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Has Engagement Had Its Day – What's Next and Does It Matter?

There is little doubt that employee engagement has been one of, if not *the*, 'hot' HR concept of the new millennium. Certainly during the first decade, internet searches yielded thousands of links, many to the webpages of consulting companies promoting the benefits of an engaged workforce and offering strategies to achieve it. Sessions on engagement at many of the annual conventions I attended (for example, the *Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology* and the *Academy of Management*), and I'm sure many that I didn't, were filled to capacity and often overflowing into the hallways. Organizations everywhere began to replace their existing employee surveys with 'engagement surveys.' There continues to be interest in employee engagement today (it continues to be a popular internet search term), but the last few conferences I attended had fewer sessions on engagement and the overflow crowds have disappeared. Discussions with HR professionals provide subtle hints that engagement might be reaching its 'best before date.' Hence the questions posed in the title of this article.

The subtle hints I described above suggest that the answer to the first question, 'has engagement had its day,' might be a qualified 'yes' (I will elaborate on the qualification later). Unfortunately, it is too early to answer the 'what's next' question. There are suggestions that it might be 'passion' or perhaps one of the concepts been being popularized by the positive psychology and positive organization scholarship movements such as 'thriving' or 'flourishing.' It is the third question, 'does it matter,' that I will make the main focus of this article. As a starting point, I will look back briefly to the state of affairs that existed before engagement took the spotlight. By considering how and why attention shifted in the past from one key concept to another we get some insight into what might happen if and when the next big shift takes place.

A Bit of History

This special issue of *Organizational Dynamics* is about employee engagement, but it is interesting to speculate on what it would have been in days gone by. For example, were it the 1930s or 40s at the height of the Human Relations Movement, the focus might have been on *job satisfaction* and the discussion would have centered on the benefits of monitoring and managing employees' satisfaction, or morale, with the belief that 'happy workers are productive workers.' In the 1970s and 80s, the attention would have shifted to *organizational commitment* and its role in winning the 'war for talent.' The shift in focus from job satisfaction to organizational commitment was prompted in part by somewhat disappointing research findings regarding the strength of the relation between job satisfaction and performance, but also by recognition that it is organizations that employees leave, possibly to do the same job with a competitor. In the new millennium, the focus shifted again, this time to employee engagement. Among the reasons for this latest shift was concern about the relevance of commitment in an era of continuous change. Organizations, recognizing their need to be adaptable, placed less emphasis on establishing long-term relationships with employees and more emphasis on productivity and efficiency. At the same time, the nature of work was changing, requiring higher levels of knowledge, skill, and education, and the employees qualified to do this work were also changing. Among other things, they were demanding higher quality jobs that afforded opportunities for the growth and development needed to self-manage their careers and enhance their employability. Under such conditions, having employees who are engaged in their work while they are there is arguably more important than establishing a long-term commitment.

As this brief history illustrates, there were certainly reasons for the transitions from a focus on job satisfaction to organizational commitment to employee engagement. However, there are also similarities in the concepts, including the fact that each reflects a general positive orientation to work that is likely to have benefits for employee well-being and their contributions to organizational effectiveness. So in some ways the concepts, and the interest in them, are different, but in other ways they are the same. To address these similarities and differences, and whether they matter, I will focus primarily on two concepts, *organizational commitment* and *work engagement*; I will continue to include *job satisfaction* in later discussion where relevant, but in the interest of space I will not elaborate here on what it is and why it is important.

What is Organizational Commitment and Why is it Important?

As noted earlier, interest in employees' commitment to their organizations (referred to as organizational commitment) was stimulated in the 1970s and 80s primarily by its implications for retention. Employees might be satisfied with their jobs, but are they 'committed' to doing those jobs with their current employer? Interest in commitment at the time was not restricted to organizational scientists; rather it was being investigated in a variety of contexts by scholars in various disciplines (for example, philosophy, sociology, social psychology). Not surprisingly, there were many different opinions about what commitment meant and why it might be important. Indeed, when my doctoral student and now colleague, Natalie Allen, and I first began to study commitment in the 1980s, we were struck by the many different applications of the term, not only in academic circles, but in everyday life. Politicians make commitments to voters, marketers make commitments to consumers, and people make commitments to one another, often through the bonds of matrimony. Taking the latter as just one example, many individuals commit to their partners out of love and the desire to remain together 'until death do us part.' However, others may commit to a relationship (or become committed over time) out of social or religious obligation or to obtain/retain the benefits associated with that relationship (e.g., social status; economic security). What is common to these commitments is the implied continuation of the relationship, and this is true of all commitments, including organizational commitment. The reason that commitments are important is because they make the future more predictable. We presumably want commitment from our partners if we are going to make personal investments in our relationships. Similarly, organizations want commitment from their employees if they are going to make investments in their training and development. Consequently, it is not surprising that when retention became a key issue in the 1970s and 80s, commitment was seen as a potential solution.

Of course organizations want more than retention, they also want their employees to perform effectively and be good corporate citizens, and this is where the different motives underlying a commitment become important. In our *Three Component Model* (TCM) of commitment, Natalie Allen and I noted that commitment to any entity or course of action can be accompanied by three distinct mindsets: desire, obligation, or cost. That is, individuals can remain in a relationship or persist in a course of action because they *want to*, feel they *ought to*, or believe they *have to*. Importantly, mindset matters! As most readers would expect, and as the data show, the quality of the relationship or behaviors accompanying a commitment are greater when based on desire than on obligation or cost. In research pertaining to organizational commitment, commitment based on a desire to remain is typically referred to as affective, or emotional, commitment. *Affective organizational commitment* has consistently been found to relate positively with retention, job performance, citizenship behavior and employee health and well-being.

Of the remaining mindsets, cost-based commitment has been associated with the least desirable, and sometimes detrimental, outcomes. Employees who are committed to remain primarily to avoid the cost of leaving tend to do what is required of them, but little more. They also experience greater stress, perhaps due in part to the loss of control they experience in their work lives. It is worth noting, however, that some recent research suggests that the most positive outcomes, for both employers and their employees, derive from commitments reflecting the combination of desire, obligation, and cost. In this case, employees want to do what they believe to be the right thing and recognize that there may be undesirable costs associated with failing to follow through ("I love my spouse (this organization) and see it as my duty to meet his/her (its) needs because the consequences of failing to do so would be detrimental to us both"). Nevertheless, because affective organizational commitment has received the most attention to date, and has been implicated most often in the comparison with engagement, I will make it the focus in much of the following discussion.

Although concerns about organizational commitment began to wane in the 1990s as trends toward downsizing, outsourcing, and contract work made employer/employee relationships more tenuous, it did not disappear. Indeed, organizations continue to compete for talent and, once attracted, want to retain the best and brightest. Moreover, even if they don't want, or can't expect, employees to commit to a long-term relationship, they still want commitment to policies, projects, and goals that are essential to their effectiveness. There is a large body of evidence demonstrating that affective commitments to

supervisors, teams, customers, projects, change initiatives, and goals are positively associated with desirable outcomes. So employee commitment, including commitment to the organization, is still relevant, even if it has been replaced by engagement as the primary tool in the HR consultant's toolbox. Interestingly, it is also one of the key concepts addressed by engagement scholars in their efforts to demonstrate the uniqueness, and unique contributions, of work engagement. I will return to the issue of uniqueness later, after a brief discussion of the meaning of engagement.

What is Engagement and Why is it Important?

Like commitment, engagement has been defined and measured in a variety of ways. Not only is there little consensus on its meaning, there is even disagreement on where the concept originated. In their extensive review of the academic and practitioner literatures in the 2008 inaugural issue of *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, William Macey and Benjamin Schneider stated "The notion of employee engagement is a relatively new one, one that has been heavily marketed by human resource (HR) consulting firms that offer advice on how it can be created and leveraged. *Academic researchers are now slowly joining the fray*, and both parties are saddled with competing and inconsistent interpretations of the meaning of the construct" (emphasis added). However, they also acknowledged that the term was first used by William Kahn in 1990 in an academic journal (*Academy of Management Journal*). Kahn defined engagement as "the harnessing of organizational members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances." Many of the academics who 'joined the fray' and got involved in the scientific investigation of engagement offered similar definitions. For example, Wilmar Schaufeli and his colleagues defined *work engagement* as "A positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption." What is noteworthy about these definitions is their depiction of engagement as a psychological state. Such treatment raises questions about how it differs from other psychological states such as satisfaction and commitment, an issue I will return to and discuss in more detail later.

Macey and Schneider noted that engagement has also been described in both trait-like and behavioral terms. As a trait, engagement is viewed as a relatively stable disposition that increases the likelihood that an individual will seek out opportunities for engagement and/or experience engagement when those opportunities arise. There is some evidence to suggest that personality traits such as conscientiousness, extraversion, emotional stability, positive affectivity, and proactivity are positively associated with likelihood of experiencing a state of engagement in one's work. This raises the possibility that organizations can select individuals who have a greater propensity to be engaged, assuming that the conditions they encounter in the workplace are conducive to the realization of that propensity.

Engagement has also been conceptualized in terms of its behavioral manifestations. We assume that employees are engaged when they perform effectively, go above and beyond the call of duty, and do so with energy and enthusiasm. Indeed, it is these very behaviors that we associate with engagement that make it such an appealing concept. But there are drawbacks to defining engagement in terms of the behaviors we want to see. For one, it is tautological – we know employees are engaged because they are effective, and they are effective because they are engaged. Second, it might be difficult to monitor their performance on a regular basis to know whether or not they are engaged. Indeed, in some cases employees' performance and its implications for organizational effectiveness can only be known in the longer term – once it is determined that they are not engaged it might be too late to do anything to quickly 'right the ship.' Finally, it tells us nothing about what to do if employees are not performing effectively? Are they not engaged or is the engagement not being channeled in the proper directions? So, although it is easy to say "I know it when I see it," there are advantages to knowing it before we see it. It is for this reason that organizational engagement surveys have become so popular – they typically include a measure of 'state engagement' as well as perceptions of work conditions that can contribute to or undermine engagement.

There is one additional approach to the measurement of engagement that is worth mentioning if for no other reason than it served as the basis for one of the first and most widely used measures. As one of the pioneers in engagement surveying, the Gallup Corporation conducted a wide-scale investigation to

identify those conditions that contributed most to the prediction of job satisfaction at a unit or organizational level (that is, when individual employees' perceptions of the work conditions were aggregated to the unit or organization level and were used to predict aggregated scores for job satisfaction). Those conditions that best predicted unit/organization-level satisfaction were included as single items on an instrument know as the Gallup Workplace Audit ®, or the Gallup 12. Included among those items are "At work, my opinions seem to count," "I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right" and "My supervisor, or someone at work seems to care about me as a person." When administered to individual employees, the more of these 12 conditions reported to be present the more engaged they are believed to be. Advocates of this approach argue that it allows for the identification of those conditions that require the most immediate attention – that is, the measure is immediately actionable. Among other things, critics argue that work conditions cannot be adequately assessed using single questions on a survey and that it is more appropriate to measure the state of engagement directly, and to accompany this measure with more reliable and valid measures of work conditions of relevance to the organization and employees under investigation. As an aside, it is also interesting to note that it was a measure of 'job satisfaction' that served as the criterion for the identification of those conditions to be used in the measurement of 'engagement.' This has implications for the discussion of similarities and differences between engagement and related concepts such as job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment to follow.

As employee engagement increased in popularity and the demand for engagement surveys escalated, it was relatively easy for consulting companies to re-brand their products and services. This was not the case for academics. Indeed, one of the reasons that academics were slow to 'join the fray' as Macey and Schneider reported is that there are standard procedures in academic circles for introducing new 'theoretical constructs' and measures into the literature. First one has to define the construct in such a way that it is distinguishable from constructs that already exist. This definition is then used to develop measures, often self-report surveys that can be administer in paper-and-pencil or on-line formats. These measures are then administered along with measures of other constructs to large samples of employees and the data are used to evaluate the reliability and validity of the new measure, its distinctiveness from measures of potentially related constructs, and its 'value added' in explaining important outcomes such as retention or job performance. Although there have been several such research programs in the last decade or so, one of the most extensive and successful was that undertaken by Wilmar Schaufeli and his colleagues in the development of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES).

Schaufeli and his colleagues defined work engagement as a positive state reflecting vigor, dedication and absorption. The precision of this definition lent itself nicely to the development of a multifaceted measure of work engagement with three subscales: vigor, dedication, and absorption. However, it is important to note that Schaufeli and his colleagues defined and measured 'work engagement' rather that 'employee engagement' per se. This helped to distinguish it more clearly from existing constructs including satisfaction, with its focus on the job in general (or specific facets like pay and promotion opportunities), and commitment with its primary focus on the organization. The UWES is the most widely used measure in the scientific investigation of work engagement and has been incorporated into the engagement surveys used by many organizations and consulting firms. The instrument has proven to be reliable and valid, and scores on the measure have been shown to be distinguishable from, albeit related to, measures of job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment. It has also been shown to predict important outcomes and, in some cases, most notably job performance, to do so better than affective organizational commitment. On the other hand, affective commitment has been found to predict employee retention better than does work engagement.

Another important aspect of research pertaining to the UWES is that it has been linked to, and guided by, the Job Demands and Resources (JD-R) model developed by Evangelina Demerouti and her colleagues (see Schaufeli's article in this special issue for more detail). The JD-R model serves to identify *demands* such as role ambiguity and interpersonal conflict that can undermine engagement and contribute to its antipode, burnout, as well as *resources* like social support and training that foster engagement. Consequently, organizations wanting to use the UWES as the cornerstone of their engagement surveys

can draw on the evidence linking work engagement to known demands and resources and include measures of these to identify potential barriers to, and drivers of, engagement.

Engagement vs. Commitment: Is there a Difference and Does It Matter?

Again, I chose affective organizational commitment as the comparator in this discussion partly for simplicity and partly because it remains the most widely investigated of the constructs that 'compete' with engagement. I have already mentioned that there is some evidence demonstrating the distinctiveness and value added of work engagement vis a vis affective organizational commitment. This evidence comes from multiple individual investigations as well as recent meta-analytic studies that combine the results of the individual studies. However, there have been counterarguments to the claims for uniqueness and these too have been supported by individual studies and meta-analytic findings. For example, David Harrison, Daniel Newman and their colleagues argued that affective organizational commitment and work engagement (along with job satisfaction) are all highly related and reflect a common underlying positive job attitude that they refer to as the A-Factor (A standing for job attitude). Their intention is not to diminish the importance of any of the individual constructs that make up the A-Factor, and they indeed provide evidence that the A-Factor is an important predictor of the E-Factor (E standing for behavioral engagement) that combines many of the outcomes described above, including job performance, citizenship behavior and withdrawal (lateness, absence and turnover).

How can these competing positions be reconciled and what are the practical implications? It is likely that both positions are accurate to some extent and that the truth lies somewhere in the middle. To illustrate, consider the Venn diagram in Figure 1. The solid arrow reflects the relation between what is common among job attitude constructs (the A-Factor) and the behavioral engagement constructs (the E-factor) as described by Harrison, Newman, and their colleagues. Implied in this relation is the notion that any intervention that affects the A-Factor, regardless of the specific facet at which it might be directed, will have a common indirect effect on the E-factor. As I will discuss later, studies investigating the development of affective organizational commitment and work engagement have identified a number of common antecedent factors. The most well-established of these reflect the operation of basic underlying principles of effective management.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The dotted arrows reflect links between the unique aspects of the attitude and behavioral constructs. Only some of the possible unique links are included in the figure and described here for illustrative purposes. The links reflected by these arrows are more difficult to establish empirically for a number of reasons (mostly reflecting limitations in research methodology and data analytic techniques), but they are nevertheless intuitively appealing and worth considering for practical purposes. As noted previously, there is some evidence to suggest that affective organizational commitment is a better predictor of the likelihood that employees will leave the organization than is work engagement. This might be because employees are able to separate the work that they do from the organization that employs them to do it. Consequently, it is possible for employees to be very engaged in their work yet find conditions in the organization (for example, the politics or values) difficult to deal with; the solution might be to find another organization where they can do the same work under better conditions. Employees' commitment to their organization might also be a better predictor of their willingness to engage in citizenship behaviors directed at the organization itself. This could include willingness to volunteer for committees, to mentor newcomers, or to speak positively about the organization's products or services to outsiders. On the other hand, work engagement has been shown to relate more strongly to task performance than has organizational commitment, suggesting that organizations interested in optimal performance might benefit more from efforts to improve work design than organizational climate or culture. Future research might find similar effects for other aspects of performance such as creativity and innovation.

What is important to note from this discussion is that work engagement and affective organizational commitment share much in common and the conditions that contribute to one are likely to

contribute to the other. However, they are not the same thing and they can have unique effects on behavior. Thus, applying general principles, some of which I discuss below, known to foster both commitment and engagement will be beneficial, but attention to alignment of attitude target and behavioral objectives can also be important. Work engagement might be more important when high levels of performance, creativity, or innovation are a priority, whereas affective commitment to the organization might be of greater importance when long-term retention or buy-in to broader organizational goals and values are keys to organizational effectiveness. Of course, where there are multiple objectives, it will be important to foster both engagement with work and commitment to the organization.

At the risk of muddying the waters further, it is important to note that the comparison of 'work engagement' and 'organizational commitment,' confounds the focal construct (engagement vs. commitment) with the target of interest (work vs. organization). As I noted earlier, Schaufeli and his colleagues focused specifically on work engagement as a means of establishing its uniqueness from existing constructs such as affective organizational commitment. However, not all academics or practitioners make that distinction. Indeed, some argue that a focus on engagement with work itself is too limiting and that attention should also be paid to how engaged employees are in their teams, projects, and even the organization itself. For example, Alan Saks demonstrated that employees' engagement in their job is related to, but distinguishable from, engagement in their organization. Moreover, each was sensitive to somewhat different conditions in the workplace and contributed uniquely to the prediction of attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. This evidence for multiple foci of engagement, combined with the fact that affective commitment has also been studied with supervisors, teams, jobs, customers, goals, change initiatives, and the like as targets, raises further questions about the uniqueness of the constructs when separated from their targets. I suspect that it might be more difficult to separate engagement from affective commitment when the targets are consistent. Although this creates a problem for those academics or consultants who want to promote one construct over the other, it is important to keep in mind that what is common among them is actually very important for both organizational effectiveness and employee well-being. Moreover, once a basic principle has been established with one construct, it can be applied to others with which it shares common elements, including the construct(s) that will ultimately replace engagement.

Before turning to a discussion of some of the principles that have been established and can be used to guide management practices, I want to conclude with some practical recommendations for the design of 'engagement' surveys. First, although it is possible to infer that employees are engaged or disengaged based on their responses to questions pertaining to work conditions (demands and resources), there are advantages to measuring 'state engagement' directly. For example, such a measure can be used as a criterion in analyses (for example, relative importance analyses) to identify the conditions that contribute most to explaining employees' level of engagement or disengagement. These conditions can then be given priority in subsequent interventions. If levels of state engagement cannot be explained from other information collected in the survey, it might suggest that important conditions were missed in the design of the survey and that there is a need for a follow-up investigation. Second, there may be advantages to measuring both work engagement and organizational commitment (and other related constructs as required) given that they can have both common and unique implications for work behavior.

What Can We Learn from the Past and Take into the Future?

We have learned a great deal about the effective management of people from decades of research. Some of this research focused specifically on the development and consequences of job satisfaction, affective organizational commitment and, more recently, work engagement. However, much of the work focused on other, often broader issues that, through a network of connections, have implications for the effective management of commitment and engagement (and the A-Factor more generally). Before getting into specifics, it is important to consider two complementary approaches to investigating the effectiveness of management practice. One focuses on how these practices are perceived by individual employees and subsequently affect their attitudes, behavior, and well-being. This is referred to as an individual-level of

analysis. The second focuses on the effects on employee reactions at a collective level (e.g., team, unit, organization) and the implications of these reactions for the collective. Most research focusing directly on job satisfaction, affective organizational commitment, or work engagement has been conducted at the individual level. However, it may well be the research conducted at the collective level, particularly the organization level, that will be most persuasive to organizations wondering whether investments in the human resource will truly pay off. The following is just a sampling of what we have learned from research at both the individual- and organizational levels of analysis.

Research examining the implications of management practices on job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment is extensive, and research on work engagement is plentiful and growing. Much of the work focuses on employees' perceptions of the climate created by management and how these perceptions are related to satisfaction, affective commitment, or engagement. Although extensive, one of the criticism of this line of research is that it has produced a 'laundry list' of management practices and work conditions that have the potential to contribute to increased satisfaction, commitment, and/or engagement. As noted earlier, much of the research pertaining to work engagement has been guided by the JD-R model and consequently these practices and conditions can be categorized as demands that thwart engagement (e.g., role ambiguity, conflict or overload) or resources that foster it (e.g., supervisor and peer support). The same rubric might be applied retrospectively to the research on antecedents of job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment. The findings of this research have been synthesized in both narrative and meta-analytic reviews of the relevant research literatures and are available to guide evidence-based practice (see the Selected Bibliography for examples).

Much of the research conducted at the organizational level of analysis was directed at establishing links between strategic human resource management (SHRM) practices and various indices of organizational effectiveness (e.g., return on investments). This research generally confirmed beliefs that many of advancements in specific HRM practices (e.g., selection and training techniques; performance management strategies), when combined (bundled) into high-performance strategies, contribute meaningfully to the organization's bottom line. More recently, attention has been directed at identifying the mediating mechanisms responsible for these effects. Not surprisingly, the collective impact of SHRM on employees became a focus of investigation. The cumulative results of this research were nicely synthesized recently in a meta-analytic investigation conducted by Kaifeng Jiang and his colleagues. Due to the nature of the literature, the investigators were not able to isolate employees' job satisfaction, organizational commitment, or work engagement as specific mediators of the effect of SHRM on organizational effectiveness. Rather, they created two broad categories of variables, one reflecting the effects of SHRM on human capital (e.g., employee skills, knowledge, ability and education), and the other employee motivation (e.g., job satisfaction, organizational commitment), The latter most closely resembles the A-factor described above. Importantly, they were able to demonstrate that evidence-based SHRM practices exert their effects on the organization's bottom line at least in part through they effect they have on employee engagement, broadly defined.

Again, the point of this discussion is to argue that a great deal has been learned about the effective management of the people in organizations and there is good evidence to suggest that effective management contributes to organizational success. This knowledge began to accumulate long before researchers became interested in employee engagement and is certainly being enriched by the work that is being done today in the investigation of work engagement. There is certainly much to be gained by the enthusiasm stimulated by the introduction of new constructs like engagement, both in terms of research and practice. However, it would be unfortunate if, in the interest of promoting the new construct and its unique contributions, researchers and practitioners lose sight of the wealth of knowledge that has already accumulated.

'Best Principles' for 'Best Practice'

The research at the individual and organizational levels of analysis described above provides convincing evidence that employee engagement is important and can be managed. Both identify management practices and resulting work conditions that might serve as levers to enhance the engagement of individual employees or the workforce in general. However, in both cases, we can dig a

little deeper by asking why a particular practice, demand or resource has the effect that it does. As we scratch below the surface we discover a whole new set of principles, some dealing with issues pertaining to basic human nature and its implications for work motivation and performance. The advantage of working our way down to such a basic level of analysis is that it provides us with the insights required to tailor HRM practices to the unique conditions that might exist within an organization, unit, team, or dyadic relationship. Often organizations are interested in 'best practices' that have worked effectively in other organizations. For example, they might look to see what Google or other very successful companies are doing to get the extraordinary levels of performance from their employees. However, what is a best practice in one organization might not work, or be possible to implement, in another. A better approach is to ask why that practice had the effect that it did and to apply the same principles to design policies and practices that are applicable in the current context. While best practices often don't generalize, best principles usually do. There are far too many such best principles to cover here, but I will provide a few to serve as illustrations.

The first, and one of the most fundamental, principles has to do with the existence of basic human needs. Over several decades, Edward Deci, Richard Ryan and their colleagues from around the world have conducted research to identify what they consider to be an innate set of psychological needs that all humans seek to satisfy. These include needs for autonomy (volition and self-endorsement of behavior), competence (efficacy and self-control), and relatedness (social significance and connection). They describe these needs as the basic nutriments for psychological well-being and effective functioning, much like food, water and oxygen are basic necessities for physical health and well-being. They have investigated the effects of satisfying or thwarting these basic needs in a variety of life domains, including sport and exercise, education, parenting, and work. Within a work context, there is now considerable evidence demonstrating that satisfaction of these needs relates positively to the health and well-being of employees and the quality of their contributions to organizational effectiveness.

Using this one example, we can see how best principles can have advantages over, and can be used to guide, best practices. It might not be possible for an organization to go to the lengths that Google does to empower their employees, but recognizing that empowerment 'works' by satisfying the need for autonomy can assist in the design of more modest but effective employee involvement initiatives. Similarly, an organization might not have the training budget available to larger well-established Fortune 500 companies, but by recognizing that employees have a basic need for competence it can develop other strategies to provide the necessary knowledge, skills and resources employees require to feel competent in their roles. The same applies to the design of strategies to ensure that employees feel connected to others in the organization as a way of satisfying their need for relatedness. As one final demonstration of the centrality of these needs and their relevance to employee engagement, it is interesting to go through the items on the Gallup 12 ® engagement survey. In virtually every case, the conditions identified in this survey can be linked to the satisfaction of one or more of the three basic needs. For example, having one's opinions count at work helps to satisfy the need for autonomy; having the equipment and materials to do the job right satisfies the need for competence; and having someone at work that cares about you as a person satisfies the need for relatedness.

Another well-established principle supported by a large body of research is that employees want to be treated fairly and will respond to fair and unfair treatment accordingly. Concern over fairness becomes evident very early in our lives and is possibly something that is hard wired in our brains through evolutionary processes. Although the fact that employees want to be treated fairly might seem like a 'motherhood' statement, the research goes much farther by clarifying how and why people make fairness judgments and how they react to both fair and unfair treatment. One important discovery was that people are often willing to accept unfair outcomes, or at least outcomes that are less desirable than they had hoped, when the procedures used to determine those outcomes are judged to be fair. This has come to be known as the *fair process effect*. Many years ago, Gerald Leventhal identified six criteria that can be used to evaluate the fairness of any policy or procedure that has implications for employees, whether it be a pay policy, a procedure for making promotion decisions, or even the way vacation time is allotted. These criteria include: consistent application across people and time; consideration of the interests of all parties

affected; absence of bias or favoritism; decisions based on objective data; application of accepted moral standards (e.g., the merit principle); opportunity for appeal.

I noted earlier that research on SHRM practices have been found to have demonstrable effects on the financial success of organizations, and that these effects are due at least in part to their implications for human capital (the talent the organization is able to attract and retain) and employee motivation. A close examination of this research reveals that, among the characteristics of the HRM policies and practices found to have the most beneficial effects, is fairness – fairness in the way hiring decisions are made, fairness in performance appraisal, fairness in the allocation of training and development opportunities, and so on. Again, the specific policies and practices will differ across organizations and contexts, but the Leventhal criteria can be applied in all cases and therefore qualify as 'best principles.'

There are many more 'best principles' I could describe, but I will conclude with one that arguably underpins the effective application of many of the others: frequent and effective two-way communication. While it is true that what organizations *do* plays an important role in shaping job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and work engagement, these actions are filtered through employee perceptions. They won't know that senior management gave due consideration to fairness in policy development unless they are provided with this information. They will not understand that what they do is valued and appreciated unless someone tells them so. They may not appreciate that certain changes are necessary to avoid pending threats to the organization's bottom line, and perhaps their jobs, unless it is clearly explained to them. And importantly, organizations will not necessarily make the best decisions, or understand their potential impact, unless they also listen to those who implement and are affected by them. Again, much has been learned about effective organizational communication over the years, some of it coming from research on job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and it applies as well to our understanding of engagement. I have little doubt that this will apply as well to the next 'big thing.'

In sum, the reason I emphasize the importance of best principles is two-fold. First, these principles apply to engagement whether it is defined narrowly as 'work engagement' of more broadly as the 'A-factor.' Second, they can be used to tailor HRM policies and practices across very different contexts. That is, unlike the best practices that they help to explain, best principles can be easily transported from one situation to another. One practical implication of this observation is that, in addition to including questions about management practice and work conditions on their engagement surveys, organizations might want to include questions that would allow them to determine how well they are applying these key principles. For example, to what extend do employees believe their core needs are being met and/or they are being treated fairly? Given that these principles manifest themselves in management practices and work conditions, it should be possible to devise measures of both without adding unduly to survey length. That is, measures of the effective application of key principles can be derived from relevant questions being asked about management practices and work conditions.

Conclusion

In answer to the first question posed in this title of this article, "has engagement had its day?" I would argue that, as a label, possibly yes, but as a legitimate human condition worth striving toward, definitely not. Engagement might one day, maybe soon, be supplanted as the next 'hot topic' in the HR literature and consulting world, just as was the case for job satisfaction and organizational commitment, but the psychological state that it reflects, and the consequences it brings, will remain important. As for what that hot topic might be, it is too early to tell. However, I expect that it will share much in common with work engagement, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction, and require application of many of the same principles that have been demonstrated effective in fostering the latter. But it might also stimulate new ways of thinking about employees, their work experiences and what it takes to manage them effectively. For example, if the concepts of thriving and/or flourishing at work take hold as a result of the increasing popularity of the positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship movements, it might reflect an awareness that an increasingly educated workforce is looking to work for more than a paycheck or even an opportunity to do interesting and challenging work. They may see work as an opportunity for broader personal growth and development and as a way to make a meaningful and lasting contribution to society (signaled by the rise in interest in corporate social responsibility [CSR] and

its appeal in attracting and retaining employees). In that case, it might be necessary to build on (not replace) the HRM strategies used in the past to foster commitment and engagement, and to identify additional criteria (e.g., personal growth and development; contributions to and outcomes of CSR activities) as criteria in the evaluation of HRM initiatives designed to help employees thrive and flourish.

Selected Bibliography

Much has been written in the last decade on employee engagement. William Macey and Benjamin Schneider provide a concise and insightful review of the origin and meaning of the concept from both an academic and practitioner perspective in their 2008 article in the inaugural issue of *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 1(1), 3-30. The article is accompanied by a series of commentaries illustrating the diversity of perspectives that have been taken on this important concept. For a more in-depth treatment of theory and research, and implications for practice, two relatively recent Handbooks are available, one edited by Arnold Baaker and Michael Leiter (*Work Engagement: A Handbook of Essential Theory and Research*: Psychology Press, 2010) and the other by Simon Albrecht (*Handbook of Employee Engagement: Perspectives, Issues, Research and Practice*: Edward Elgar, 2010). A more succinct summary and critical review of engagement theory is provided by Alan Saks and Jamie Gruman in *Human Resource Management Quarterly*, 2014, vol., pp. 155-182).

For a more comprehensive treatment of the decades of research pertaining to employee commitment, readers are referred to two edited volumes, one by Howard Klein, Thomas Becker and John Meyer (*Commitment in Organizations: Accumulated Wisdom and New Directions*: Routledge, 2009) and the other by John Meyer (*Handbook of Employee Commitment*: Edward Elgar, 2016). Cutting edge developments in commitment theory and research are also reported in special issues of *Human Resource Management Review* (2013) and the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* (2016), both resulting from the *Conferences on Commitment* organized by Howard Klein and held at the Fisher College of Business at The Ohio State University. The next conference will be held October 13-15, 2017 (for more information, see http://u.osu.edu/fishercomconf/).

Much of what we have learned about the human thought, motivation, emotion, and behavior and its implication for effective management in the workplace is summarized in leading textbooks in industrial and organizational (I/O) psychology, human resource management (HRM) and organizational behavior (OB). Although not specifically directed at the understanding of engagement per se, the decades of research in these fields can be used to guide the design of policy and practice to foster employee engagement broadly defined. Some of the key principles highlighted in this article, including the basic needs underlying workplace motivation and perceptions of organizational justice can be found in recent edited volumes by Marylene Gagné (*The Oxford Handbook of Work Engagement, Motivation, and Self-Determination Theory*: Oxford, 2014) and Russell Cropanzano and Maureen Ambrose (*Oxford Handbook of Psychology: Justice in the Workplace*: Oxford, 2015), respectively.
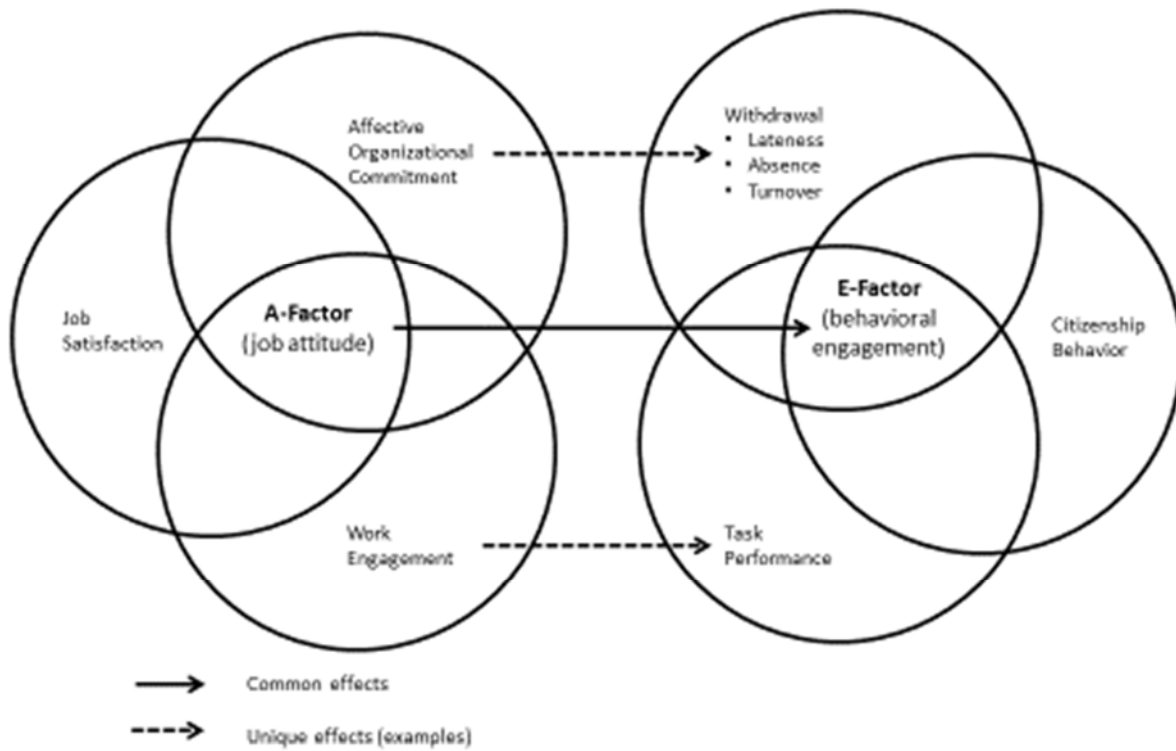
Figure 1. Common and unique effects of job satisfaction, affective organizational behavior, and work engagement.