EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: INTROSPECTION OF THE CONCEPT

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ABSTRACT

Employee engagement is one of the latest terminologies that have gained enough attention from business organisations in the process of implementing new employee productivity strategies. Its popularity has caught up so fast that even in the absence of a universal definition and concrete conceptualisation; business houses have begun framing strategies to induce employee engagement. The first step in the development of any concept is a definition and a common language that situates the concept across relevant fields. Employee Engagement is an emerging topic being studied with differing conceptualizations and lack of clear definition. Hence, this paper aims at examining the concept of Employee Engagement and its origin to propose a working definition.

KEYWORDS: Commitment, Employee Engagement, Job Involvement, Job Satisfaction, Organisational Citizenship Behaviour

INTRODUCTION

In the present context, while business houses are progressing after the economic slowdown, it becomes inevitable to motivate and engage the employees. Employee Engagement is one of those fascinating concepts that come along every few years in the HR field by an intense business need and is introduced into practice so quickly that it creates consternation and confusion in the research and academic communities (Jeff, 2009). Employee Engagement is a barometer that determines the association of a person with the organization (Nitin, 2007). It is an important outcome variable which many research studies in India have not investigated. (Bhatnagar, 2007).

The term "Employee Engagement" has gained popularity in the business world with intensive marketing by HR firms. Although, most websites, books, research papers and conferences gives evidence to available literature on Employee Engagement, still it is an area where rigorous academic research is required (Luthans and Peterson, 2002; Cartwright and Holmes, 2006; Joo and Mclean, 2006). As a result, Employee Engagement lacks a consistent definition and conceptualisation. This missing link has resulted in a chaotic approach to understanding and developing strategies around employee engagement within organizations.

EMERGENCE OF THE CONCEPT

Employee engagement is derived from studies of morale or a group's willingness to accomplish organizational objectives which began in the 1920s. The value of morale to organizations was matured by US Army researchers during WWII to predict unity of effort and attitudinal battle-readiness before combat. In the postwar mass production society that required unity of effort in execution, (group) morale scores were used as predictors of speed, quality and militancy. With the advent of the knowledge worker and emphasis on individual talent management (stars), a term was needed to

describe an individual's emotional attachment to the organization, fellow associates and the job. Thus the birth of the term "employee engagement" which is an individual emotional phenomenon whereas morale is a group emotional phenomenon of similar characteristics. In other words, employee engagement is the raw material of morale composed of 15 intrinsic and extrinsic attitudinal drivers. (e.g. Scarlett Surveys 2001).

More recently employee engagement has become an area of focus within organizations for the purpose of retention as a means of avoiding expensive employee replacement costs resulting from staff who voluntarily quit their jobs. According to SHRM (Society of Human Resource Management) the cost of replacing one $8 per hour employee can exceed $3,500, which gives companies a strong financial incentive to maintain their existing staff members through strong employee engagement practices.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

The most influential studies of engagement was carried out by Kahn (1990). According to his theory, people occupy roles at work and this role depends on their task. People also, bring them into or remove themselves from particular task behaviours or performances. Goffman (1961a) in his book, "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" pointed out that people's attachment to and detachment from their roles vary. This attachment and detachment was the starting point for Kahn's work towards defining the "self-in- role" of people. According to Kahn (1990) researchers had given less input to "how fully people are psychologically present during particular moments or situations of role performances".

Although Goffman's work was the scope for Kahn to develop on people's calibration of "self- in–role", he did not pursue on Goffman's idea further since he believed that employees act out momentary attachments and detachments in role performances. But Goffman's work dealt with only fleeting face-to-face encounters. Kahn (1990) opined that a different concept is needed to fit an organization life, which is "ongoing, emotionally charged and psychologically complex" (Diamond and Allcorn 1985). Kahn found from various psychologists (Freud 1922), sociologists (Merton 1957, Goffman 1961) and group theorists (Slater 1966, Smith and Berg 1987) that individuals feel hesitant to belong to an ongoing group or a system and thereby naturally tend to pull away from and move towards their memberships. A sense of belonging to something beyond oneself is a basic human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Kahn (1990) stated that the attachment and detachment of people are people's calibration of self-in-role. He termed these calibrations of self in role as personal engagement and personal disengagement, which means behaviour by which people bring in or leave out their personal selves during work role performances. This pursuit of understanding of "self-in- role" processes and the roles people occupy at work led Kahn in coining the term "engagement". And thus embarked the usage of the term "engagement" in academic literature. Further, the term 'Employee engagement' became an overnight sensation in the business consulting world after the popularity of the book "First Break All the Rules – What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently" by Buckingham & Coffman, 1999 (Shuck & Wollard).

A multitude of definitions have been applied to the term employee engagement that needs to be examined before making it common. Kahn (1990) defines employee engagement as "the harnessing of organization members" selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances". The cognitive aspect of employee engagement concerns employee's beliefs about the organization, its leaders and working conditions. The emotional aspect concerns how employees feel about each of those three factors and whether they have positive or negative attitudes toward the organization and its leaders. Kahn found that there were three

psychological conditions related with engagement or disengagement at work: meaningfulness, safety and availability. According to Kahn employees can be engaged on one dimension and not on the other. Therefore, the more engaged the employee is on each dimension, the higher his or her overall personal engagement. In the only study that empirically tested Kahn's model, May et al (2004) found that meaningfulness, safety and availability were significantly related to engagement and proved that psychological conditions effect employee engagement. They also found job enrichment and role fit to be positive predictors of meaningfulness; rewarding co-worker and supportive supervisor relations were positive predictors of safety, while adherence to co-worker norms and self-consciousness were negative predictors (Kular et al, 2008).

Although it is acknowledged and accepted that employee engagement is a multifaceted construct, as suggested by Kahn (1990), researchers and practitioners have contributed their share of evidence. Together, Kahn (1990) and Maslach et al. (2001) provided the two earliest theoretical frameworks for understanding employee engagement. According to Maslach et al. (2001) employee engagement is "a persistent positive affective state, characterized by high levels of activation and pleasure" (p. 417).

Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes (2002), the empirically based Gallup researchers published one of the earliest and most definitive portions of practitioner literature on employee engagement and were the first to look at employee engagement at the business unit level. Harter et al, (2002) used an enormous database to link higher levels of employee engagement to increased business unit outcomes and defined employee engagement as "the individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work".

Robinson et al (2004) defines engagement as "a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organization and its values". According to them, an engaged employee is aware of the business context, works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organization. Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) defined engagement as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption. Development Dimensions International (DDI, 2005) states "the extent to which people value, enjoy and believe in what they do" as employee engagement. Truss et al (2006) define employee engagement as "passion for work", a psychological state which is seen to encompass the three dimensions of engagement discussed by Khan (1990).

Saks (2006) was the first academic researcher to specifically conceptualize and test antecedents and consequences of employee engagement. He claims that it is the degree to which an individual is attentive to one's work and absorbed in the performances of one's role.

Common to these definitions is the notion that 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 behavioural components (Macey & Schneider, 2008). From all the definitions, it is concluded that there is no perfect consensus to an official definition of the term engagement in research literature but presence of common threads have surfaced about the nature of the construct. One mutual understanding seems to be that employee engagement involves an expression of the self through work and other employee-role activities. (Finn & Rock, 1997).

MYSTIFICATION ON THE CONCEPT

A psychological construct is defined as a concept that has been deliberately created or adopted for a scientific purpose (Schmitt & Klimoski, 1991). A construct cannot be observed; it must be inferred (Little & Little, 2006).

Although there is a great interest and importance being placed on the concept of engagement, the literature has been confused with employee engagement being related to several other constructs more specifically, organizational commitment, job involvement, and organisational citizenship behaviour and job satisfaction. The existence of different definitions makes the state of knowledge of employee engagement difficult to determine as each study examines employee engagement under a different protocol (Kular et al, 2008). So if the meaning of engagement overlaps into other developed constructs, then engagement just becomes an umbrella term for whatever one wants it to be (Saks, 2008).

Kahn (1990) emphasizes that employee engagement is different from other employee role constructs such as job involvement (Lodahl and Kejner, 1965, Lawler and Hall, 1970), commitment to organizations (Mowday et al., 1982), or intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1975).

Porter (1974) points out that commitment involves the willingness of employees to exert higher efforts on behalf of the organization, a strong desire to stay in the organization, and accept major goals and values of the organization. Saks (2006) argue that organizational commitment refers to a person''s attitude and attachment towards their organization, whilst engagement is not merely an attitude; it is the degree to which an individual is attentive to their work and absorbed in the performance of their role.

According to Organ (1988), organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) represents "individual behaviour that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and in the aggregate promotes the efficient and effective functioning of the organization". Voluntarily helping of others, such as assisting those who have fallen behind in their work, and identifying and stopping work-related problems in the first place is one such behaviour. Employee engagement, on the other hand, focuses on how the psychological experiences of work and work contexts shape the process of people presenting and absenting themselves during task performances (Kahn, 1990). Employees are emotionally, cognitively or physically engaged.

Robinson et al (2004) also stated that engagement contains many of the elements of both commitment and OCB but is by no means a perfect match with either. In addition, neither commitment nor OCB reflect sufficiently two aspects of engagement i.e. its two-way nature, and the extent to which engaged employees are expected to have an element of business awareness.

May et al (2004) indicated that engagement is most closely associated with the constructs of job involvement and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). But, Job involvement is defined as „the degree to which the job situation is central to the person and his or her identity (Lawler & Hall, 1970). This differs from engagement as it concerns more with how the individual employs him/her self during the performance of his/her job. Furthermore, whilst the focus of job involvement is on cognitions, engagement, according to most definitions encompasses emotions and behaviours.

The notion of flow is defined as the "holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975). It is argued that individuals experience flow needs no external rewards or goals to motivate them, as the activity itself presents constant challenges. However, flow is primarily the cognitive involvement of the individual in an activity on a momentary basis, but engagement implies a longer-term and more holistic involvement in work tasks (Kahn, 1990; Holbeche and Springett, 2003).

Job satisfaction reflects how people feel about their work (Spector, 2003). It refers to "the positive and negative feelings and attitudes we hold about our job" (Schultz & Schultz, 2002) where as employee engagement deals with the

attachment and detachment of self - in - role. Hence, there are sufficient grounds to argue that engagement is related to, but distinct from other constructs in organizational behaviour (Saks, 2006).

PROPOSED DEFINITION

The literature on employee engagement has a practitioner influence and research studies (barring a few like Rothbard, 2001; May et al, 2004; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004) are sparse in this area (Bhatnagar, 2007). Employee engagement has almost always been treated as a very general concept that refuses to accept all aspects of one's work situation and thus it is meaningless to refer to engagement without being specific about the role in question (Saks, 2008).

However, the term employee engagement has already been established in literature, with the term showing up in many research and practitioner articles and many companies and research firms see engagement as a powerful source of competitive advantage. Hence, we propose a common definition for employee engagement that situates any role an employee occupies as "the degree of one's allegiance of self-in-role towards one's company and the extra effort put in, to help the firm achieve its goals".

CONCLUSIONS

Research has shown that there is a strong link between employee engagement and organisational performance. Organisations around the globe are measuring their employees" level of engagement in the attempt of improving productivity, profitability, turnover and safety. A clear and concise definition of employee engagement can give human resource development practitioners and managers powerful tools to develop workplace strategies that can greatly improve employee satisfaction, fulfilment, and loyalty. Hence, the scope for continued research on Employee Engagement is immense.

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