Handbook of Employee Engagement
Perspectives, Issues, Research and Practice

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NEW HORIZONS IN MANAGEMENT

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"Engage me once again": is employee engagement for real, or is it “same lady – different dress”?

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Introduction: evolution of the person–organization relationship
The implied understandings between employees and organizations, frequently referred to as “the (old) psychological contract”, have changed drastically over the decades. It can be argued that, since the 1990s, there has been a mutual reduction of loyalty and a decrease in employee commitment to both work and organizations. This shift can be attributed to two major trends which reinforce and complement each other, making it difficult to determine what changed first. The first trend is the change in the employment paradigm of modern corporations. Organizations require greater flexibility in hiring and firing, and need their employee pool to expand or shrink according to their current needs and according to the rules of the market. Managing vested employees or those seeking one employer for life challenged the ability of human resources (HR) to constantly adjust the size of the workforce to the tune of strategic and operational needs (O’Reilly & Pfeffer, 2000; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007).

The second trend is the change in the value system that contemporary employees exhibit. After many years of distinct preference for security and stable employment (which usually resulted in very long careers within a single company), employees gradually appreciated other psychological incomes over occupational stability. Nowadays, employees prefer to establish a different dialogue with the organizational systems in which they are living and working because of – among others – a move from institutional to self-reliance (Hall, 1986, 1996; London. & Stumpf, 1986) that upset the relationship between organizational and career commitments (Blau, 1985, 1988; Cohen, 2003).

Over the years, three major constructs were suggested as the “ultimate” description of the desired person–organization relationship which, while fostering individual loyalty and satisfaction, eventually contribute substantially to the firm’s performance: organizational commitment (OC), job involvement (JI), and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). More recently, employee engagement (EE) was mentioned as an optional
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Redefinition for the individual–organization relationship. This chapter represents our attempt to evaluate EE’s “added value” and assess its potential theoretical contribution over the other three well-established constructs.

Employee engagement: the birth of a concept

A thorough exploration of existing literature reveals a wealth of writing, mostly applied in nature. A simple search in Amazon online bookstore (October, 2009) yields a record 1,914 hits on the subject and yielded claims such as: “Employee engagement is the cornerstone of achieving a sustainable competitive advantage”; “there is clear and mounting evidence that employee engagement keenly correlates to individual, group, and corporate performance in areas such as retention, productivity, customer service, and loyalty”; or “engaged employees are more productive, engender greater customer satisfaction and loyalty, and help promote a company’s brand”. Given this enormous enthusiasm one can begin to wonder: what exactly is EE? How is it different from other existing concepts? Is it as simple and straightforward as it sounds?! What is the source of its enormous appeal?

According to Macey and Schneider (2008): “employee engagement is a desirable condition, has an organizational purpose, and connotes involvement, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, focused effort, and energy, so it has both attitudinal and behavioral components” (p. 4). The root of the EE concept lies in what has come to be known, in recent years, as “positive psychology” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), namely the study of the characteristics of successful employees and managers and productive work groups (Harter et al., 2002).

In their exhaustive review of the literature, Macey and Schneider argued that most definitions of EE seem to have in common several constructs, already established in their own right. Chief among these are the constructs of: OC, JI, and OCB. Nonetheless, the literature is not very clear whether EE is a new concept/construct or whether it is simply a new concoction of existing and well-established constructs. Recently, the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP, Division 14 of the American Psychological Association) launched a new journal titled Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice. The very first focal article was the aforementioned Macey and Schneider piece. Among the dozen responses to that article very few writers were in favor of viewing EE as something new (as Macey & Schneider argue) and the majority considered it to be, at best, a realignment of old constructs.

Among the authors in favor of viewing EE as a new theoretical construct, some consider EE to be a continuum running between “actively engaged” and “actively disengaged”. These authors wonder about the
consequences of low as well as high levels of EE and whether high EE is always going to be favorable for individuals or the organization (Masson et al., 2008). Frese (2008) also claimed that EE is a new construct connoting active performance, and as a result requires a novel performance model that he saw as lacking in the literature.

A number of writers have argued against viewing EE as a new construct, claiming that it is an intuitive construct in the process of gaining legitimacy (Newman & Harrison, 2008); it might be theoretically distinct from other constructs, but it is not empirically distinct and therefore not superior to OC or job satisfaction (Harter & Schmidt, 2008); it lacks distinctive meaning (Saks, 2008); cannot be individually assessed (Pugh & Dietz, 2008); it is very difficult to measure or operationalize “extra-role” or “beyond expectations” performance (Griffin et al., 2008); it ignores intra-personal variability and mood swings during the day, hour or minute (Dalal et al., 2008); and ultimately EE lacks a comprehensive framework and should be included in the self-determination theory instead (Meyer & Gagné, 2008).

**Past knowledge: commitment, involvement and citizenship**

In order to look into the uniqueness of EE, if it exists, one needs first to draw the borders among competing concepts and to emphasize the contribution of EE beyond them. Let us try to summarize what present-day theory has to offer concerning OC, JI, and OCB.

**Organizational commitment**

OC has drawn massive interest from researchers as well as practitioners due to the belief that it is a more stable attitude and, therefore, a better predictor of work behavior than job satisfaction (Mottaz, 1986). The link between OC and organizational effectiveness was established by the pioneering work of Mowday et al. (1979, 1982). These authors defined organizational commitment as: “the relative strength of the individual’s identification with and involvement in a particular organization . . . characterized by at least three related factors: (1) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization’s goals and values; (2) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization; and (3) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization” (1979, p. 226).

In the past decades, since its original formulation, this perspective of OC remained largely unchallenged. However, over the years researchers have questioned the type of relationship between OC and organizational outcomes (for example, turnover, performance, and absenteeism). For example, Cohen (1991) conducted a meta-analysis of 41 studies relating career development and OC, and concluded that career stage moderates
the relationship between OC and outcomes. He found that the relationship between commitment and turnover (actual and intended) is stronger in the early career stage than in the mid- and late-career stages. Similarly, Vandenbeng and Lance (1992) established a causal relationship between OC and job satisfaction. Their results, based on a sample of 100 management information systems (MIS) professionals, lent support to the commitment-causes-satisfaction model.

Job involvement
JI has been defined as “psychological identification with a job” (Kanungo, 1982, p. 97) and was suggested as an important addition to understanding the nexus between individuals and the organization via the nature of the job. A job-involved person sees her or his job “as an important part of his self-concept” (Lawler & Hall, 1970, p. 311), and as defining “one’s self-concept in a major way” (Kanungo, 1982, p. 82). JI is an attitude toward the work role and its context.

Conceptual definitions of JI have been of two basic types (see, for example, Lodahl & Kejner, 1965; Rabinowitz & Hall, 1977). One regards JI as reflecting the degree to which a person’s sense of esteem is affected by job performance. The other views it as the centrality of work and the job context to the individual’s self-image. There are also other views on the nature of the JI construct and little consensus on the most appropriate measure of this construct (Rabinowitz & Hall, 1977). Moreover, as is true of the conceptual definitions of many constructs, popular definitions of JI tend to confuse it with its antecedents (for example, work values) and consequences (for example, performance-based esteem changes), as they may be confused with EE as well. Researchers and theorists have equated JI, directly or indirectly, with such constructs as work centrality, employee morale, intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, and the Protestant work ethic (ibid., 1977).

Organizational citizenship behavior
OCB was first mentioned in the early 1980s (Smith et al., 1983; Organ, 1988) and was suggested as the good soldier syndrome of extra-role behavior that is above formal requirements in the organization. The great Greek philosopher Aristotle was first to observe that (positive) citizenship is a behavior that contributes to the establishment, the security, and the continuous development of the community, while at the same time it is an expression of the individuals partaking in a purposeful collective enterprise (Elcock, 1976). Indeed, the initial formulations of good citizenship behavior in organizations expressed the ability and willingness of employees to contribute above and beyond the call of duty (for example, organizational
rules and procedures, job description, and so on). Based on an extensive review of earlier work, Robbins (2005) defined OCB as “voluntary individual behavior, that while it is not part of formal job requirements, is still promoting the effective functioning of the organization” (p. 28). He further suggested that successful organizations require employees that go beyond their formal job duties, and perform beyond expectations.

The benefits of having good organizational citizens are exhibited, for example, in: assisting other team members, volunteering and willingness to perform additional work (without being formally rewarded for these activities), abstaining from conflicts, and a non-simplistic interpretation of organizational rules and procedures. Other studies reveal that organizations possessing employees high on OCB are also more satisfied in the job, demonstrate higher organizational commitment and higher job involvement, and are more successful than others (Podaskoff et al., 2000; Bolino & Turnley, 2003).

Advanced conceptualizations of OCB place it within the realm of organizational performance. It can be argued that when we explore the reasons for organizational success, there is a distinct possibility that hard-working and devoted employees, doing their utmost above and beyond the call of duty, actually assist in increasing organizational effectiveness, efficiency and positive atmosphere – all of which produce jointly business and economic success. Since OCB involves a voluntary contribution to the organization – provided by participants independent of sanctions or economic inducements – such an accumulation, over time, contributes to organizational effectiveness (Vigoda-Gadot, 2006, 2007). Furthermore, OCB is not only a unique individual competency but rather a valuable source of social capital. It is perceived as the “lubrication” that facilitates organizational functioning, health, stability, and performance (Bolino et al., 2002). Good organizational citizens are responsible externally for the provision of better and more-qualitative customer service (Hui et al., 2001) and have a general positive impact at all levels of the organization.

The added value of EE: a comparative view
The adoption of new “game rules” (that is, new psychological contract) based on decreasing mutual commitment among employers and employees alike, is indeed compatible with the above-mentioned value shifts both among employees and organizations. We submit that the new commitment of people to organizations and of organizations to people is not lesser in its intensity, but rather shorter in its duration and more mobile or transferable across various organizational settings. In the new organizational context, a high degree of organizational commitment – a positive quality no doubt – may become more of a liability by making it more difficult for employees
to change their occupational setting and/or careers. Organizations may be less thrilled about having all of their personnel highly committed or highly involved since this might impact on their ability to manage downsizing and right-sizing processes in times of repeating economic crises and changing market conditions.

The new psychological contract ushers in a change to the totality of commitment between people and organizations. The new rules are based on multiple contacts (or multiple careers) – in accordance with the individual’s multiple commitments (Cohen, 2003) – that are short term, in comparison to the old unitary long-term traditional psychological contract. As long as a specified occupational relationship lasts, the involved parties’ mutual expectation is of total engagement. For this reason, organizational commitment that develops in one specific setting is going to create a major interference with the individual’s ability to adjust to a new organizational system, as frequent career moves demand (Hall, 1996), while at the same time infringing on her/his career self-management capabilities. On the other hand and unlike OC or JI, OCB and EE are behavioral patterns that individuals can carry from one place to another, since they are not fixing the employee to a single given employment relationship, and therefore will be adaptive, positive and valued in any organizational setting.

Therefore, we propose to compare the four concepts on various dimensions along which the concepts differ. The dimensions are:

1. **Scope** The range of job-related performance, specifically intra-role, extra-role or both.
2. **Source of behavior** The source of the individual behavior either voluntary or as a result of a certain attitude or disposition.
3. **Personality type** The value driver for the individual’s behavior: respect of others or respect for authority.
4. **Basic orientation** The individual’s basic orientation toward life.
5. **Assistance target** Which is likely to benefit from the individual’s assistance: team, group, unit or the entire organization?
6. **Situational compatibility** What are the situational requirements – inter-dependence or independence of units – facilitating or inhibiting individual behavior?
7. **Inter-organizational transferability** Can an individual possessing this quality move freely between different organizations?
8. **Guiding discipline** Academic domain that most frequently informed the writings on each quality.

Our efforts to summarize the fundamental characteristics of each of the four constructs are shown in Table 8.1. The table suggests that OC, JI, OCB
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Table 8.1 Comparison of EE with OC, JI, and OCB

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>OC</th>
<th>JI</th>
<th>OCB</th>
<th>EE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scope</td>
<td>Intra-role</td>
<td>Intra-role</td>
<td>Extra-role</td>
<td>Intra- &amp; extra-role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of behavior</td>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Job</td>
<td>Voluntary, non-specific</td>
<td>Dispositional/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality type</td>
<td>identification/</td>
<td>identification</td>
<td>Respect toward</td>
<td>motivational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>internalization</td>
<td></td>
<td>people, authority and</td>
<td>Optimistic/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Team player</td>
<td>Care and understanding</td>
<td>institutions</td>
<td>proactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic orientation</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Normative</td>
<td>Normative compliance &amp;</td>
<td>Initiative &amp;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>compliance/</td>
<td>compliance &amp;</td>
<td>participation &amp;</td>
<td>enterprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>collaborative</td>
<td>participation</td>
<td>participation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistance target</td>
<td>Unit/</td>
<td>Unit/</td>
<td>Personal/</td>
<td>Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>organization</td>
<td>organization</td>
<td>team/work-group/unit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational compatibility</td>
<td>Unlimited</td>
<td>Job knowledge, skills, experience</td>
<td>Personal/</td>
<td>Unlimited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-organizational</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>team interdependence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transferability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiding discipline</td>
<td>Industrial-organizational psychology</td>
<td>Industrial-organizational psychology</td>
<td>Management, political science</td>
<td>Social and behavioral science</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and EE all share some variance as they are considered job- or work-related attitudes or behaviors that emphasize a positive interaction of individuals and the workplace. Nevertheless, EE emerges with some uniqueness compared with the others as a sort of an “omnibus” construct since: (i) its scope is larger than the other three, (ii) its source of behavior is related much more to work and organization, (iii) its personality type is high on “active coping”, (iv) its basic orientation is non-submissive (therefore making its management more challenging), (v) its situational compatibility is unlimited, and (vi) it is high on inter-organizational transferability.

We consequently maintain that organizations should consider adding EE to the arsenal of theoretical concepts such as OC, OCB, and JI. EE may thus become a much more appropriate alternative to encourage highly committed and involved employees as well as fostering good organizational citizens. In contrast to OC or JI, OCB and EE are individual characteristics easily transferred from one organization to another since
they reflect a principle attitude of individuals toward institutions. As a result, these are not likely to interfere with inter-organization moves, and will always allow the individual to express the same quality and intensity of involvement that organizations are so keen on having. EE on the other hand, seems unique compared with both OC and OCB being, at least in part, a dispositional characteristic rather than purely attitudinal (Macey & Schneider, 2008) and by being rooted in the general social and behavioral sciences rather than in a limited disciplinary section of industrial psychology or management.

Summary
There is no doubt in our minds that, presently, EE offers organizations a much more attractive profile of positive attitudes, life-related optimism and work-related enthusiasm combined with energetic intra-role proactivity. Studies should seriously discuss EE theoretically and test it empirically. It deserves scholarly attention for being a solid blend of commitment to the organization and its values, involvement in the specific job one exhibits, together with the positive citizenship assisting many in the organizational setting. Like OCB, EE is something that employees offer voluntarily in direct response to their organizational experience (for example, leadership, infrastructure, resources and so on) and therefore cannot be a simple part of the formal employment contract. However, unlike OCB, EE can be rooted in both formal and informal activities that involve commitment, care, respect, innovation, creativity, and other aspects of belonging. We feel that EE must be considered as a potentially new challenge for both theory and practice in management. Therefore, this theoretical observation should be challenged by empirical efforts to support (or reject) the thesis of EE’s uniqueness. We may end up finding that EE consists of the best of what OC, JI, and OCB have to offer and therefore should be viewed as the most comprehensive description, to date, of the desired relationship between individuals and organizations. Although more studies, conceptual and empirical, are needed to support this idea, the effort must be made. Scientific knowledge creation pays homage to parsimony. EE may represent a breakthrough in social science’s capability of describing the true individual–organization relationship, especially in modern times of complexity and fragility in markets and in organizational development.

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