomer adjustment and socialization (Saks and Gruman, 2014), and might also be useful for understanding how to engage newcomers. Thus, as reflected in Figure 1, HR socialization practices should provide newcomers with resources that will lead to Kahn's (1990) three psychological conditions, that in turn will lead to engagement. In this sense, Figure 1 integrates propositions from JD-R theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008, 2014) and from Kahn's (1990) theory of engagement.

Although numerous socialization practices (e.g. orientation programs) have been studied in the socialization literature, they have not previously been considered as resources within the context of the JD-R model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008) or linked to Kahn's (1990) psychological conditions and engagement. Therefore, in what follows we describe socialization resources that might be effective for the development of each of Kahn's (1990) psychological conditions and for facilitating newcomer engagement.

#### *Socialization resources and psychological meaningfulness*

Psychological meaningfulness refers to the extent to which people derive meaning from their work and feel that they are receiving a return on investments of self in role performances (Kahn, 1990). Kahn found that work that is experienced as challenging, clearly delineated, varied, creative, and autonomous is most likely to be associated with the experience of psychological meaningfulness. Task characteristics such as skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and performance feedback (Hackman and Oldham, 1980) have consistently been found to be important job resources that also predict employee engagement (e.g. Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Saks, 2006).

In the socialization literature, Katz (1980) found that task significance and feedback are especially important for newcomers during their first three or four months. Similarly, Colarelli *et al.* (1987) found that autonomy and feedback were positively related to job

attitudes and behaviours in a sample of newly hired entry-level accountants. Ashforth *et al.* (1998) found that a motivating potential score, based on Hackman and Oldham's (1980) five core job characteristics, was positively related to newcomer adjustment after four and ten months following organizational entry. Overall, there is clear evidence to suggest that ensuring newcomers have enriched work tasks is especially important for psychological meaningfulness. Therefore, managers need to ensure that newcomers are assigned interesting and challenging work that provides them with opportunities for skill variety, autonomy, task significance, and performance feedback. Managers also need to promote the organization's mission, vision, values, and culture. Missions and cultures that promote a strong sense of community foster feelings of meaningfulness at work (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003).

#### *Socialization resources and psychological safety*

Psychological safety refers to the extent to which new employees feel able to employ and express their true selves without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career (Kahn, 1990). Kahn found that psychological safety was influenced by interpersonal relationships, group and intergroup dynamics, management styles and processes, and organizational norms. Kahn also suggested that management that is supportive, trusting, and clarifying leads to greater psychological safety.

The importance of social support and interpersonal interactions with insiders has long been considered a critical factor in the socialization of newcomers. Lundberg and Young (1997), for example, found that the critical events newcomers reported most frequently involved supportiveness and caring from co-workers and managers. More particularly, Bauer and Green (1998) found that manager clarifying behaviour was positively related to role clarity and performance efficacy, and that manager supporting behaviour was positively related to feelings of acceptance by the manager. Thus, socialization agents seem to be especially important resources in terms of friendship, social support, and clarifying behaviour that can help to create a sense of psychological safety. Indeed, the frequency of interactions with insiders has been described as the primary mechanism through which socialization occurs and newcomers are transformed into insiders (Reichers, 1987).

At a practical level, HRM professionals will therefore need to ensure that socialization agents have the knowledge, skills, abilities and accountabilities for helping newcomers feel psychologically safe throughout their socialization. This means that interactions and relationship development with newcomers must be encouraged and even rewarded.

#### *Socialization resources and psychological availability*

Psychological availability refers to the belief that one has the physical, emotional, and psychological resources required to invest one's self in the performance of a role. Kahn (1990) found that psychological availability was negatively influenced by four types of distractions:

- (1) depletion of physical energy;
- (2) depletion of emotional energy;
- (3) individual insecurity; and
- (4) outside lives.

Although our focus is on providing newcomers with resources, it is important to recognize that minimizing job demands placed on newcomers is also important. In the

socialization literature, various job and role demands such as role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload, work/home conflict, and unmet expectations have been found to be negatively related to socialization outcomes (Saks and Ashforth, 2000). Thus, it is important that these demands be minimized and managed during the socialization process in an effort to ensure that newcomers feel psychologically available to engage themselves in their new roles.

In terms of socialization resources, orientation and training programs are especially important for providing newcomers with the resources they need to feel available. Orientation and training programs can provide newcomers with the knowledge and skills required to perform their new tasks and roles, and to provide them with coping strategies for managing their job demands. Additionally, given that self-efficacy has been found to be positively related to newcomer adjustment (Saks, 1995) and engagement (Saks and Gruman, 2011), HRM professionals should incorporate self-efficacy training in socialization processes and programs. Schaufeli and Salanova (2007) suggested that promoting and training of self-efficacy is foundational for fostering engagement.

Thus, there are a number of socialization resources that are likely to create feelings of meaningfulness, safety, and availability in newcomers. The following proposition suggests the linkages between socialization resources and newcomer engagement:

*P5.* To develop newcomers' engagement, socialization programs should provide newcomers with resources that will enable them to experience psychological meaningfulness (e.g. enriched task characteristics such as skill variety, autonomy, and performance feedback; clarity of organizational mission, vision and values), psychological safety (e.g. social support), and psychological availability (e.g. orientation and training, self-efficacy enhancement).

In summary, organizational socialization research has been more concerned about reducing newcomers' uncertainty and providing newcomers with information than about translating newcomer's entry enthusiasm and excitement into enduring engagement. If organizations want to engage their new hires, in addition to asking what they need to know, they should also ask Kahn's (1990) three questions with regard to organizational socialization resources:

- (1) what resources do newcomers need to experience meaningfulness;
- (2) what resources do newcomers need to feel safe; and
- (3) what resources do newcomers need to feel available to perform their job?

The answers to these questions will aid in the identification of the resources that new hires require to translate their energy, enthusiasm, and excitement into ongoing employee engagement. Furthermore, socialization practices should fully recognize and reinforce the importance of employee engagement.

### **Employee engagement and performance management**

Once successfully socialized into their roles, HRM professionals also need to help and support employees achieve and sustain high levels of engagement and performance. Performance management is an ongoing organizational process involving a wide range of activities that include identifying, assessing, and promoting individual and team performance for the purpose of achieving organizational objectives (Aguinis and Pierce, 2008; DeNisi and Pritchard, 2006). Due to increased competitive challenges, many

organizations have focused on their performance management systems as a way to drive performance improvements (Buchner, 2007). As modelled in Figure 1, if properly managed, performance management processes can have a positive and direct influence on employee engagement and downstream attitudinal, behavioural, and organizational outcomes. Also as shown in Figure 1, performance management processes can indirectly influence engagement and outcomes through their influence on organizational climate, perceptions of job demands and resources, and of the associated feelings of meaningfulness, safety and availability that employees experience.

Among the few articles on the topic of how performance management processes affect levels of employee engagement, Mone *et al.* (2011) summarized the results of a study originally published by Mone and London (2010). Mone and London identified five performance management activities that influence engagement:

- (1) setting performance and development goals;
- (2) providing ongoing feedback and recognition;
- (3) managing employee development;
- (4) conducting appraisals; and
- (5) creating a climate of trust and empowerment.

This list of recommended activities is generally consistent with accepted performance management practices, and given the reference to job resources such as feedback, recognition, and climate, is generally consistent with the modelling in Figure 1.

Gruman and Saks (2011) argued that although superior performance is the ultimate objective of performance management, and as per Figure 1, superior performance is best considered a distal outcome of the performance management process. Gruman and Saks argued that for various reasons, including the fact that contemporary jobs are less static (Singh, 2008) and often have variable, subtle performance standards (Fletcher and Perry, 2001; Pulakos *et al.*, 2008), achieving high levels of performance may best be achieved by facilitating the conditions that foster the more proximal outcome of engagement, which may then lead to high performance, rather than trying to directly manage the more distal outcome of performance itself.

Based on these arguments, Gruman and Saks (2011) proposed an engagement management model designed to generate high levels of engagement as a precursor to high levels of performance. The model builds on traditional performance management practices but modifies them to more specifically promote employee engagement and the psychological conditions that serve as its antecedents (Kahn, 1990). The three primary elements in the engagement management model are:

- (1) performance agreement;
- (2) engagement facilitation; and
- (3) performance and engagement appraisal and feedback.

Some of the key points pertaining to how each of these elements relate to the psychological conditions of meaning, safety, and availability are elaborated below.

#### *Performance agreement*

The first element in the engagement management model involves having employees and their supervisors agree on the goal or set of goals to be achieved. The first essential step in this process requires that any goals established should reflect not only

organizational objectives, but also the values, interests, and personal goals of the employee. Such mutually beneficial goals, in effect reflecting “fit”, are more likely to be integrated with employees’ selves and to therefore result in the experience of meaningfulness and employee engagement. This approach is consistent with Bouskila-Yam and Kluger’s (2011) strength-based performance appraisal that also focuses on aligning organizational and personal objectives. Goals should also be challenging. Research has shown that engagement is positively associated with increases in performance expectations over time (Barbier *et al.*, 2013).

The second step in performance agreement involves the ongoing monitoring of psychological contracts. Schaufeli and Salanova (2010) noted that one way personnel assessment and evaluation processes will affect engagement is through psychological contracts, which reflect the extent to which employees believe that implicit or explicit promises and agreements about work are honoured and fulfilled by the organization. Parzefall and Hakanen (2010) empirically demonstrated that psychological contract fulfilment is positively associated with engagement. Psychological contract fulfilment will also likely result in increased perceptions about the availability of job resources and, as a consequence, psychological availability.

#### *Engagement facilitation*

Engagement facilitation involves a number of components including job design, coaching and social support, and training. We have previously noted how job features such as job autonomy, task variety and performance feedback are associated with job meaningfulness and engagement (Bakker *et al.*, 2004; May *et al.*, 2004; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). It follows that performance management and development processes focused on engagement should therefore include two-way conversations and agreements about the degree to which employees have jobs that are designed in ways that optimize engagement.

Consistent with the prescription that performance management should be an ongoing activity (Latham *et al.*, 2005), regular coaching and social support should facilitate the development of employee engagement. Schaufeli and Salanova (2008) suggested that coaching employees and helping them plan their work, highlighting potential difficulties, and offering advice and emotional support helps to foster engagement. Research supports this idea (Hakanen *et al.*, 2006; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2009b) and it is therefore important that coaching and social support be recognized as targets or criteria in performance management and development processes. Ongoing coaching and support should also result in employees experiencing increased psychological safety and job meaningfulness.

The last ingredient in engagement facilitation is training. Schaufeli and Salanova (2008) suggested that allowing employees to learn and develop throughout their careers is key to keeping employees engaged. As discussed below, training can be one way to accomplish this. Salanova *et al.* (2010) and Gruman and Saks (2011) argued that training programs that help employees build personal resources in turn foster engagement through Kahn’s (1990) psychological experience of meaningfulness and availability. Indeed, recent research has shown that human resource practices that include opportunities for training are positively associated with engagement (Alfes *et al.*, 2013b). The bottom line is that a systematic focus on training needs, training delivery, training transfer and training effectiveness should be an integral focus of effective performance management and development processes.



*Performance and engagement appraisal and feedback*

The final element in the engagement management process involves assessing levels of employee engagement, and providing feedback to employees about their engagement and performance. In order for employees and managers to have productive conversations during such activities it is important that employees perceive that they are treated justly and fairly. As Macey, Schneider *et al.* (2009) suggested, a climate of trust and fairness is necessary for employees to feel and act engaged. We would add that, as per Figure 1, they also need to feel psychologically safe. Studies have shown empirical associations between fairness and engagement (Maslach and Leiter, 2008; Saks, 2006) and between psychological safety and engagement (May *et al.*, 2004). Of particular relevance, Gupta and Kumar (2013) have demonstrated positive associations between engagement and employee perceptions of fairness specifically during performance appraisals. Managers must therefore promote distributive justice, procedural justice, interactional justice, and provide employees with an opportunity to express voice during engagement management conversations (Latham, *et al.*, 2005).

During engagement appraisal the degree to which employees have demonstrated behavioural engagement is assessed. Constructive feedback can then be provided to employees in an effort to increase engagement in the future. Aguinis *et al.* (2012) argued that feedback will enhance employee engagement if it focuses on employee strengths, as opposed to weaknesses. However, weaknesses and areas of improvement may also need to be discussed. Recommendations for accomplishing this, without undermining engagement, include closely linking developmental feedback to knowledge and skills that are under employee control (Aguinis *et al.*, 2012). Menguc, Auh *et al.* (2013) have demonstrated that supervisory feedback is positively associated with engagement, and that engagement fully mediates the relationships between feedback and performance.

Gruman and Saks' (2011) model of engagement management offers researchers, HR professionals and managers a new way to think about how to generate high levels of performance in the knowledge age. Prior work on performance management has built on expectancy theory to address where employees will invest effort (DeNisi and Pritchard, 2006). Gruman and Saks' (2011) model supplements this work by addressing activities that explain why employees may become engaged. The foregoing discussion suggesting why specific performance management practices are likely to promote engagement leads to the following proposition:

- P6.* Properly designed and managed performance management processes will have a positive and direct influence on employee engagement and downstream attitudinal, behavioural, and organizational outcomes.

As noted above, training is one aspect of Gruman and Saks' (2011) engagement management model. We next address how an organization's training, learning and development processes can help build and maintain the personal and work-related resources prerequisite for employee engagement.

**Training, learning, and development**

HRM professionals provide the systems and processes through which organizations, teams and individual employees are able to identify and satisfy learning and development needs. For example, customer facing employees, through customer service training, can develop the knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes and personal resources they need to optimally satisfy customer needs and to achieve higher sales.

Research suggests that training can also be used to increase employee work engagement (Luthans *et al.*, 2010).

As we have already noted, according to JD-R theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014; Demerouti *et al.*, 2001), work engagement is most likely to develop when employees are confronted with challenging job demands in combination with high job resources. We have also noted that personal resources positively impact engagement (Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2009a, b) such that employees who are, for example, more self-efficacious and who find their work meaningful are better able to mobilize their own job resources and become more engaged in their work (Albrecht, 2013; Halbesleben, 2010). Importantly, the JD-R model also includes a feedback loop, representing a positive gain cycle, which describes how employees who are engaged in their work are more able to create their own resources, which then, over time, foster further engagement. In what follows, we use the JD-R model to show how HR professionals can improve employee engagement through training, learning, and development. We discuss three interventions to facilitate employee work engagement, namely:

- (1) providing the optimal mix of job demands and resources;
- (2) optimizing personal resources through training; and
- (3) encouraging employees to engage in job crafting.

#### *Optimizing job demands and resources*

HRM professionals can use the JD-R model and associated measures to assess the levels of job demands, job resources, and engagement in an organization. For example, analyses of engagement survey results can detect differences between locations, departments, and teams in terms of the job demands and resources, engagement, and its consequences. Sub-group analyses can provide clear indications of where to target interventions to foster engagement. Tailor-made interventions can then be designed, aimed at reducing salient hindrance demands, and increasing important job resources, which, in turn, may increase work engagement and job performance. These interventions may, for example, include transformational leadership training, in which leaders learn how to optimize the job demands and resources in their team through developing individual consideration and intellectual stimulation. Interventions may also take the form of survey feedback workshops in which employees and teams can generate their own ideas about how to decrease their hindrance demands, increase their challenge demands, and increase their job resources. In this context, survey results can also identify groups where certain practices have proven effective. Indeed, it is through the benefits of unique and specific best practices that competitive advantage may be realized.

#### *Optimizing personal resources through training*

Personal resources are positive self-evaluations that are linked to resiliency and refer to individuals' sense of their ability to successfully control and impact upon their environment (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2003). It has been argued and shown that such positive self-evaluations predict goal-setting, motivation, and performance (for a review, see Judge *et al.*, 2004). Several authors have investigated the relationships between personal resources and work engagement. In their longitudinal study among highly skilled Dutch technicians, Xanthopoulou *et al.* (2009a) tested the predictive value of personal resources on engagement. As noted in our discussion of selection methods, the findings indicated that self-efficacy, optimism, and organizational-based self-esteem made a unique contribution to explaining variance in work engagement, over and above the

impact of job resources and previous levels of engagement. Thus, the more employees believe they are able to meet their job demands and that they will experience good outcomes, the higher their levels of work engagement. Van den Heuvel *et al.* (2009) investigated a heterogeneous sample of employees in a variety of both public and private organizations. They found positive associations between self-efficacy, optimism, and meaning-making on the one hand, and work engagement on the other hand, suggesting that the ability to make meaning of challenging and ambiguous situations also has the potential to foster vigour, dedication, and absorption.

Evidence shows that employees can develop their personal resources through training and development. For example, Luthans *et al.* (2010) assigned participants randomly to treatment ( $n = 153$ ) or control ( $n = 89$ ) groups. The treatment groups received a two-hour training intervention conducted by trained facilitators who utilized a series of exercises and group discussions designed to impact the participants' level of efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience (collectively referred to as psychological capital or PsyCap). In the training intervention, the facilitators used a series of writing, discussion and reflective exercises specific to each of the four personal resources. For instance, one of the exercises focused on broadening the hope-oriented self-regulating capacity of trainees and developing strategies towards the achievement of a specific goal. First, each participant was asked to reflect on and then write down their personal goals. The facilitator then led participants through a series of techniques to set and phrase these goals to increase their agentic capacity (Bandura, 2008). This included parceling large goals into manageable units, thereby also increasing efficacy over smaller sub-goals. Next, participants were asked to consider multiple pathways to accomplishing each goal and to share those pathways in small discussion groups. The participants therefore acted as models for each other. The capacity for pathway generation was thus expected to be increased through vicarious learning and, in turn, to enhance participants' efficacy in utilizing the hope application of deriving multiple pathways to accomplish a given goal. In addition, by increasing their efficacy to accomplish the goal, the participants were expected to increase their positive expectations of goal accomplishment - that is, their optimism. Luthans and his colleagues found that the intervention had a positive impact on participants' on-the-job performance.

In another intervention study, this time spanning several days, Demerouti *et al.* (2011) tested the effects of "personal effectiveness" training aimed at helping employees cope with their changing work environments. Several personal resources were monitored before and after the training, including assertiveness, self-efficacy, resilience, optimism, and hope. The goal of the training was to modify cognitions, behaviour, and emotions, using principles derived from rational emotive therapy, tension control, vicarious learning, and goal setting. The results showed that self-ratings and other-ratings of personal resources increased significantly as a result of the training. These findings clearly suggest that engagement can be improved by optimizing personal resources.

#### *Encouraging employees to engage in job crafting and voice*

We have noted that HRM professionals can help facilitate work engagement by providing an optimal work environment, as well as by offering the right training to employees. However, employees themselves may also actively change or "craft" the design of their jobs by choosing tasks, negotiating different job content, and by assigning meaning to their tasks or jobs (Parker and Ohly, 2008). Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) defined job crafting as the physical and cognitive changes individuals

make in their task or relational boundaries. Physical changes refer to changes in the form, scope or number of job tasks, whereas cognitive changes refer to changing how one sees their job. For instance, a maintenance technician may craft the scope of his or her job by taking on additional tasks such as proactively helping newcomers to learn the job (Berg *et al.*, 2010). Changing relational boundaries means exercising discretion over which colleagues employees interact with while doing their job. According to Wrzesniewski and Dutton, job crafting is about changing the job in order to experience enhanced job meaningfulness, increased person-job fit, and as a consequence, increased work engagement.

The research evidence supports the positive claims made about job crafting. Tims *et al.* (2012) showed that self-ratings of job crafting were positively related to peer-ratings of work engagement, employability, and performance. Thus, employees who increased their job resources by, for example, asking for feedback from their supervisor and mobilizing their social networks, were most likely to be energetic and dedicated to their work. On a similar theme, Morrison (2014) recently argued in support of the important responsibility that supervisors and leaders have in enabling employees to exercise voice. Morrison defined voice as “the informal and discretionary communication by an employee of ideas, suggestions, concerns, information about problems, or opinions about work-related issues to persons who might be able to take appropriate action, with the intent to bring about improvement or change” (p. 174). Consistent with Kahn’s (1990) original conceptualization of engagement, and as modelled in Figure 1, employees who feel psychologically safe and engaged at work are willing to fully invest and express themselves in their work roles. More generally, self-initiated work behaviours such as voice, job crafting and proactive performance will be most prevalent among employees who are high in energy, involved in their work, and who strive to make their organization successful (Tims *et al.*, 2013; Van Dyne and LePine, 1998). However, and as modelled in Figure 1, JD-R theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014) explains how job crafting also has an indirect influence on engagement. As such, engagement leads to job crafting, which in turn leads to increased job resources, which in turn leads to increased engagement. A similar “gain spiral” (Hakanen *et al.*, 2008) for voice behaviour would predict that engagement leads to employees voicing suggestions or concerns, that in turn create job resources, that lead to engagement:

- P7.* Human resource training, learning and development practices that are strategically focused on engagement will directly influence organizational climate and will indirectly influence the demands and resources experienced by employees in their work roles, the psychological experience of meaningfulness, safety and availability, engagement and attitudinal, behavioural and performance related outcomes.

To summarize, the evidence described here clearly suggests that HR professionals can use top-down and bottom-up approaches to develop work engagement. Through learning and development initiatives and through self-initiated action, employees can learn to develop their job resources, manage their demands and develop their personal resources. The bottom line is that HRM professionals, through learning and development initiatives, can help create and sustain engagement in the organizational contexts within which they work.

### **Practical implications**

Throughout the paper we have provided practical advice on how to structure and what to include in engagement focused HRM policies, practices, and procedures. We have,

for example, shown that organizations that choose to focus on an HR engagement strategy might potentially consider selecting for extraversion, conscientiousness and emotional stability. With respect to socialization we have argued that organizations should provide newcomers with resources that will satisfy their needs for meaningfulness, safety and efficacy in order to capitalize on the energy and enthusiasm they initially bring to their role. This approach represents a departure from traditional approaches to socialization that provide newcomers with information to aid their learning and reduce uncertainty, rather than facilitate their engagement. With respect to performance management we have argued that high levels of performance may best be achieved by facilitating the conditions that foster and support engagement. We recommend that performance management processes should focus on three primary elements: a performance agreement, engagement facilitation, and performance and engagement appraisal and feedback. We have described the required steps in each of the elements. With respect to training and development, beyond providing employees with appropriate job resources, we recommend training programs to help employees optimize their personal resources, job crafting interventions, and interventions that enable employees to willingly voice ideas, suggestions and concerns to bring about improvement and change.

### Conclusion

In this paper, we aimed to provide a comprehensive account of how employee engagement needs to be integrated within the HRM fabric of an organization if engagement is to yield sustainable competitive advantage. We have argued that engagement provides a conceptually well-developed and well-researched strategy by which competitive advantage can be achieved, developed and maintained. In line with Bowen and Ostroff (2004) who argued that “HRM content *and* process must be integrated effectively in order for prescriptive models of strategic HRM actually to link to firm performance” (p. 206) we have emphasized that engagement needs to be integrated as a focus across all facets of the employer-employee relationship and across the employee lifecycle. To that end we have argued that engagement needs to be strategically embedded and supported across selection, socialization, performance management and training and development practices, processes and systems.

We proposed a model (Figure 1) that we hope goes some considerable way towards addressing what Becker and Huselid (2006) some years ago described as “the most pressing theoretical challenge facing SHRM” (p. 899). That is, we identified a number of mediating mechanisms to help explain the “black box” of how an organization’s HRM architecture influences its performance outcomes. Beyond integrating HR and engagement literatures that up until now have largely run in parallel, we have gone some way towards reconciling unresolved issues in the engagement literature (see Bakker *et al.*, 2011). For example, the modelling in Figure 1 helps reconcile the JD-R and Kahn’s (1990) approach to engagement by showing that job resources, in part, lead to Kahn’s (1990) psychological conditions, that both lead to engagement. This modelling is also consistent with research conducted by May *et al.* (2004).

Systematic research programs and rigorous evaluation processes are now needed to test the relationships modelled in Figure 1. Although the proposed model is complex, and therefore difficult to test as a whole, structural equation modelling could be used to test more focused relationships embedded within the model. For example, additional research could usefully determine the direct and indirect effects of the four HR practices on organizational climate and employee engagement. Additional research could also be

conducted to determine the causal influence and temporal dynamics of the relationships between engagement, voice and job resources. Longitudinal studies and multilevel analytic approaches to differentiate and disaggregate variance at the individual, group, and organizational level can help map the strength of the direct and indirect relationships proposed. Additional theory-based research to determine how the four engagement-focused HR practices we have recommended interact could also usefully be conducted. Hopefully, our model will stimulate and guide future research and promote a greater understanding of the importance of establishing HRM practices and climates that are strategically focused on employee engagement.

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**Corresponding author**

Dr Simon L. Albrecht can be contacted at: [simon.albrecht@deakin.edu.au](mailto:simon.albrecht@deakin.edu.au)

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