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Employee Engagement as a Shared Responsibility: A Study of Engagement Strategies Employed by Legal Assistants

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Employee Engagement as a Shared Responsibility: A Study of Engagement Strategies Employed by Legal Assistants

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify strategies used by legal assistants to engage, stay engaged, and reengage, when appropriate, in their work, in particular when common organizational efforts fall short or do not exist. Constructivism and job demands-resources (JD-R) were the primary frameworks for understanding and analyzing the phenomenon of developing engagement strategies.

Qualitative data were drawn through semi-structured interviews with 16 legal assistants. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Trustworthiness and validity were enhanced by using multiple respondents and allowing each to review the transcripts for accuracy, fairness, and clarity. The transcriptions were then analyzed for themes. Two of the categories that emerged from the data were the strategies individuals developed to enhance employee engagement (EE) and the drivers that motivated the participants to develop the strategies. These two categories were developed into sub-categories.

Participants felt motivated to employ their strategies by their internal drive to be productive, to do the work they are assigned, to achieve success for themselves and their attorneys, and from a sense of community with their firms and colleagues. The strategies they employed included temporarily disconnecting from the work, work organization tactics, self-care, and self-motivation. These strategies supported their internal drives, just as the internal drives supported their strategies. Overall, the participants were fully engaged the majority of the time they are at work, they recognized the need to be engaged, and they felt driven to develop strategies, and bring those strategies to their employers, to engage, remain engaged, and reengage, when appropriate, in their work.

This study provided support for the idea that EE is a shared duty between employee and employer. As an individual construct, employees share a responsibility in creating and maintaining an environment of engagement. Highly engaged employees enjoy being engaged and may even become more engaged through the act of developing engagement strategies.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

According to recent research by Gallup (2017b), less than 15% of workers worldwide are fully engaged in their work, while 24% are actively disengaged. The remaining workers are simply not engaged, sleepwalking their way through their daily work tasks (Gallup, 2017b; Seijts & Crim, 2006; Shuck et al., 2010). Those workers who are actively disengaged generate significantly less revenue than their engaged coworkers (Seijts & Crim, 2006). Disengagement may cost U.S. organizations hundreds of billions of dollars in lost productivity annually, making employee engagement (EE) interventions attractive for most organizations (Saks, 2006; Valentin et al., 2015). Some evidence suggests interest in EE has been growing vigorously among organization development (OD), human resource management (HRM), and human resource development (HRD) professionals over the past decade or so (Mackay et al., 2017; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Saks, 2006; Shuck et al., 2016; Valentin et al., 2015), yet Macey and Schneider (2008) report the study of EE is relatively new to academic researchers.

Kahn (1990) was the first to coin the term “employee engagement” as “the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles…[in which] people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). The Gallup Organization likens EE to an employees’ positive emotional attachment and commitment to the organization (Gallup, 2017a). Some academics have called EE a positive emotional state workers direct toward their organization, their coworkers, and their job tasks, characterized by being committed and fascinated by their work, showing vigor, dedication, and absorption (Bakker et al., 2008; González-Romá et al., 2006; Martin-Kniep, 2010; Schaufeli et al., 2002). There appears to be agreement between academics and practitioners that “engaged employees are those who are emotionally connected to the organization and cognitively vigilant”

(Seijts & Crim, 2006, p. 1). The implications of cognitive vigilance implies that workers should know when they are engaged and when their engagement levels are waning, or when they are actively disengaging. This study seeks to understand the strategies legal assistants use when engagement levels drop, therefore it is important to understand the drivers that bring on lower engagement, or when calling on strategies to reengage will be necessary.

Employee Engagement

Toward a definition of EE

Due in part to the “bottom-up” approach of the development of the EE construct (Macey & Schneider, 2008), understanding the meaning of what it is to be engaged has become more and more ambiguous (Nimon et al., 2011). Macey and Schneider (2008) noted that “the meaning of engagement is unclear” (p. 3); it could be “a psychological state…a performance construct…or some combination of the above” (p. 5). This confusion leads to a definition that becomes “elusive…compromis[ing] its utility both in theory and as an actionable phenomenon” (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017, p. 164), thereby giving way to a definition weighted toward organizations driving higher efficiencies and productivity through the construct of EE. Some researchers have made productivity the purpose of EE. For example, Saks (2006) found EE to be concerned primarily with “how individuals employ themselves in the performance of their job” (p. 602). The emphasis on productivity pivoted the discussion away from what individuals bring to employers and toward how organizations control employee output, possibly contributing to misconceptions around the complexity of the EE construct (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Kahn’s (1990) original definition was agnostic toward an increase in organizational efficiency and productivity, and was more concerned with understanding what leads to positive human behaviors (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017). Kahn (1990) pointed to job satisfaction, interpersonal relationships, and other influences as determinants to the level of engagement an employee decides to dedicate to the organization. Research by Markos and Sridevi (2010) suggests organizational leaders are beginning to shift attention back toward individuals. Developing an employee's autonomy and encouraging their engagement may actually lead to greater performance for both the individual and the organization (Antony, 2018; Michlitsch, 2000). Anitha (2014) suggests that individuals within organizations are the one factor that "cannot be duplicated or imitated by the competitors" and should be "managed and engaged properly" (p. 309).

Despite the interest in EE, finding a clear construct called "engagement" is problematic. Fletcher (2015) complained "there is no single universally accepted and utilized engagement construct" (p. 6). Macey and Schneider (2008) found the idea "compelling on the surface," but muddied by practitioners due to a "bottom-up" notion (p. 3). Shuck and Wollard (2010) found the concept of engagement to be misunderstood due to the complexity of the issues surrounding it. Engagement may refer to a behavior state displayed through performance standards, a psychological state displayed through mood or commitment, or a combination (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Anthony-McMann et al. (2017) described engagement as coming from the positive psychology movement. They discussed an inward energy, as opposed to something necessarily external. Other researchers focused on behaviors (Kahn, 1990; Nimon et al., 2011; Saks, 2006; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Tying the two factors together, Fletcher (2015) claimed "the experience is psychological, yet the consequences are behavioural" (p. 5–6). Several researchers combined cognitive, behavioral, and emotional factors in their definitions of engagement (Kahn, 1990; Nimon et al., 2011; Saks, 2006; Seijts & Crim, 2006; Shuck et al., 2016).

For this study, the definition used for EE was seen as “a high-order factor, supported by emotional, behavioral, and cognitive factors” (Shuck et al., 2016) and drew heavily from Kahn’s (1990) definition of EE as the “harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles” (p. 694) wherein “people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances… the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's ‘preferred self’ in task behaviors” (p. 700). Seijts & Crim (2006) further defined engagement as being “emotionally connected to the organization and cognitively vigilant… fully involved in, and enthusiastic about, his or her work” (p. 1). This definition was chosen because it helps understand the job resources legal assistants bring to address job demands in the legal environment to engage in their work.

Organizational success and EE

As a primarily commercial construct, organizations have assumed EE has a link with job performance, employee well-being, and, hence, organizational success, positive shareholder returns, and competitive advantage (Kwan & Park, 2019; Mackay et al., 2017; Saks, 2006). Some research shows engagement may lead to a competitive advantage (Anitha, 2014; Anthony-McMann et al. 2017; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Michlitsch, 2000) and it is, therefore, valuable to allocate resources to engagement practices (Rich et al., 2010). Engagement is also shown to increase the performance of individuals. EE theorizes that the energy and involvement state will translate into higher performance, and some studies have shown evidence to support that assumption (Fletcher, 2015). According to Seijts and Crim (2006), engaged employees believe they make a positive impact—up to 50% more than do their unengaged colleagues—for their organizations in product quality, customer service, and lower costs. They further state that 84% of employees who identify as fully engaged believe they can improve the quality of their organization’s products, 72% feel they can improve their organization’s customer relations, and 68% feel they can lower costs for their organizational units. Despite these perceptions of engagement, the actual link between engagement and performance does not seem to be completely clear (Knight et al., 2017; Rich et al., 2010).

Balancing EE strategies between organizations and individuals

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify strategies used by legal assistants to engage, stay engaged, and reengage, when appropriate, in their work, in particular when common organizational efforts fall short or do not exist. A review of the literature on engagement shows a primary focus on what organizations can do to engage employees (Anitha, 2014; Anthony-McMann et al., 2017; Gallup, 2017a; Kelleher, 2011; Kwan & Park, 2019; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Neff, 2002; Saks, 2006). Langelaan et al. (2006) suggest even those organizations that do provide EE strategies may not see 100% engagement; each individual is unique and will respond to organizational strategies in unique ways. Very little research exists exploring what workers can do to remain engaged, in particular legal assistants working in law firms. Kahn’s (1990) original conceptualization of engagement focused on an individual’s relationship with work engagement. This study will look at legal assistants’ roles in choosing strategies to engage and to reengage when they become disengaged.

The study of EE is relatively new, “with a sparse and diverse theoretical and empirically demonstrated nomological net” (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p. 3). Of the research available, much of it focuses on what *organizations* can do to engage workers, including coaching, providing constructive feedback, strengths intervention, and celebrating successes (Anitha, 2014; Anthony-McMann et al., 2017; Gallup, 2017a; Kelleher, 2011; Kwan & Park, 2019; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Neff, 2002; Saks, 2006). Researchers have attempted to create lists of practical solutions for organizations to build and maintain an engaged workforce, such as creating a climate for employees to perform up to their potential, management alignment of career development, job design, clear goals, training programs that are tailored to job demands and individual work roles, and creating a learning culture (Antony, 2018; Seijts & Crim, 2006; Fletcher, 2015; Khan, 2015; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Shuck et al., 2014). There is, however, little in the literature about the role *employees* play in choosing strategies to engage and remain engaged. There is a gap in the literature where research asks employees what they perceive to be their personal obligation to engage, remain engaged, and reengage when appropriate. The research gap extends to finding strategies employed by fully engaged workers to engage and remain engaged in their work. To be fully engaged may be defined as bringing one's full and authentic self to one's work roles, and putting one's full energy and passion into the accomplishment of work tasks to the point of going beyond the call of duty (Fletcher, 2015; Glavas, 2016; Kahn, 1990; Leroy et al., 2013; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; McBain, 2007; Seijts & Crim, 2006). Kahn (1990) first operationalized the concept of EE as "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles…[T]he simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task behaviors that promote…full role performances" (p. 694, 700). Kahn's definition of engagement implies that individuals share the role of being engaged with their employer, and may even hold the primary responsibility. Valentin et al. (2015) suggested EE may be viewed on a continuum, indicating EE within individuals may ebb and flow, requiring cognitive awareness and some development of employable strategies to assist workers' efforts to remain engaged in their work.

Focusing solely on what organizations can do to encourage EE without understanding the fundamental strategies employees bring with them may result in organizational failures around

EE interventions. Markos and Sridevi (2010) found EE to be a two-way agreement between an employee and employer. It has been observed that, even in the same organization providing the same EE support, some workers are fully engaged and some are not (Langelaan et al., 2006). Additionally, people are affected by their nonwork lives, which may impact their desires to be fully engaged in their work lives (Kahn, 1990). Therefore, organizational support alone is not enough to ensure full employee engagement. Markos and Sridevi (2010) suggested that organizations must reach out to employees to understand both sides of the engagement puzzle. Fully engaged employees bring something of themselves to their work. They bring learned strategies to become, remain, and reengage in their work. Organizations may benefit from understanding EE strategies workers develop and employ. These strategies may be sharable with other workers through careful design of HRD interventions. Organizations may also find ways to better support the engagement strategies employees bring to their work.

Benefits of EE

Employees and organizations may have different understandings of what EE means and how it is measured. Some research indicates that organizations rate their employees as more fully engaged than employees rate themselves (Shuck et al., 2010). Having a clear understanding of what EE means to both employees and organizations may aid in focusing intervention design, allowing HRM professionals to rely more on methodology than on luck (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Understanding the strategies highly engaged employees use to be fully engaged in their work may help HRD professionals design interventions to engage, reengage, and maintain engagement among employees.

There appears to be a high value for organizations to make sure their employees are fully engaged. Forstenlechner et al. (2008) found that lower turnover rates may result from a fully engaged workforce. Studies also show that about 85% of all workers worldwide are not fully engaged in their work (Gallup, 2017b; Seijts & Crim, 2006). Seijts and Crim (2006) reported that professional services workers who are not engaged produce 23% less revenue than their engaged colleagues, while those who are actively disengaged produce 28% less revenue than those who are engaged, indicating that EE may lead to higher performance results.

There may also be intrinsic value to workers who are fully engaged in their primary work roles. Research by Oswald et al. (2015) indicates engagement efforts may bring more happiness to employees, which may result in higher individual and organizational output A perceived value, such as happiness at work, may be a benefit, and therefore an inducement, to employ individual EE strategies (Ongwattanakul et al., 2012).

Statement of the Problem

Engaged employees are generally more productive (Shuck et al., 2014; Anitha, 2014; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Fletcher, 2015), making the study of EE important to human resource development (HRD) practitioners. Career development opportunities, including career advancement, is one area researchers have identified as an engagement practice (Anitha, J., 2014; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Saks, 2006). One cause of employee disengagement is the lack of hierarchical mobility opportunities (Antony, 2018, Khan, 2015). Engagement has been described as employees expressing their full selves in role performance, while disengagement is the active withdrawal of preferred dimensions of one's self (Kahn, 1990). Research suggests that full engagement 100% of the time is an ideal that is impossible to expect (Bakker et al., 2008; Kwan & Park, 2019; Marathe et al., 2019). Everyone experiences changes in energy flows toward work-related activities. Unengaged employees are those who are at the lower end of the energy scale with regards to engaging fully in their work.

These unengaged employees are not bringing their full, authentic selves to their work roles and are just "spinning their wheels," spreading their unhappiness, and generally are disinterested in the success of the organization, thus undercutting their engaged colleagues (Gallup, 2017a; Markos & Sridevi, 2010).

Flat organizations are organizations with few layers between individual contributors (IC) and senior management (Rajan & Wulf, 2006). Having only a few layers between ICs and senior management, flat organizations provide a difficult environment for career advancement and may lead to higher disengagement and turnover rates (Antony, 2018). Law firms are one example of organizations which operate with a flat organizational structure; there is little opportunity to move up or to move laterally, potentially negatively affecting engagement levels of support staff employees (Forstenlechner et al., 2008). Working within flat organizational structures may have an effect on EE for legal assistants. Many legal assistants spend long careers within law firms. For example, the average tenure for a legal assistant at one particular firm is 13 years (S. Astrup, personal communication, August 5, 2019). Legal assistants who work in this environment for the majority of their careers may find it difficult to move to positions of higher responsibility and challenge, and would therefore need to find other ways to engage in their work. There is little in the literature concerning EE for legal assistants working in a hierarchically flat organization. It is unclear how legal assistants engage in their work when one element common to engagement studies – career advancement opportunities – is unavailable.

There is also very little in the literature regarding the balance of responsibility for engagement strategies between employees and organizations. For example, it is unclear whether it is in the province of organizations to provide engagement opportunities such as career advancement or if employees are responsible for having their own engagement strategies when the organization does not provide them. This balance is not fully understood. Much of the popular business literature, as well as much academic literature, discusses the duty of the organization to engage their employees without addressing the employees' obligation to find ways to engage (Anitha, 2014; Gallup, 2017a; Kelleher, 2011; Kwan & Park, 2019; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Neff, 2002; Saks, 2006). Markos and Sridevi (2010) conceded EE discussions are shifting toward the employees' side, as a "two-way, mutual process" between the organization and its workers (p. 90), but went on to discuss more ways organizations can bolster EE. There is very little research about what employees can do to become and remain engaged, and to reengage when full engagement wanes.

This study sought to understand what engagement strategies legal assistants bring to a law firm, regardless of what the firm gives back to the legal assistant. According to Kahn (1990) and Shuck and Wollard (2010), engagement is an individual construct; looking at surveys across the organization "distorts the nature of the concept" (Shuck & Wollard, 2010, p. 105). The interest of this study was to investigate strategies legal assistants bring to manage engagement and mitigate episodes of loss of engagement, whether defined as low engagement or disengagement. Of interest to this study in the deployment of personal strategies was the employee's individual perceptions of engagement and loss of engagement, under the assumption that engagement is a continuum with varying levels from full engagement to active disengagement (Valentin et al., 2015).

Value to HRD practice

The study of individual EE strategies in organizations lacking traditional career mobility options may be of interest to HRD professionals. Research shows that corporate organizations are flattening, providing fewer avenues for career growth (Guadalupe & Wulf, 2010; Rajan &

Wulf, 2006). This phenomenon, combined with the rise of the boundaryless career where employees move from employer to employer, puts more pressure on HRD professionals to understand the needs of the modern workforce (Arthur, 1994; Inkson & Arthur, 2001; Kerno & Kuznia, 2007). Understanding what strategies employees bring to organizations and utilize to engage, reengage, and maintain engagement will help HRD professionals develop programs that support an employee's efforts in individual engagement with the organization. It may be important for managers to support engagement strategies as a way to maintain an employee's desires to stay engaged (Antony, 2018, Neff, 2002). Building an understanding of what strategies employees bring with them to their organizations will also assist human resources (HR) professionals and hiring managers in identifying appropriate candidates. Employees who are highly engaged may be a competitive advantage to an organization (Anitha, 2014; Shuck et al., 2010). Fully engaged employees may bring up to 28% more revenue to organizations, making improved engagement a clear value to organizational growth (Gallup, 2017a; Seijts & Crim, 2006). Developing a means to identify engagement strategies in potential employees may aid hiring managers in screening candidates.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the strategies employed by highly engaged legal assistants to engage, remain engaged, and reengage when necessary in their work. A basic qualitative study was chosen as the means to understand the phenomenon of EE, and, in particular, EE strategies legal assistants employ to engage and remain engaged in their work (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Primary Research Questions

In a basic qualitative study, the "research question is designed to illicit information about the concept" so as to understand how individuals create meaning from a particular phenomenon (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 90). This study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What strategies do legal assistants employ to engage, remain engaged, or reengage when appropriate?

RQ2: What are the drivers that cause legal assistants to employ engagement strategies to engage or reengage when disengagement happens?

There is very little research that seeks to understand the perceptions of workers and their strategies of engagement. A qualitative study was well-suited to discovering perceptions workers have of full engagement, less-than-full engagement, and active disengagement, and the strategies workers use to be engaged. Through the use of a basic qualitative design, this study aimed to uncover insights into workers' strategies around engagement and the perceptions workers may have that caused them to employ these strategies.

Significance of the Study

This study has significance for future research and practice in the area of EE as it relates to the balance between the obligation of organizations and that of individuals to provide the right environment for engagement. This study focused on legal assistants working in law firms, which are considered flat organizations. Flat organizations, by design, limit traditional career development, one element organizations may use to foster EE (Forstenlechner et al., 2008). Keeping employees engaged in their work has been defined as a critical element to the success of organizations (Markos & Sridevi, 2010; McBain, 2007; Shuck et al., 2010; Shuck et al., 2014). People provide the competitive advantage businesses are looking for (Anitha, 2014). Engaged employees add significantly to the profits of businesses while actively disengaged employees cost organizations millions, and the overall economy many billions of dollars each year (Gallup, 2017b; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Valentin et al., 2015). Currently only a minority of all employees, that is <15%, are fully engaged in their work (Gallup, 2017a; Gallup, 2017b; Seijts & Crim, 2006), thereby costing organizations significant profits. The majority of the literature speaks to what organizations can do to improve EE (Anitha, 2014; Gallup, 2017b; Kelleher, 2011; Kwan & Park, 2019; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Neff, 2002; Saks, 2006), although most definitions of EE identify the individual as responsible for being engaged (Kahn, 1990; Kwan & Park, 2019; Langelaan et al., 2006; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Focusing on individuals' skill sets and needs will help organizations get more benefit from their engagement efforts (Saks, 2006; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Some researchers are unsure of the clarity HRD professionals may receive from engagement research (Fletcher, 2015). At the same time, others are calling for more attention to practical applications of engagement research (Kwan & Park, 2019).

Research

This study focused on engagement strategies employed by legal assistants in their primary work roles who work in law firms. Future research could broaden the results of this study to look at engagement strategies employed by non-legal assistants in law firms or employees in flat organizations that are not law firms. Since law firms are considered flat organizations (Forstenlechner et al., 2008), a study of engagement strategies employed by workers in hierarchically rich organizations with many levels and greater career development opportunities may also be of interest. This study primarily used participants who were active within professional organizations. Future research may center around whether active members of professional organizations are more engaged in their regular work roles than employees who are not active in professional organizations.

Much of the literature provides lists of ways organizations can enhance or develop engagement in their employees (Antony, 2018; Gallup, 2017a; Kelleher, 2011; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Saks, 2006). Shuck and Wollard (2010) note that this is a sort of broad, scattered approach and may be detrimental to developing a coherent EE strategy. Additionally, Knight et al. (2017) point out there is very little data available to determine whether any of these interventions is effective. It is also unclear whether engaged employees work as productively in any environment. This study will investigate strategies legal assistants employ to engage, reengage, and remain engaged in an environment that does not provide traditional forms of career development support.

Practice

Many research and popular business articles use a wide-ranging approach to defining what organizations can do to support EE without taking into account the strategies employees bring with them (Anitha, 2014; Gallup, 2017a; Kelleher, 2011; Kwan & Park, 2019; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Neff, 2002; Saks, 2006). This study's results may help HRD professionals focus their talent development on programs tailored to the needs and strengths of the employees they have, with particular attention to those in flat organizations.

By understanding and recognizing that fully engaged employees bring their own strategies to their organizations, managers can pair workers together to better leverage their strengths. Managers can better develop their teams to take advantage of each individual's contribution to the work. According to Antony (2018), engaged employees need management support to enable them to employ successful strategies if they are to remain engaged.

Hiring managers may be able to use the results of this study to identify candidates who use engagement strategies that will make their organizations more successful. Managers typically hire for specific skill sets. Engagement strategies represent unique skill sets employees bring with them to their work. These skill sets help make organizations more successful (Anitha, 2014; Fletcher, 2015; Kahn, 1990). Being aware that employees bring their own successful engagement strategies may help hiring managers focus on candidates who will bring the appropriate skill sets with them to the organization.

Legal assistants are considered knowledge workers because their main work activities require high-level cognitive skills and working with complex information (Heery & Noon., 2017). To have space to provide creative solutions in the work they perform, knowledge workers perform best in an atmosphere that supports autonomy (Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Valentin et al., 2015). Fletcher (2015) found "engagement [to be] beneficial for individual performance" among knowledge workers (p. 4). Seijts and Crim (2006) note that engaged knowledge workers "believe that they can make a difference in the organizations they work for" (p. 2). Managers hold the key to empowering individuals to be engaged (Shuck et al., 2014). Managers who understand the strategies their workers employ may find that encouraging individuals to employ their own strategies will improve their sense of autonomy and purpose, and may improve performance outcomes.

This study may provide new insights that will assist HRD professionals working with legal assistants in developing better practical applications to engagement interventions. Each legal assistant may display different levels of engagement, and therefore different strategies. This study may reveal both intrinsic and extrinsic strategies. Langelaan et al. (2006) reported that not all employees at a given organization exhibit similar levels of engagement. Organizations creating a “one size fits all” approach to EE will find success to be difficult, at best. EE must be seen as a two-way process between employer and employee, with the employee taking responsibility for the strategies they choose to employ (Markos & Sridevi, 2010). By identifying the role individuals must play for being and remaining engaged, HRD professionals may develop better, more targeted activities that support individuals’ engagement strategies.

Learning professionals can design learning tools that leverage employee strategies. Organizations must understand individual needs when designing programs for improving engagement (Saks, 2006; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). This study may help learning professionals design tools that tap into employees’ need for autonomy (Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Shuck et al., 2014; Valentin et al., 2015) as well as their need for social connectedness (Fletcher, 2015; Saks, 2006). By understanding the role individual employees must play to engage, coupled with each individual’s personal strategies, learning professionals can create tools that capture teamwork and strategy sharing, thus fostering an engagement culture that leverages the inherent skillsets individuals bring to the organization while building new skillsets in other individuals.

Theoretical Framework

Macey and Schneider (2008) found EE to be a relatively new construct with a rather broad, yet incomplete theoretical foundation. Despite its incompleteness and the lack of consensus on its definition (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017; Fletcher; 2015; Kahn, 1990; Macey and Schneider, 2008; Nimon et al., 2011; Saks, 2006; Seijts & Crim, 2006; Shuck et al., 2016 Shuck & Wollard, 2010), the study of EE has grown in complexity (Shuck et al., 2014). Several theories and frameworks surrounding EE will be briefly introduced here and described in further detail in Chapter 2.

Commitment and OCB

As a construct, Markos and Sridevi (2010) found EE may have emanated from commitment theory and organizational citizen behavior (OCB), which posit that "efficiency and productivity lie within the employee's ability and commitment" (p. 89). Markos and Sridevi noted, however, that neither concept clearly accounts for the two-way nature of engagement between organization and employee. Additionally, OCB includes voluntary behaviors, but according to Saks (2006), EE is about formal role performance.

Self-determination Theory

Researchers have also tried to frame EE using self-determination theory (SDT) (Leroy et al., 2013). According to Leroy et al. (2013), SDT suggests that workers internalize work tasks and consciously choose to engage or not. Further, SDT speculates that individuals become more engaged as they internalize their core sense of their preferred self (Kahn, 1990; Leroy et al., 2013). STD may provide insights into the choices employees make to demonstrate engagement (Valentin et al., 2015), though SDT alone does not explain why the choices are made or how they are made (Shuck et al., 2014; Valentin et al., 2015; Zigarmi et al., 2009).

Work passion

A new framework to explain EE, called work passion, which focuses on factors that influence an employee's full presence in the workplace, was introduced by Zigarmi et al. (2009). Work passion emphasizes a state of well-being through constant appraisals of the situations that bring about full engagement (Zigarmi et al., 2009). Although work passion maintains a strong emphasis on the role of the individual to be and remain engaged, Shuck and Wollard (2010) argued that work passion is no different than EE and is simply a reinterpretation for commercial purposes.

Neuroscience

Some researchers have tried to explain EE through the study of neuroscience, incorporating a model of threats and rewards, tying self-regulation and motivation (Martin-Kniep, 2010; Rock & Tang, 2009). Neuroscientific research requires the testing of biological markers (Rock & Tang, 2009), making measurement impractical for widespread implementation. Additionally, the models do not suffice for explaining strategies workers bring with them to organizations.

Job demands and resources

Amid the cacophony of ideas around EE is job demands-resources (JD-R). JD-R is a framework that has gotten a lot of attention in the EE literature (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001; Kwan & Park, 2019; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). JD-R refocuses "the influence of job demands on EE" and the balance job resources, in particular personal resources, brings to job demands (Kwan & Park, 2019, p. 361; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). It is the personal resources workers bring to the job and how those resources translate into strategies of engagement that is of interest to this study. Although researchers have sought to explain the psychological resources workers bring to organizations, it is the transformation of those psychological resources into cognitive strategies that eventually translates into EE (Kahn, 1990). It is also through the transformation of psychological resources into cognitive action that provides insight into what actions HRD professionals can take to support workers in being and remaining engaged, and reengaging when appropriate in their work. Understanding that workers bring their own set of resources, and examples of what those resources look like, may add to how HRD professionals view EE.

Primary framework for this study

The primary theoretical framework of this study was the JD-R model. Personal job resources include perceptions of self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience. By understanding the resources individuals bring with them to job tasks and job roles, organizations can better understand how to aid workers in the development of personal and job resources and increase individuals' strengths (Knight et al., 2017; Kwan & Park, 2019). Gaining insights into individuals' strategies to engage may help organizations understand how individuals deal with job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Understanding how individuals choose to engage, through personal strategies, may improve organizational performance. There is some evidence that employees with high EE characteristics, such as work identification and high energy levels, seem to perform better due to having more available resources (Bakker et al., 2008).

Research Design

This study was conducted using a basic qualitative design paradigm. Qualitative studies are founded on the belief that knowledge is built, or constructed, by people on an ongoing basis through experiences and activities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative studies provide an elegant and insightful framework for understanding human phenomena (Patton, 2002). The phenomenon under investigation in this study was EE, with particular emphasis on the individual worker's strategies for becoming and remaining engaged. This study sought to describe an individual's willingness to accept his or her own responsibility with the phenomenon of EE, and by doing so, provide a better understanding for organizations to support engaged workers. A basic qualitative study provides the best perspective for building knowledge based on the workers' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Study participants

The study drew a sample of legal assistants who self-identified as highly engaged at least 30 hours per week over the past 26 weeks. Participants completed the Employment Engagement Scale (EES) (Shuck et al., 2016) as a tool to determine their level of engagement in their work. A purposeful sample selection was used in an effort to identify information-rich cases which provided an in-depth understanding of an individual's personal strategies in EE. Participants were initially drawn from a professional organization of legal assistants, NALS, in the Seattle, Washington area. Snowballing was also used. The researcher coordinated with the president of NALS of Washington to identify volunteers. Although it may be reasonable to assume that legal assistants who are interested enough in their careers to join a professional organization are interested enough in their careers to engage in their work, there is no research to support this assumption, therefore the EES was used as a demographic tool to identify the level of self-reported engagement perceived by each legal assistant. When determining sample size, Patton (2002) said "it depends…there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry" and that a sample size needs to be judged in context and must support the purpose of the study (p. 244). Creswell (2014) suggested stopping when all categories or themes are saturated. For the purposes of this study, a sample size of 16 individuals were interviewed. A demographic survey was given to each participant to help determine the average tenure in the legal field, as well as other aspects of experience.

Data collection methods

The study's main method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews begin with a limited set of questions posed to each interviewee, but allows the researcher to follow the line of responses and provides the flexibility for follow-up questions

(Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interviewing allows the researcher to elicit each individual's personal experiences (Creswell, 2014). More details about the specific design of this study are provided in Chapter 3.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed iteratively as it was collected allowing for data refinement and the following of varying lines of questioning during interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Data analysis was inductive and comparative using a spiral method to iteratively and cyclically analyze the data. This process required organizing the data; developing classifications and themes; reviewing and creating memos; describing and interpreting the data to discover meaning (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, Saldaña, 2016).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was strengthened through the collection of rich data. The analysis included direct quotes from many participants to ensure richness and provide a connection between the data and the research questions (Anney, 2014; Elo et al., 2014). This study was also strengthened through the use of triangulation through multiple informants (Anney, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and member checks (Anney, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Ethical considerations

Approval from the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained before participant recruitment was launched or data were collected (see Appendix A). All ethical safeguards were appropriately detailed in the IRB application. All data were electronically stored in an encrypted and protected cloud-based location. Participant names were replaced with pseudonyms.

Assumptions, Delimitations, Limitations

This study included the assumption that people being interviewed responded candidly and honestly about their work experiences, as it relates to engagement, periods of disengagement, and their strategies around those experiences. The EE literature is replete with recommendations on tactics organizations can employ to increase and encourage engagement by their workers. This study assumed there are duties and measures employees can and do take to engage in their work. There was also an assumption knowing and recognizing this responsibility and resultant actions will benefit HRD professionals and bring balance to the EE equation.

A delimitation of this study was that participants were volunteers. In addition, the participant pool was female. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the job classification of legal assistants is 84% female ("Paralegals /Legal Assistants", 2019). The participants may not represent all legal assistants and their experiences. In addition, all participants worked at law firms and were not necessarily representative of all categories of workers. One outcome of this study was the discovery of strategies utilized in flat organizations where traditional concepts of engagement support are not fully provided, such as can be found in law firms. The participants may not represent employees in other environments or even similar environments within other industries.

The researcher for this study had worked in the legal field for over 13 years, and in flat organizations for over 30 years. It is likely he had formed both conscious and unconscious biases around HRD interventions designed for larger, hierarchical organizations. The choice of literature for discussion in Chapter 2 may also represent some form of bias. In qualitative inquiry, it is not possible to separate the instrument of analysis from the researcher, nor is it desirable to attempt to (Patton, 2002, Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). These biases may have crept into the coding and analysis of the data. Chapter 3 discusses the methods and cautions the researcher took to assure an accurate representation of the participants' perceptions and experiences.

The scope of this study was limited to legal assistants in law firms located in Seattle, Washington, Portland, Oregon, Sacramento, California, and San Diego, California. There were 16 participants who responded to semi-structured interviews. The results of the data collected cannot be generalized beyond the participants themselves and some strategies uncovered may be unique to the interviewees. The desired outcome was to provide evidence of the workers' role in developing their own strategies for engagement in their work roles and for organizations to recognize the workers' responsibility so as to design organizational programs and interventions in a balanced manner.

Summary

This study sought to understand the role legal assistants play in engaging in their work, using a qualitative method. Many studies describe engagement as an individual's physical, emotional, and cognitive efforts within a work role (Kahn, 1990; Shuck et al., 2016; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Other studies suggest the need for finding a balance between the employee and the organization (Markos & Sridevi, 2010). None of the studies included in the literature review, however, uncovered workers' perception of their responsibility to engage and what strategies workers use to become engaged, remain engaged, and reengage when appropriate, in their work. The results of this study may benefit multiple stakeholders, including HRD professionals, hiring managers, and organization leaders. Outcomes of this study may be of especial interest to those who are looking for balance in the design or improvement of engagement programs and interventions.

Chapter 2 is a comprehensive review of the literature on EE and associated theoretical foundations. The primary focus of Chapter 2 is on the gap between organizational and individual responsibility when it comes to developing engagement strategies. The literature review will show that although engagement is often defined along the lines of what an individual brings to an organization, the suggestions tend to point to what organizations can do to encourage engagement. Chapter 2 will clarify how his study contributes to the literature. Chapter 3 discusses the research design in more detail, including how the participants were selected and how the interviews were conducted. The remaining two chapters discuss the actual research and findings. Chapter 4 discusses the results and Chapter 5 is an interpretation of the findings and how they may be applied to research and practice.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined to provide context to the reader:

Disengagement: Actively uncoupling oneself from their work roles and displaying less energy in their organizational obligations (Kahn, 1990), displaying high levels of threat activity such as anxiety, depression, sadness, and mind wandering (Rock & Tang, 2009).

Employee engagement: The harnessing of an organization's employees to their work roles physically, emotionally, and cognitively, in such a way as to bring their full and true selves to their various work roles while fully understanding the requirements of the business and the benefits the employee provides the organization (Kahn, 1990; Seijts & Crim, 2006; Shuck et al., 2016).

Flat organizations: Organizations with few layers between individual contributors (IC) and senior management (Rajan & Wulf, 2006).

HRD professional: Those employed by an organization with the intent to develop an organization's workforce, in particular to improve engagement practices, and may or may not have the title of human resource development.

Knowledge worker: An employee whose main work activities require high-level cognitive skills and systematic thinking involving the synthesizing and processing of information, such as managing client communications and analyzing data (Heery & Noon., 2017).

Low engagement: When energy levels are low and job demands exceed job resources to the point of an individual putting less of themselves into their job role, while remaining cognitively vigilant of organizational needs.

Reengage: Moving through the continuum from disengaged or low engaged to fully engaged.

Worker: Worker and employee are used interchangeably to represent one who is employed by an organization and whose work is expected to benefit that organization in some way.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Understanding the construct under study is vital to the success of a research project. This study focuses on employee engagement (EE). In particular, this study focuses on an individual's responsibility to develop strategies he or she employs to be engaged, remain engaged, and reengage, when necessary, in their work. The term *employee engagement* has been around since Kahn (1990), but there is little in the literature before 2008. Mackay, et al. (2017) performed a literature search of PsycINFO/Business Source Elite using the terms "employee engagement" and "work engagement." The search results returned 112 articles from the decade between 1990–2000. This may explain why there are competing definitions of what EE is or if it even exists as an independent construct (Fletcher, 2015; Knight et al., 2017; Kwan & Park, 2019; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Mackay et al., 2017; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). The following review of the literature will help bring this debate into the context of this study. This review will also show that although EE was originally conceived as an individual's responsibility to his or her organization, over time, many prescriptions have been developed with the organization as the driver and the individual as the recipient of something that will make him or her engage in their work. This chapter will review this phenomenon. It is the point of view of this researcher that individuals make cognitive choices about how they will engage in their work, and hence, develop personal and independent strategies to be as fully engaged as possible. An example of a cognitive strategy includes job crafting which requires a cognitive awareness of job tasks, job task meanings, and organizational business needs (Berg et al., 2007).

This literature review will focus on prior research conducted on EE and associated topics. The research will cover relevant frameworks from which to view EE, discuss measurement tools used to determine EE, and set the context for this particular study.

Interest in employee engagement

Interest in EE has been growing vigorously among organizational development practitioners over the past decade or so (Mackay et al., 2017; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Saks, 2006; Shuck et al., 2016). According to Valentin et al. (2015), EE has had a strong position with human resource management (HRM) practitioners for much of that time, but similar interest is now growing quickly among human resource development (HRD) professionals. Of the more than 1,000 articles in the search performed by Mackay, et al. (2017) for the time period of 2001–2011, 80% were "non-empirical papers authored by human resource practitioners" (p. 108). The majority of references relate back to commercial consultancy and survey firms such as the Gallup Organization, the Australian Institute of Management, the Institute for Employment Studies, Development Dimensions International, the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore, and members of the American Society for Training and Development (Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Saks, 2006; Shuck & Wollard, 2010; Zigarmi et al., 2009).

Although "employee engagement is becoming a popular term among human resource management and development consultants, internal communications practitioners, and business conference presenters" (Shuck & Wollard, 2010, p. 89), there have been authors within the academic community who have written on the topic, though sometimes under different contexts, such as burnout, job involvement, or employee well-being (Zigarmi et al., 2009, p. 302). Kahn (1990) appears to be the first to have used the term *employee engagement*. Despite this background, academic attention to EE appears to have lagged behind commercial interest. The lack of theory and empirical research has led some to conjecture whether EE is just a passing fad or another "flavor of the month," and not so much an academic construct (Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Saks, 2006; Shuck & Wollard, 2010).

As a primarily commercial construct, organizations seem to have assumed a link with job performance, employee well-being, and, hence, organizational success, positive shareholder returns, and competitive advantage (Kwan & Park, 2019; Mackay et al., 2017; Saks, 2006). HR professionals are looking to EE as a "compilation of attitudes [deemed] to be the cornerstones of a highly performing workforce" (Mackay et al., 2017, p. 108) and is at the heart of many talent development initiatives (Kwan & Park, 2019).

Perhaps due to the commercial focus of the construct, which lacks formal discipline, academic researchers are taking a more serious look at EE (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Lately, HRD research has displayed a strong interest in investigating EE using work-related variables. There have been efforts to investigate the conditions, antecedents, and potential outcomes of EE (Kwan & Park, 2019). To reach some form of acceptable academic consensus, though, there needs to be a clear definition of exactly what EE is or if it even exists. Gaining consensus seems to be problematic.

Defining employee engagement

The construct of EE is relatively new, especially to academic research (Macey & Schneider, 2008). As will be shown below, many have tried to define EE, yet so far, there is no universally accepted definition of the construct (Fletcher, 2015; Markos & Sridevi, 2010). Researchers have, however, defined in general terms how they see EE within their individual studies. This study took a holistic approach to defining EE, using what other researchers have defined. For this reason, it is important to understand where the current research on EE stands in this regard, what the various viewpoints are, and the role of individual responsibility in EE.

Original conceptualization

Kahn (1990) defined the term “employee engagement” as “the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles…[in which] people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). Role performance is interpreted to mean formal role, and not voluntary or extra-role behavior, such as behaviors defined in organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (Saks, 2006; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Kahn also spoke of both utilizing and displaying what he termed a “preferred self” that would encourage positive connections to both individuals in the organization and to the tasks required of the work (Kahn, 1990, p. 700). According to Kahn, engagement requires more than the accomplishment of tasks, but a full and active participation within the organization, including a full presence, physically, cognitively, and emotionally. In essence, engagement is an individual’s responsibility to invest his or her complete self in their applicable work roles (Rich et al., 2010).

Since Kahn’s initial definition of EE, others, both commercial practitioners and academic researchers, have developed additional layers to the construct. The Gallup Organization likens EE to an employees’ positive emotional attachment and commitment to the organization (Gallup, 2017a). Some researchers have called EE a positive emotional state workers direct toward their organization, their coworkers, and their job tasks, characterized by being committed and fascinated by their work, showing vigor, dedication, and absorption (Bakker et al., 2008; González-Romá et al., 2006; Martin-Kniep, 2010; Schaufeli et al., 2002). These positive feelings are believed to lead to feelings of fulfillment, dedication to their organizations, and higher productivity (Bakker et al., 2008; González-Romá et al., 2006; Marathe et al., 2019; Rock & Tang, 2009; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Engagement in this sense seems to go beyond motivation. It appears to be something the employee offers freely to the organization and cannot be forced on employees. The employee has responsibility and control over their engagement (Rock & Tang, 2009). Organizations may be interested in understanding what employees bring and how organizations can support the "factors that can lead to and sustain positive human behaviors and the related positive consequences of those behaviors" (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017, p. 165).

Difficulty in defining EE as a construct

Perhaps, in part due to the "bottom-up" approach development the EE construct has taken (Macey & Schneider, 2008), understanding the process employees take to become engaged has become more and more ambiguous (Nimon et al., 2011). Referring to EE as a "folk term," Macey and Schneider (2008) noted that "the meaning of engagement is unclear" (p. 3); it could be "a psychological state…a performance construct…or some combination of the above" (p. 5). This confusion leads to a definition that becomes "elusive…compromis[ing] its utility both in theory and as an actionable phenomenon" (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017, p. 164), thereby giving way to a definition weighted toward organizations driving higher efficiencies and productivity through the construct of EE. Most commercial interest has been around the idea of EE as an organizational commitment concept, while academic writers have investigated job commitment and job requirements (Zigarmi et al., 2009). Kahn's (1990) original definition was agnostic toward an increase in organizational efficiency and productivity, and was more concerned with understanding what leads to positive human behaviors (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017). Others, however, have made productivity the purpose of EE. For example, Saks (2006) found EE to be concerned primarily with "how individuals employ themselves in the performance of their job" (p. 602). The emphasis on productivity has pivoted the discussion away from individual responsibility and toward organizational control, and may contribute to misconceptions around the complexity of the EE construct (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017; Shuck & Wollard, 2010).

EE has also been described as a deep emotional connection an employee feels toward an organization, thereby encouraging a greater work effort on the employee's part (The Conference Board, 2006; Rich et al., 2010). Fully engaged employees have been characterized as having a heightened sense of commitment to an organization and its values to the point of feeling fascinated, inspired, fully involved, and engrossed in their work, going beyond what is required and performing their roles with excellence (Anitha, 2014; Bakker et al., 2008; Seijts & Crim, 2006). It is also important to understand that engagement may be manifest inwardly through attention to the tasks at hand. Not all engagement can be measured outwardly (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017).

There appears to be agreement between academics and practitioners that "engaged employees are those who are emotionally connected to the organization and cognitively vigilant" (Seijts & Crim, 2006, p. 1). Further strengthening the commercial value of engagement, many see engaged employees as those who are cognitively aware of business needs and have a heightened desire to see their organization meet desired outcomes (Gallup, 2017a; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Shuck & Wollard, 2010; Thomas 2009). This places EE as a crucial construct for organizations to get the most from their highest functioning employees (Markos & Sridevi, 2010). More about productivity and organizational expectations will be discussed in a section below.

EE is often discussed as a single state: either one is engaged or one is not. Despite the various definitions of engagement, most researchers agree that engaged employees display high levels of energy toward the tasks they perform (Bakker et al., 2008). Personal role engagement is full, deep, and immersive, capturing an “authentic and complete expression of ones’ preferred self,” which takes a large amount of an individual’s energy (Fletcher, 2015, p. 6). Valentin et al. (2015) conceptualized EE as being on a continuum, reminding us one may not have the energy it takes to be fully engaged 100% of the time (Bakker et al. 2008; Kwan & Park, 2019; Macey & Schneider, 2008). This view opens the possibility that employees are aware of their position on the continuum at any point in time. This also opens the possibility for individuals to develop strategies to reengage for times when they wander out of full engagement.

What engagement is not

There are various definitions of what EE is. Despite its popularity over the past 30 years, EE has not gained a clear, single definition (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Definitions have wavered between theory and practice and from psychological construct to practical productivity tool (Zigarmi et al., 2009; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). There remain questions about whether EE actually exists as a unique concept or if it is simply the repackaging of currently accepted work-related constructs (Knight et al., 2017; Kwan & Park, 2019; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Mackay et al., 2017; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Additionally, some researchers question if EE is nothing more than a “passing fad” (Shuck & Wollard, 2010, p. 89).

Some HRD scholars have questioned whether EE is nothing more than a new name for job satisfaction, job involvement, or organizational commitment (Mackay et al., 2017). Job satisfaction is really a state of fulfillment and does not elicit the levels of dedication to one’s work or the energetic expressions of behavior, cognition, and emotion, as does EE (Kwan & Park, 2019; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Shuck et al., 2016). Others have taken job satisfaction to be a component of EE, though job satisfaction may be manifested as nothing more than a transactional relationship with the organization (Markos & Sridevi, 2010).

EE is also not the same as job involvement. Job involvement is a cognitive judgment of the need to satisfy task conditions and ties into self-image. This is not the same as the ebbs and flows of the emotional and psychological connections to the work and the organization one experiences with EE (Kwan & Park, 2019; Saks, 2006). EE is about "how individuals employ themselves in the performance of their job" (Saks, 2006, p. 602).

Organizational commitment also differs from EE. Engagement is not an attitude toward an organization, rather EE is an employee's perception of and total absorption in the performance of his or her primary organizational roles (Bakker et al., 2008; Kwan & Park, 2019; Saks, 2006). McBain (2007) points out that commitment may be a part of engagement or may lead to engagement, or it may be a completely different construct.

In addition, EE is not the same as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) in that OCB focuses on informal and extra-role behaviors, where EE focuses on formal role performance (Saks, 2006; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Finally, EE is distinguished from workaholism and type-A behavior. According to Bakker et al. (2008), engaged workers are balanced in their efforts and lack a compulsive drive. "For them work is fun, not an addiction…Engaged employees work hard because they like it and not because they are driven by a strong inner urge they cannot resist" (p. 190).

Alternative views

Researchers, pointing to this lack of consensus in defining EE, have proposed other models to describe work engagement, such as SCARF (status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, fairness), work passion, and high performing employees (HPE). SCARF is based on neuroscience and claims engaged workers experience positive rewards in the brain, while disengaged workers experience high levels of threat (Rock & Tang, 2009). SCARF addresses only the motivations to engage or disengage and does not provide a complete model of full engagement. Work passion was proposed as a reframing of EE that focuses on factors that influence an employee's full presence in the workplace (Nimon et al., 2011) and may even be considered a "higher-order form of engagement" (Valentin et al., 2015, p. 185). Work passion emphasizes a state of well-being through constant appraisals of the situations that bring about full engagement (Zigarmi et al., 2009). Although work passion returns to a strong emphasis on the role of the individual to be and remain engaged, Shuck and Wollard (2010) argued that work passion is no different than EE and is simply a reinterpretation for commercial purposes. HPE is defined differently than EE. HPEs are defined by behavioral factors broken into categories such as personality traits, decisiveness, teamwork, basic skills, and innovation (de Wall & Oudshoorn, 2015). Engagement may have both state-like and trait-like components (Zigarmi et al., 2009).

Another alternative view is regulatory focus theory which describes motivation as striving to meet set goals by either focusing on a reward (promotion focus) or by trying to avoid negative consequences or punishments (prevention focus). These systems act to regulate behaviors depending on which of the systems ranks higher in the view of the individual and the circumstances (Voight & Hirst, 2015). Regulation focus theory, then, describes the motivation which causes an internal state of arousal, which thereby sets or changes one's behaviors (Neff, 2002). Although EE is about adapting behaviors to meet or even exceed organizational goals, according to Shuck and Wollard (2010), regulatory focus theory does not go far enough to explain aspects of EE, including being fully engaged when rewards and punishments are non-existent or are not clearly defined.

Engagement as the opposite of something

The fact there is no common agreement on how to define EE has not prevented researchers from speculating on its opposite. Some researchers believe the roots of current research on EE comes from prior research on burnout (Bakker et al., 2014). According to burnout research, EE is characterized by the opposites of the three dimensions of burnout. Burnout is characterized as exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness, whereas EE is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Bakker et al., 2014; Bakker et al. 2008; González-Romá et al., 2006). Several researchers (Bakker et al., 2008; González-Romá et al., 2006; Schaufeli et al., 2002) found burnout and EE to be antipodes that are, at least to a moderate degree, negatively "sharing about one-quarter to one-third of their variance" (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 87). Some researchers found questionable the claim that burnout and EE are independent constructs (Knight et al., 2017), but should be seen as polar opposites when measured along their core dimensions (González-Romá et al., 2006; Saks, 2006).

Despite the perceived relationships between EE and burnout, some burnout researchers admit the two constructs are independent and should be measured with separate instruments (Bakker et al. 2008; Schaufeli et al., 2002). The two constructs seem to be negatively related, though not perfectly (Langelaan et al. 2006). One school of thought is that EE exists to fill the voids left by feelings of burnout (Bakker et al., 2014). Some researchers pointed out that high levels of engagement may lead to burnout (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Similarly, high levels of burnout may negatively affect EE (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017). Langelaan et al. (2006) found extroversion and neuroticism to be opposite measures for burnout, yet only extroversion played a role in EE, therefore indicating EE and burnout to be interrelated, yet independent constructs.

Anitha (2014) claimed there are three kinds of employees: those who are engaged, those who are not engaged, and those who are actively disengaged. When Kahn (1990) originally described EE, he defined disengagement as its opposite. If engagement is people expressing their full selves in-role performance, disengagement is the withdrawal of preferred dimensions of one's self. Kahn's definition did not use burnout as its opposite. Anthony-McMann et al. (2017) reported that Kahn rejected burnout as being on the same continuum as engagement. Although engagement is about energy, energy is not always projected outwardly. One may exhibit the symptoms of burnout and yet still be fully engaged in the tasks at hand. Although engagement may be measured on a continuum, burnout may not be at the opposite end of engagement. It may just be that individuals cannot be fully engaged 100% of the time (Valentin et al., 2015).

EE appears to be an elusive construct that defies a single universally accepted definition (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017; Fletcher, 2015). Knight et al. (2017) question the existence of EE as a stand-alone construct. Shuck et al. (2016) considered EE as a high-order factor, supported by emotional, behavioral, and cognitive factors. Perhaps it is the "bottom-up" development of the construct that makes EE remain unclear and opens it to misconceptions by the general practitioner population (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Most researchers characterize engagement as being about putting one's full energy and passion into the accomplishment of work tasks, to the point of going beyond the call of duty (Markos & Sridevi, 2010; McBain, 2007; Seijts & Crim, 2006). According to Mackay, et al. (2017), EE may provide insights into how effective employees are on the job, including contextual and focal performance, absenteeism, and turnover intent. Commercial researchers appear to focus on the performance aspects of EE and the unlocking of human performance (Gallup, 2017a; Gallup 2017b; Kelleher, 2011), indicating that "engagement is a strong predictor of organizational performance" (Markos & Sridevi, 2010, p. 90). EE may be influenced by an organization's culture (Kwan & Park, 2019), but some claim it is really an individual construct (Kahn, 1990; Rich et al., 2010). Although some researchers have pointed to EE as the opposite of burnout (González-Romá et al., 2006), Langelaan et al. (2006) indicate that there is not a perfect correlation between the two and EE should be viewed as an independent construct. Where some see large gaps between the various definitions, especially between researchers and practitioners, leading to disjointed understanding and poor development of practices (Shuck & Wollard, 2010; Zigarmi et al., 2009), others find analogs in the conceptualizations, definitions, and attributes of EE (Kwan & Park, 2019). As noted in Chapter 1, this study has taken an amalgamation of these definitions, rooted in Kahn's (1990) original concepts.

Why study employee engagement?

By understanding EE, HRD professionals can help individuals get the most out of their abilities. This understanding can also be used to help organizations find ways to support employees to be engaged in their work. There is some connection found between work passion as a form of EE and happiness at work (Nimon et al., 2011). Engagement may lead to happier workers, thereby keeping engaged workers as integral members of the organization (Ongwattanakul et al., 2012). Happiness alone is not enough to bring about engagement, though, nor is unhappiness enough to explain disengagement (Hsiao et al., 2015). A lot of EE has been grounded in burnout theory and employee well-being (Knight et al., 2017; Rich et al., 2010). Many researchers believe EE is under-theorized and needs more development to close the many gaps in our understanding (Kwan & Park, 2019; Shuck & Wollard, 2010; Soane et al., 2012; Valentin et al., 2015), therefore, more study is needed for EE to have a greater impact in the HRD field. There is currently little understanding of the employee's experience with engagement

(Shuck et al., 2010). One gap in the knowledge that needs greater development is the understanding of individual responsibility, regardless of organizational support. At this point, there is little understanding of what workers bring to organizations that contributes to EE. It would strengthen the field of HRD to understand the strategies employees use to be engaged, remain engaged, and reengage when necessary.

The need to unify engagement models

Up to this point, it has been challenging for academics and practitioners to come up with a clear, universally accepted definition of EE (Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Valentin et al., 2015). EE is very popular with organizations that try to associate EE with increasing performance (Knight et al., 2017), but as a field of study, EE is a relatively new area of focus for academic research (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2006). The field has been dominated by commercial interests trying to sell advice on how EE may be “created and leveraged” to increase organizational efficiencies and performance (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p. 3), however, there is very little evidence on the effectiveness of what is being sold as interventions (Knight et al., 2017). Most of the literature is based on opinion and not empirical research, which leaves practitioners with little to differentiate EE from other constructs (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). One must know what is worth measuring, otherwise, prescriptive actions will be “at best, vague and, at worst, a leap of faith” (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p. 4). One must also understand how engagement affects individuals and their roles. The degree of an individual’s level of engagement may depend on the roles they play (Saks, 2006). One thing is clear, not all interventions will affect individuals the same way; individuals react differently even under the same conditions (de Wall & Oudshoorn, 2015; Marathe et al., 2019). There is a discrepancy between what organizations are doing to increase engagement and individuals’ actual assessment of their engagement (Shuck et al., 2010). Understanding an individual's responsibility to engage may close some of the gaps in our understanding.

Kwan and Park (2019) called for more focused attention on practical applications of engagement theory within the research, as well as in practice. There is no room for ill-defined or conflicting concepts. With "no clear model of antecedents and consequences, it becomes almost improbable for any lasting systemic organizational change to occur" (Zigarmi et al., 2009, p. 301). The current disjointed approach has led to misunderstandings of the concepts and applications of EE (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). A lack of agreement and organization around a common construct does not imply the concept of EE lacks practical value and efficacy, but without a more unified and clearly constructed model, insights being developed may serve little purpose and may provide practitioners no clear direction (Fletcher, 2015; Macey & Schneider, 2008). More rigorous research could increase the efficacy of EE interventions and thereby strengthen the HRD community, for both academics and practitioners (Kwan & Park, 2019). Theoretical models that can improve EE may also improve organizational performance. Understanding the influence EE has may bring a range of positive outcomes (Soane et al., 2012). According to Shuck et al. (2010), HRD practitioners are in dire need of the type of support rigorous academic research can provide.

Understanding EE

One rationale for understanding EE is to manage turnover rates. High turnover often translates into high costs and loss of important talent (Forstenlechner et al., 2008, p. 99). Additionally, EE may affect how employees see their value to an organization. Seijts & Crim (2006) found a majority of employees who identify as fully engaged believe they can impact the quality of their organization's products, their organization's customer relations, and lower costs for their organizational units. Fully engaged employees tend to be actively interested in moving the organization forward. Yet, a minority of workers worldwide are actively engaged in their work while many are actively disengaged (Gallup, 2017b; Seijts & Crim, 2006; Shuck et al., 2010).

A better understanding of EE may offer advantages to organizations that want to retain their top talent and drive improved outcomes (Voight & Hirst, 2015). It may be more beneficial for organizations to understand how engaged employees think and work, including strategies individual workers employ and support they need for those strategies, than to utilize traditional inducements. For example, there is some research indicating that pay-for-performance programs are not top motivators in retaining employees (Giancola, 2015). As Forstenlechner et al. (2008) indicated, the secret to organizational success may be in rethinking the relationship between worker and employer.

Measuring EE

EE may be a valid topic for both HRD professionals and academics, but according to Anthony-McMann et al. (2017), to make the discussion relevant, there needs to be a common measure against which organizations and researchers can gauge their practices and results. As with the confusion around creating a clear definition of EE, there is also confusion around creating a clear tool with which to measure it. This is not the result of a lack of trying. There have been several attempts to create and validate instruments with which to measure EE, but just as there are varying conceptualizations of the construct of EE, there are varying conceptualizations of how to measure it (Kwan & Park, 2019). Many of the measurement tools that have been developed have been "convoluted, severely entangling their latent nature and making comparisons across streams a severe challenge" (Shuck et al., 2014, p. 5).

Many of the early attempts at developing measurement instruments focused on organizational temperature-taking, often sent out to respondents annually (McBain, 2007). These surveys addressed a range of topics, including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, leadership, and advocacy. McBain found that some surveys also attempted to measure engagement through leaver surveys, attrition rates, human capital, and hiring. As may be expected, organizations often used the data collected in such surveys to address performance issues (McBain, 2007). Performance expectations will be discussed in a section below.

EE Scales

Beyond the disparate surveys, HRD scholars, both academic and commercial, have attempted to develop a measurement instrument around the varying constructs of EE (Gallup, 2017a; Gallup 2017b; Nimon et al., 2011; Neff, 2002; Saks, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003; Schaufeli et al., 2006; Schaufeli et al., 2002; Shuck et al., 2016; Soane et al., 2012). Each scale has taken a slightly to dramatically divergent tack. Gallup (2017a) developed the Q12, a survey of 12 questions the company uses worldwide and claims to define EE. Shuck et al., (2016) developed the Employee Engagement Scale (EES) which divides questions among three factors: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. Citing the ambiguity in defining EE, Nimon et al. (2011) developed the Work Cognition Inventory (WCI), creating a multidimensional instrument to determine the underlying factors of EE, focusing on areas such as teamwork, autonomy, connectedness, fairness, growth, meaningfulness of work, feedback, and work cognition. Soane et al. (2012) developed the Intellectual, Social, Affective Engagement Scale (ISA) which measures work roles, activation, and positive affect over the three facets of intellectual, social, and affective engagement. Saks (2006) developed a rather extensive instrument to measure the antecedents and consequences of EE, using job and organizational commitment, intent to quit, perceived support, and recognition, among other factors. Neff (2002) created two non-validated surveys to measure law firm job satisfaction as an indicator of EE. Schaufeli, et al. (2002) created two scales, one for students and one for employees, using vigor, dedication, and absorption as a way to determine how burnout and engagement interact. Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) also created the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) which uses a three-factor model including vigor, dedication, and absorption to measure EE as the opposite of burnout (Schaufeli et al., 2006).

Of these many measures developed by academic researchers, the UWES is the most commonly used scale for measuring EE (Kwan & Park, 2019). Despite its popularity, or perhaps because of it, the UWES has attracted its share of detractors. Kwan and Park noted that some have challenged its robustness. Others have questioned its factorial validity, noting multidimensional models are ambiguous and not superior to unidimensional equivalents (Knight et al., 2017). Some researchers found the UWES to be a measure of the antipode of burnout, but not necessarily a measurement of the construct of EE (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017). For this study, the EES will be used for measuring EE. EES addresses the three dimensions of EE that match the definition of engagement used in this study: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. There are many definitions of EE and many tools with which to measure it. The correct measurement instrument will depend on how one defines EE in their own context. Likewise, any interventions an organization implements will depend on how one interprets scores from the chosen instrument (Rich et al., 2010).

Performance

Organizations have been interested in engagement as a way to improve performance (Kwan & Park, 2019; Shuck et al., 2014). Some research shows engagement may lead to a competitive advantage (Anitha, 2014; Anthony-McMann et al. 2017; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Michlitsch, 2000) and it is, therefore valuable to allocate resources to engagement practices (Rich et al., 2010). Individuals were the primary focus of this study. Engagement is also shown to increase the performance of individuals (Fletcher, 2015). EE theorizes that the energy and involvement state will translate into higher performance, and some studies have shown evidence to support that assumption (Fletcher, 2015). Unfortunately, the link between engagement and performance is not completely clear (Knight et al., 2017; Rich et al., 2010). Regardless of whether EE leads directly to higher performance, engagement efforts may bring more happiness to employees, which may in turn bring higher organizational output (Oswald et al., 2015).

Links to performance

Some research indicates EE is “interwoven significantly with important business outcomes” (Markos & Sridevi, 2010, p. 92), Highly engaged individuals’ performance may be financial or non-financial and includes both task and job performance, organizational citizenship behavior, continuance commitment, discretionary effort and personal initiative, positive culture, affective commitment, customer satisfaction, and knowledge creation (Anitha, 2014; Kwan & Park, 2019; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Neff, 2002; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). According to Seijts and Crim (2006), EE drives positive bottom-line results.

High-performing organizations report high levels of EE (Shuck et al., 2010). There is also some evidence that high-growth organizations have more than the average number of engaged employees (Markos & Sridevi, 2010). Engaged employees may have a different mindset than unengaged employees. Research shows that engaged employees believe they make a positive impact—up to 50% more than do their unengaged colleagues—for their organizations in product quality, customer service, and lower costs (Seijts & Crim, 2006). As importantly, there is evidence that EE is negatively related to factors leading to productivity loss, such as absenteeism and turnover intention (Kwan & Park, 2019). Despite these obvious advantages, the links between engagement and productivity are far from simple and not always clear (Shuck et al., 2014).

Many businesses appear to be drawn to EE's "reported ability to solve challenging organizational problems" in the hopes of increasing productivity during economic uncertainty (Shuck et al., 2010, p. 301). Business leaders grappling with competitive challenges are looking to EE as a performance booster, hoping that getting employees more engaged, the organization will remain ahead in their business sector (Markos & Sridevi, 2010; McBain, 2007). EE's appeal to business leaders is driven in large part by claims that EE drives the bottom line and leads to high organizational performance (Kelleher, 2011; Macey & Schneider, 2008). Many organizations that collected data on EE, did so to address performance issues, including improved task performance, lower turnover rates, and positive OCB (McBain, 2007; Soane et al., 2012). Although scholars have made some connections between EE and improved performance, there is still very little empirical proof that ties EE alone directly to these higher outcomes (Knight et al., 2017; Rich et al., 2010). One thing seems sure, other business process improvement methods, such as outsourcing, reengineering, and automation have not brought the lasting results organizations have desired (Park, 2006).

This is not to say EE will not bring higher productivity. Although EE has been shown to improve outcomes in some cases, it has also been regarded as one more fad (Shuck et al., 2014). As noted above, there is some evidence of the effectiveness of EE interventions (Knight et al., 2017), it just may not work alone without other types of intervention. Improved employee performance may indeed come in part from an employee's positive attitudes, often associated with EE, yet there is also evidence that points to performance improvements and positive organizational culture and leadership style (Kim, Nimon, Song & Zigarmi, 2015). Oswald et al.'s (2015) work found that happiness leads to higher productivity. Happiness is not the same as engagement, although engaged workers are often considered happy (Nimon et al., 2011; Ongwattanakul et al., 2012). Interestingly, happiness can be induced through other means, including providing cookies and chocolate to employees (Oswald et al., 2015).

Just as there is some evidence that EE may lead to productivity gains, there is also evidence that disengagement leads to losses in productivity. Some evidence points to burnout and workplace stress as triggers for disengagement (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017). Those workers who are actively disengaged, which accounts for around 16% of all employees, while another 54% are simply unengaged, not bringing their full, authentic selves to their work roles (Gallup, 2017a), generated significantly less revenue than their engaged coworkers (Seijts & Crim, 2006). Unengaged workers are likely just "spinning their wheels," spreading their unhappiness, and generally disinterested in the success of the organization, thus undercutting their engaged colleagues (Gallup, 2017a; Markos & Sridevi, 2010). Disengagement may cost U.S. organizations hundreds of billions of dollars in lost productivity annually, making EE interventions interesting for most organizations (Saks, 2006; Valentin et al., 2015). Gallup (2017b) called this a "stunning amount of wasted potential" due to a lack of EE (p. 5).

Self-involvement

Kahn's (1990) research focused on individuals' responsibility in being engaged in their work role performances. Not every intervention will produce the same effect in each individual (de Wall & Oudshoorn, 2015; Macey & Schneider, 2008). Traditional performance measures dictated by organizational leadership are not always accepted by today's workforce, where autonomy, status, and job satisfaction play a larger role. Research shows that individuals bring their knowledge, skills, creativity, problem-solving abilities, and experience to their jobs, thus deciding the fate of organizational success (de Wall & Oudshoorn, 2015; Park, 2006). Job satisfaction, interpersonal relationships, and other influences come to determine the level of engagement an employee decides to dedicate to the organization (Kahn, 1990). Developing individuals' autonomy and encouraging their engagement may lead to greater performance for both the individual and the organization (Antony, 2018; Michlitsch, 2000). Organizational leaders are beginning to shift attention toward individuals (Markos & Sridevi, 2010). The individuals within organizations are the one factor that "cannot be duplicated or imitated by the competitors" and should be "managed and engaged properly" (Anitha, 2014, p. 309). It is important to note that affective commitment does not link to higher performance (Khan, 2015; Somers & Birmbaum, 1998). High-performing employees may not be committed to their organizations and highly committed employees may not be high performers. Khan (2015) suggested that HR systems should be designed so as not to retain the low performers just because they appear to be committed. According to Forstenlechner et al. (2008), achieving EE may require a fundamental shift in how organizations see the employee-employer relationship.

Practical suggestions

Both academic and commercial researchers have advocated for HRD interventions as a way to improve EE. Many organizations have begun investing in the development and implementation of programs to enhance EE (Kwan & Park, 2019). Unfortunately, there is very little data available to determine whether any of these interventions are effective (Knight et al., 2017). Some of this lack of evidence may be attributable to the fragmented manner in which EE has been defined, and the consequent misconceptualization of the construct (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). However, despite the dearth of evidence, many research reports come with practical advice on how to develop EE within organizations. Referring back to Kahn's (1990) original concept of engagement being an individual construct, it is interesting and important to note the various suggestions centering on what organizations can do to foster EE.

Organizational

Creating a climate for employees to "unleash their potential" was considered critical from an organizational viewpoint (Seijts & Crim, 2006, p. 3). According to this perspective, improving organizational support was more likely to increase EE (Fletcher, 2015; Saks, 2006; Shuck et al., 2014). Programs should be broad in scope and involve clear and consistent communication from all levels of the organization, starting from the top (Antony, 2018; Kelleher, 2011; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Saks, 2006). Support should be proactive and focus on employee needs (Neff, 2002; Saks, 2006), empowering workers by aiming to satisfy employees' need for autonomy (Antony, 2018; Shuck et al., 2014; Valentin et al., 2015).

Creating an appropriate engagement culture was often cited in the literature. Higher perceptions of procedural justice (Kelleher, 2011; Saks, 2006), fair HR practices that support high performance and removes low performers (Antony, 2018; Khan, 2015; Kelleher, 2011; Markos & Sridevi, 2010), corporate responsibility (CSR) programs (Valentin et al., 2015), and a servant style leadership (Shuck et al., 2014) all were perceived to improve EE levels in individuals. Social support programs that reduce exhaustion were also suggested to inhibit burnout and enhance employees' personal resilience to remain engaged (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017).

Career development, job design, clear goals, and creating a learning culture were also suggested as drivers of engagement (Khan, 2015; Markos & Sridevi, 2010). Management alignment of career development with organizational goals (Khan, 2015; Markos & Sridevi, 2010) and a strong emotional and cognitive connection with work roles (Fletcher, 2015) was thought to lead to higher levels of EE. In addition, training programs that are tailored to job demands and individual work roles with breadth and quality content was believed to have a positive impact on employees' intention to engage (Antony, 2018; Fletcher, 2015; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Shuck et al., 2014). It seemed to be important for workers to connect positively to their jobs (Neff, 2002; Saks, 2006; Zigarmi et al., 2009) and to feel they have the resources, internally and externally, to engage and to avoid the negative effects of burnout (Kwan & Park, 2019; Markos & Sridevi, 2010).

Coaching, individually and in teams, was thought to be vital to showing organizational support and enticing EE (Gallup, 2017a; Kelleher, 2011). This included strengths interventions, providing positive, constructive feedback, and celebrating successes (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017; Gallup, 2017a; Kelleher, 2011; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Neff, 2002). Engaging line managers was also considered a critical factor in promoting engagement in individual contributors (Kelleher, 2011; McBain, 2007).

Also noted is the understanding that not all employees will be motivated by the same programs (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Sone researchers (Kwan & Park, 2019; Valentin et al., 2015) suggested practitioners need to take a step-by-step approach to understand the research and the theories, how to apply both, and develop refinement practices to be able to generate new theory and better practices in situ. Developing organizational EE programs takes time and is a continual process (Kwan & Park, 2019). It was recommended that programs be balanced with both the organization and the individual in mind (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Fletcher 2015).

Individual perspective

In light of the various recommendations on how organizations can improve EE, it is important to underline that organizations cannot force their workers into more engagement and higher performance (Seijts & Crim, 2006). EE is a two-way relationship between employer and employee (Markos & Sridevi, 2010). Although organizations can and must support their employees, individuals must come with their own strategies to engage in their work. Although researchers and practitioners agree on the importance of employees in the engagement relationship, leadership often focuses only on key employees, such as managers (Michlitsch, 2000). For EE to permeate an organization, there needs to be a focus on all employees, from the top down (Antony, 2018; Kelleher, 2011; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Saks, 2006). Unfortunately, there is little in the literature addressing what employees can do to develop individualized strategies to engage, remain engaged, and reengage when appropriate. Employees come with a set of talents and strengths that they leverage to perform their work roles and job tasks. Organizations can help employees recognize and develop these strengths in ways that positively influence EE (Gallup, 2017b). Mindfulness practices, which are intimate and highly individualized, have been found to reduce stress and burnout, as well as provide personal resources to enhance EE (Leroy et al., 2013; Tang & Posner, 2008). Leroy et al. also found mindfulness practices to be an antecedent to authentic functioning, a key to Kahn's (1990) original conception of individual responsibility with engagement. Organizations can also support, but cannot force, feelings of autonomy by leveraging the framework of self-determination theory, thus allowing individuals to develop and employ their own engagement strategies (Shuck et al., 2014). The next section will focus on individual responsibility for engagement.

Engagement as an individual construct

Although there may be value in looking at ways organizations can create an environment for employee engagement, EE is an individual construct. It is a decision made, for personal reasons, by an employee. Looking only at the organization "distorts the nature of the concept" of EE (Shuck & Wollard, 2010, p. 105). Managers can provide an environment that empowers employees toward autonomous decision-making, build competence, and foster relatedness (Shuck et al., 2014), but management initiatives will fail without conscious participation by employees (Markos & Sridevi, 2010). The traditional styles of leadership grounded in authoritarian roots will not foster EE. For this reason, it is best to for management to look toward their employees for engagement (Markos & Sridevi, 2010). When employees are engaged, they are aware of their responsibility to the business goals of the organization. This sense of responsibility may lead to more engagement behaviors, continuously moving the purpose forward (Anitha, 2014; Thomas, 2009). Goal self-concordant employees feel a sense of commitment to a meaningful purpose and care enough to invest discretionary effort for the success of the organization (Bakker et al. 2008; Seijts & Crim, 2006). Engagement is psychological (meaningfulness, availability, safety) with behavioral consequences (Fletcher, 2015; Kwan & Park, 2019).

Support for the idea of individual responsibility for engagement is strengthened by the realization that not every employee reacts the same under the same set of circumstances. Some individuals do well in particular jobs while other individuals will not. One person may feel engaged at work while another person does not (de Wall & Oudshoorn, 2015; Kwan & Park, 2019; Langelaan et al., 2006). Individuals bring their own vigor (high energy and resilience), dedication (enthusiasm, pride, inspiration, work involvement), and absorption (deep engrossment, attachment, concentration), independent of the organization or position in which they are employed (González-Romá et al., 2006; Schaufeli et al., 2006). A prescribed set of engagement initiatives may fail without understanding what individuals bring with them and what they need for support.

Self-determination

According to Leroy et al., (2013), individuals play a proactive role in creating their own engagement environment. Bakker and Demerouti (2008) indicate that for EE to work in an organization, individuals must bring with them the correct strategies to engage and stay engaged. Thomas (2009) claims that self-management—the ability of an individual to choose one's work activities without management intervention—is "the defining characteristic of employee engagement" and adds value to the organization (p. 28). The autonomy employees naturally bring with them implies workers can make independent choices about how they will utilize their skills and talents to engage (Valentin et al., 2015). Self-determination theory (SDT) suggests that workers internalize work tasks and consciously choose to engage or not (Leroy et al., 2013). Further, SDT speculates that individuals become more engaged as they internalize their core sense of their preferred self (Kahn, 1990; Leroy et al., 2013). Kahn suggested that individuals, given the right conditions and option to do so, choose to express their preferred self in their work role performances. Individuals may express their preferred self by finding meaningful purpose in their work, developing activities around those purposes, monitoring the competence of those activities toward the accomplishment of goals, and adjusting as necessary (Thomas, 2009). Fletcher (2015) found preferred self-expression to manifest as high-quality job performance. According to self-regulation theories, individuals manage their engagement by developing strategies to guide them through these goal-directed activities. Promotion-focused individuals have strong positive ideals and develop strategies to help organizations move forward, while prevention-focused individuals are motivated by security and safety, and are motivated by obligations toward the organization (Bakker et al. 2008). The more an individual's work can allow authentic self-expression, the more engaged individuals will be (Glavas, 2016). In contrast, individuals who uncouple themselves from their roles display less energy in their organizational obligations and begin to disengage (Kahn, 1990). Better understanding the strategies individuals use and under which conditions may help organizations better support individuals' intentions to engage or reengage when appropriate.

Experiential conditions may affect levels of engagement. Individuals are affected by experiences outside of work and bring those experiences with them. External experiences include family, community, spiritual practices, and prior work for other organizations (Glavas, 2016; Kwan & Park, 2019; Leroy et al., 2013). Individuals' experiences and their contexts will determine the levels to which they will engage. An individual's outside self may increase his or her availability, thereby generating more energy to engage (Kahn, 1990). These external experiences may speak to the development of unique strategies workers employ for engaging, remaining engaged, and reengaging when appropriate.

Underlying the need to understand what strategies employees bring to their work to engage, remain engaged, and reengage when appropriate is the research suggesting that full engagement 100% of the time is an ideal that is impossible to expect (Bakker et al. 2008; Kwan & Park, 2019; Marathe et al., 2019). Everyone experiences changes in energy flows toward work-related activities. Such variability has been shown to affect EE (Bakker et al. 2008; Kwan & Park, 2019; Marathe et al., 2019). Strategies individuals employ to balance job demands and job and personal resources determine an employee's engagement levels at any particular time

(Marathe et al., 2019). Individuals self-determine their overwork-work avoidance balance based on personal internal energy to engage (Kwan & Park, 2019; Marathe et al., 2019). At the same time, the inability to attain a balance between resources and demands may lead to a state of disengagement (Marathe et al., 2019).

Demands and resources

The job demands-resources (JD-R) model posits that developing more job resources will help a worker meet job demands. Individuals who develop engagement strategies may more easily meet their job demands. For example, job crafting has been shown to lead to EE (Bakker et al., 2014). Interestingly, Bakker, et al. hypothesized that EE leads to job crafting, possibly creating a virtuous cycle. Understanding how to support individuals in building resources, particularly at the personal level, may create a sense of autonomy and self-efficacy in workers (Knight et al., 2017, p. 794). The work experience includes both work-related and personal-related forces (Glavas, 2016; Kahn, 1990; Marathe et al., 2019). Developing both job and personal resources to meet job and personal demands is hypothesized to create a balance for the individual between the demands and available resources. An ideal state of EE should result from such a balance (Marathe et al., 2019, p. 6). JD-R will be discussed in a separate section, below.

Engagement as a two-way process

There are many influences on individuals' intentions to engage or disengage. The organization is just one part of the equation (Kahn, 1990). EE is a mutual process that should not fall solely on the organization but should take into account the responsibilities of workers to develop engagement strategies. Organizations can then support employees in developing, sharing, and enhancing those strategies among its workers (Markos & Sridevi, 2010). In the end, it is up to the individual to choose how to manage the confluence of these various influences and to either engage or disengage (Kahn, 1990; Markos & Sridevi, 2010). More about organizations will be discussed in the next section.

Organizational responsibilities

Although there is research supporting the individual's responsibility for EE (Anitha, 2014; Bakker et al. 2008; Leroy et al., 2013; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Seijts & Crim, 2006; Shuck & Wollard, 2010; Thomas, 2009), that does not mean there is no need for organizations to support EE (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Complex determinants lead employees to choose whether to engage their preferred self in their work roles (Kahn, 1990), yet there are things the organization can do that will support workers to engage, remain engaged, and reengage in their work when appropriate (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Markos & Sridevi, 2010). EE requires input from all levels of an organization, including its employees, and should be "viewed as a broad organizational and cultural strategy" (Saks, 2006, p. 615).

Social exchange and autonomy

Managers need to understand the value of social exchange by providing the resources and benefits that will induce EE (Saks, 2006). EE may be induced through programs that reflect an organization's understanding of employee needs and provide appropriate resources, such as career development, flexible work hours, proper performance rewards, and lower emotional threat levels (Anitha, 2014; Martin-Kniep, 2010; Saks, 2006). Organizations should also create work roles that provide a safe environment for social engagement, which may be an integral feature of EE (Fletcher, 2015; Soane et al., 2012). When done with care, the workplace provides a stable environment and a set of resources to support workers' desire to engage (Kwan & Park, 2019).

Knowledge workers, such as legal assistants, expect a certain level of autonomy in their work (Markos & Sridevi, 2010). These employees are working closely with their attorneys and top management to help the firm reach organizational goals (Forstenlechner et al., 2008; Thomas, 2009). Promoting EE can provide the level of autonomy that leads employees to want to develop engagement strategies (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008).

According to Thomas (2009), corporate hierarchies are becoming flatter, thus changing what was once a traditional form of career development. There is a gap in the literature addressing how individuals can develop careers as a strategy for engagement without traditional hierarchies. Career development and other job resources may have different meaning to different employees. After all, not all employees are the same and not all engagement programs will work the same for all employees in an organization (de Wall & Oudshoorn, 2015; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Marathe et al., 2019). This is why it is important to understand strategies employees develop and bring with themselves to their work roles (Saks, 2006).

Ultimately, organizations want to create an environment of self-motivated employees (Neff, 2002). Understanding the strategies and drivers of EE is important for fostering a supportive environment for workers to engage, but organizations also need to understand the theories behind EE (Kwan & Park, 2019). Through a cycle of theory-practice-observation-adjustment, organizations can build perceived organizational support, develop appropriate job characteristics, increase social exchange, and improve procedural justice, all of which is believed to lead to EE (Kwan & Park, 2019; Saks, 2006; Soane et al., 2012). Providing the right atmosphere will aid workers in developing their own EE strategies (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008).

The negative side of EE

Although this study will not investigate the negative side of EE, it would be irresponsible to ignore the possibility that high levels of EE may be detrimental to employees. There have been questions raised regarding victimization and total burnout (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris 2008; Kim & Glomb, 2014). Kim and Glomb argued that organizations should be wary of victimizing high performers due to a loss of well-being and productivity. According to their findings, victimized workers have higher turnover intent and may undermine HR practices in recruitment, motivation, and talent development. Some estimates place the costs of victimization to individuals, organizations, and communities at between $3 billion and $35 billion annually (International Labor Organization, cited in Kim & Glomb, 2014). Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, and Taris (2008) noted the “dearth of research on the relationship between engagement and health” (p. 194) and the costs of energy loss due to burnout and time lost in recovery. Some of these concerns may be mitigated by the engagement strategies workers employ.

Frameworks for studying EE

There have been some complaints that EE has experienced a bottom-up approach to research with no unifying theoretical framework, leading to a general confusion as to whether EE is linked to organizational commitment or if it is linked to job requirements and job commitment (Valentin et al., 2015; Zigarmi et al., 2009). Research around EE, though, has become more complex as researchers and practitioners have developed greater interest in the construct (Shuck et al., 2014). Neuroscience researchers have linked engagement to rewards and threats within the brain (Martin-Kniep, 2010; Rock & Tang, 2009). Other researchers have examined links between EE and regulatory focus theory (Bakker et al. 2008; Neff, 2002; Shuck & Wollard, 2010), commitment and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (Markos & Sridevi, 2010), authenticity (Leroy et al., 2013), corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Glavas, 2016; Valentin et al., 2015), self-determination theory (SDT) (Leroy et al., 2013; Shuck et al., 2014), self-regulation (Leroy et al., 2013; Tang & Posner, 2008), and job demands-resources (JD-R) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Bakker et al., 2014; Bakker et al., 2008; Demerouti et al., 2001; Knight et al., 2017; Kwan & Park, 2019; Marathe et al., 2019; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). This section will look briefly at each of the proposed frameworks. JD-R, SDT, and self-regulation are the primary frameworks to inform this study.

Neuroscience

Research in neurosciences points to motivations that are based on threats and rewards the brain receives from perceptions such as organizational support and management actions toward individuals (Martin-Kniep, 2010; Rock & Tang, 2009). Rewards are not necessarily monetary, rather they are the emotional and cognitive rewards spoken of in Kahn's (1990) original conception of EE (Martin-Kniep, 2010). These findings attempt to explain human behaviors by measuring engagement in terms of biological markers in the brain (Rock & Tang, 2009). In their research, Rock and Tang proposed that engaged employees have high levels of cognitive resources including problem solving and greater creativity, while disengaged employees have high levels of threat activity such as anxiety, depression, sadness, and mind wandering. Engagement may be induced when rewards are associated with business objectives (Martin-Kniep, 2010).

Regulatory focus theory

Regulatory focus theory describes motivation as striving to meet set goals by either focusing on a reward (promotion focus) or by trying to avoid negative consequences or punishments (prevention focus) (Bakker et al. 2008). These systems act to regulate behaviors depending on which of the systems ranks higher in the view of the individual and the circumstances (Voight & Hirst, 2015). Regulation focus theory, then, describes the motivation which causes an internal state of arousal, which thereby sets or changes one's behaviors (Neff, 2002). Although EE is about adapting behaviors to meet or even exceed organizational goals (Shuck & Wollard, 2010), regulatory focus theory does not go far enough to explain other aspects of EE, including being fully engaged when rewards and punishments are non-existent or are not clearly defined.

Commitment and OCB

There is some research indicating EE has roots in commitment and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), or at least there are some overlaps between these two concepts and EE (Markos & Sridevi, 2010). As discussed earlier, although commitment and OCB research may help frame some aspects of employee engagement, EE implies an awareness of the organization's business goals and EE is a two-way process between employee and employer (Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Saks, 2006).

Authenticity

Leroy et al. (2013) described authentic functioning as the awareness of one's true self and the behaviors that are in accordance with that preferred self. This concept links well with Kahn's (1990) definition of EE as being the expression of one's preferred self. According to Leroy et al. staying true to one's self may make one open and humble, and therefore willing to adapt as needed, creating a stable sense of well-being. However, authenticity may be an antecedent to EE, and not provide enough framework to describe the entire complexity of the EE construct (Leroy et al., 2013).

Corporate social responsibility theory (CSR)

Glavas (2016) reported that CSR research related to EE is relatively new, but there are some positive and significant correlates. CSR has been defined as “organizational actions and policies that take into account stakeholders’ expectations and the triple bottom line of economic, social, and environmental performance” (Aguinis, 2011, p. 855). Researchers believed that although EE focuses on the relationship between the individual and their organization, while CSR focuses on the relationship between the organization and society, management and employees can build actions around CSR in a way that benefits employees to the point of EE inducement (Glavas, 2016; Valentin et al., 2015). CSR strategies can be implemented in a way to make the program personal and deeply meaningful, thus acting as an antecedent to EE (Glavas, 2016; Valentin et al., 2015). Research showed CSR to be a “stimulant to elicit intrinsic motivation” which fosters EE (Valentin et al., 2015, p. 198). CSR was also found to have positive links to authenticity and individuals’ sense of preferred self (Glavas, 2016; Valentin et al., 2015).

Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) helps understand the choices individuals make (Shuck et al., 2014). Above, EE was defined as an individual’s responsibility, in an organizational context, often with organizational support. EE is a cognitive construct in the sense one must consciously choose to engage for reasons known and understood by the individual (Leroy et al., 2013; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Leroy et al. found that individuals are more engaged when they are cognitively immersed in and intrinsically motivated by activities that involve their preferred self. SDT provides some support for the idea that individuals are responsible for bringing strategies that keep them engaged and help them reengage when they become unengaged in their work.

Self-regulation theory

Self-regulation is a purposive process of self-directed adjustments that take place as needed to reach goals determined by the individual and is considered to be a natural function of the brain (Carver & Scheier, 2014; Tang & Posner, 2008). Researchers have found self-regulation and intrinsic motivation to be related to maximizing EE (Martin-Kniep, 2010). Self-regulation theory helps explain the need to understand the strategies individuals use to engage in their work because it is manifest through higher concentration on work tasks and a greater attention to self-functioning (Leroy et al., 2013; Martin-Kniep, 2010; Tang & Posner, 2008). An example of a self-regulation strategy is mindfulness mediation (Leroy et al., 2013; Tang & Posner, 2008). Mindfulness includes being present in the moment during work tasks, as well as paying attention with purpose and having a strong sense of self-awareness and self-observation (Tang & Posner, 2008). Mindfulness is linked with EE through short-term flow, enhanced personal resources, and authentic functioning, and has been linked to lower instances of burnout symptoms (Leroy et al., 2013).

Job demands-resources

The idea of individuals creating and using strategies to engage in work is supported by research suggesting that engaged workers develop their own job resources over time (Bakker et al., 2008). A key model for understanding EE is the job demands-resources (JDR) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2008; Marathe et al., 2019; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). In theory, the perfect balance between job demands and job resources would result in perfectly engaged workers (Marathe et al., 2019). The model suggests that employee well-being, which may lead to EE, happens when job demands are balanced by personal or job resources (Knight et al., 2017; Kwan & Park, 2019; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). High job demands may result in higher job resource loss, which makes developing resources all the more important in certain high job demand conditions (Bakker et al. 2008). An individual's work experience is defined by the relative proportions of the job's demands and the available resources (Marathe et al., 2019). Kahn (1990) suggested that having resources may influence EE, while the lack of resources may influence disengagement (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017). Strategies individuals use to create personal and job resources may predict EE (Bakker et al., 2008). The primary underlying framework of this study is the JD-R model. By understanding the resources individuals bring with them to job tasks and job roles, organizations can better understand how to aid workers through the development of personal and job resources such as perceptions of self-efficacy and resilience, and increase individuals' strengths (Knight et al., 2017; Kwan & Park, 2019). Gaining insights into individuals' strategies to engage may help organizations understand how individuals deal with job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Understanding how individuals choose to engage, through personal strategies, may improve organizational performance. There is some evidence that employees with high EE characteristics, such as work identification and high energy levels, seem to perform better due to having more available resources (Bakker et al., 2008).

Job demands are the facets of the job which require an effort, mental, physical, emotional, or social and exact a physiological or psychological toll on workers (Demerouti et al., 2001). Job resources include various aspects of the job, including organizational, physical, social, and psychological required for achieving work goals, reducing demands, stimulating growth and development, which compensate for job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Job resources may be located within an organization, a task, how work is organized, or an individual (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Helping individuals define and develop more job resources may buffer the negative impacts of job demands and thereby lead to greater EE (Kwan & Park, 2019). Accumulation of job resources has been hypothesized to play an intrinsic role in motivation, personal growth, learning, and development, as well as in achieving work-related goals (Bakker et al. 2008). An example of a job resource that evidence suggests may lead to EE is job crafting (Bakker et al., 2014). Job crafting describes allowing workers to redesign their job tasks and coworker interactions in ways that may increase resilience and satisfaction and may lead to more EE (Berg et al., 2007).

The site for this study was law firms. Law firms are difficult places to work, with high job demands (Forstenlechner et al., 2008). Forstenlechner et al. noted law firms have low organization-level job resources, such as poorly defined career opportunities and career paths with little investment in talent development for support staff. Yet, the turnover rate of legal assistants is not high and many are engaged in their work (S. Astrup, personal communication, August 5, 2019). Studying engaged legal assistants can give insights to better understand the job resources, in the form of strategies, developed and used by legal assistants in a law firm to engage, remain engaged, and reengage when appropriate. There is a gap in the literature discussing the personal strategies individuals use to engage in their work. In particular, there is very little in the literature available for understanding the job resource needs of legal assistants who make up over one-third of all employees in law firms (Forstenlechner et al., 2008).

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this literature review was to identify and examine the EE literature and the theories that support the conceptualization of EE. First coined by Kahn (1990), EE is a relatively new concept. Organizations took an early interest in EE as a way to improve performance, enhance employee well-being, and increase competitive advantage (Kwan & Park, 2019; Mackay et al., 2017; Saks, 2006). Academic study has begun to bring more discipline to the concept with a focus on the antecedents, conditions, and potential outcomes of engagement (Kwan & Park, 2019). In light of these conditions, there is no formal consensus on a definition of what exactly EE is (Fletcher, 2015; Markos & Sridevi, 2010).

The study of EE may help understand how organizations can better support their workers, retain top talent, and improve outcomes (Voight & Hirst, 2015). For example, fully engaged workers may be happier (Nimon et al., 2011; Ongwattanakul et al., 2012) and may feel less burnout, thus improving employee well-being (Knight et al., 2017; Rich et al., 2010). In this way, EE may benefit both organizations and employees. The preponderance of research describes what organizations can do to engage workers, however, there remains little in the literature defining the responsibility of workers to employ engagement strategies. There appears to be little understanding of the employee experience with engagement (Shuck et al., 2010).

Of the various frameworks used to study EE, the job demands-resources (JD-R) model may provide the best tools for understanding the worker's responsibility in defining and deploying strategies to engage in their work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2008; Marathe et al., 2019; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). Accumulating job resources that meet job demands may lead to the attainment of work-related goals, as well as personal achievement (Bakker et al. 2008). Developing engagement strategies that build job resources may lead to higher levels of EE (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Berg et al., 2007).

These findings show clear evidence of the need for more research into worker responsibility in EE. There is a great deal of research emphasizing the organizational responsibilities of engaging employees, but employer interventions do not affect all employees the same way. An organizational tactic that engages one worker may not engage another (de

Wall & Oudshoorn, 2015; Marathe et al., 2019). Thus, a study of personal employee strategies that lead to engagement is warranted.

Chapter 3: Methods

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify strategies used by legal assistants to engage, stay engaged, and reengage, when appropriate, in their work. According to recent research, less than 15% of workers worldwide are fully engaged in their work, while 24% are actively disengaged. The remaining workers are simply not engaged in their work (Gallup, 2017b; Seijts & Crim, 2006; Shuck et al., 2010). Those workers who are actively disengaged generated significantly less revenue than their engaged coworkers (Seijts & Crim, 2006). Disengagement may cost U.S. organizations hundreds of billions of dollars in lost productivity annually, making EE interventions attractive for most organizations (Saks, 2006; Valentin et al., 2015). A review of the literature on engagement shows a primary focus on what organizations can to do engage employees (Anitha, 2014; Anthony-McMann et al., 2017; Gallup, 2017a; Kelleher, 2011; Kwan & Park, 2019; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Neff, 2002; Saks, 2006). Even those organizations that do provide EE strategies may not see 100% engagement. Langelaan et al. (2006) suggested that each individual is unique and will respond to organizational strategies in unique ways. Very little research exists exploring what workers can do to remain engaged, in particular legal assistants working in law firms. Kahn's (1990) original conceptualization of engagement focused on an individual's relationship with work engagement. This study looked at legal assistants' decisions to engage and choices of strategies they employed to engage and to reengage when they become disengaged.

In support of this study, the following research questions were examined:

RQ1: What strategies do workers employ to engage, remain engaged, or reengage when appropriate?

RQ2: What are the drivers that cause legal assistants to employ engagement strategies to reengage when disengagement happens?

A review of the literature revealed very little research that seeks to understand the perceptions of workers and their strategies of engagement. A qualitative study provides the right tools for discovering perceptions workers have of full engagement, less-than-full engagement, and active disengagement, and the strategies workers use to be engaged. Through the use of a qualitative design, this study aimed to uncover insights into workers' strategies around engagement and the perceptions workers may have that lead them to employ these strategies.

Ontology and Epistemology

Traditional quantitative research assumes the positivist stance that there is a truth out there that can be proven based on rigid measurement and analysis, leading to the establishment of undeniable laws (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Over time, this rigidity gave way to a more flexible stance, such as logical empiricism and postpositivism (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2002). Postpositivism takes the view that truth may be relative, as opposed to absolute, yet the most credible claims can be supported with empirical evidence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Qualitative research most commonly assumes there is no single truth that can be supported through empirical observation. Instead, there are assumed to be multiple realities that are constructed by individuals as they experience phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2002; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This worldview is called constructivism, or sometimes interpretivism (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The focus of a constructivist research study is to understand the meaning phenomena have for those involved. Meaning is not inherent in the object of the experience, waiting to be discovered. Rather, meaning is constructed as individuals participate in the world. Constructivism underlies basic qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Other forms of qualitative research include critical research, which goes beyond social construction and assumes phenomena are experienced through the lens of power relationships. Critical inquiry analyzes the effects of social injustices found within the participants' social environment. Postmodernism is a perspective that holds that no one power or view is more important than another. Diversity and plurality are celebrated. Postmodern research is often creative, more playful, and interpretive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

This study used a basic qualitative research design to construct meaning as understood by legal assistants. This study aimed to understand the strategies legal assistants employ to engage, remain engaged, and reengage in their work. To understand their strategies, it was important to understand how the participants make sense of the strategies they employ in the context of the value of EE. Some research (Kahn, 1990; Thomas, 2009; Valentin et al., 2015) has found that when an employee sees value in engaging in their work, they will develop corresponding strategies to engage. Conversely, when they do not see value, they will not employ such strategies. Lincoln and Guba (2016) noted that as humans we do not simply experience what happens around us, we create meaning from those experiences. This study used a constructivist point of view to understand the ontology, or "what is reality," and the epistemology, or "how do we know," in relation to EE for each participant. A constructivist viewpoint allowed the researcher to observe and analyze reality as seen by the individuals experiencing the events (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). From an ontological and epistemological standpoint, in this study, the researcher interviewed individuals and analyzed the types of strategies they create to interact with the experience of EE. This study aimed to understand the context in which the participants experienced EE through the strategies they created and employed to deal with their constructed reality.

Basic Qualitative Method

A basic qualitative study was chosen as the means to understand the phenomenon of EE, and, in particular, EE strategies legal assistants employ to engage and remain engaged in their work (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative studies are founded on the belief that knowledge is built, or constructed, by people on an ongoing basis through experiences and activities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and provide a perspective on how individuals perceive and make sense of phenomena, as described by the individuals (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Swanson & Holton, 2005). Using a basic qualitative design allowed this study to focus on the "meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience" (Patton, 2002, p. 132) and to "create new understandings" of experiences for those involved (Swanson & Holton, 2005). Qualitative studies provide an elegant and insightful framework for understanding human phenomena (Patton, 2002). The phenomenon under investigation in this study was EE, with particular emphasis on the individual worker's strategies for becoming and remaining engaged. This study sought to describe an individual's willingness to accept his or her own responsibility with the phenomenon of EE, and by doing so, provide a better understanding for organizations to support engaged workers. A basic qualitative study provided the best perspective for building knowledge based on the workers' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Participant Selection

The study drew a sample of legal assistants who self-identify as fully engaged at least 30 hours per week over the past 26 weeks, based on completion of the Employment Engagement

Scale (EES) (Shuck et al., 2016) (see Appendix B and Appendix C). The results served to determine each individual's level of engagement at the time of the survey. Participants were invited to participate in the study if they showed above-average engagement, which was set as 3.5 or higher on a 5-point Likert scale with 5 being the highest. After being invited into the study, results of the EES were detached from the individual's name to remove any form of identification. A demographic survey was also given to each participant to help determine the average tenure in the legal field, as well as other aspects of experience including age, time with current employer, gender, education level, and special certifications (see Appendix D). Results of the demographic survey were not tied to actual participant names and were used solely for understanding the participant pool.

A purposeful sample selection was used to identify information-rich cases which provided an in-depth understanding of an individual's personal strategies for EE (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling ensured the study included those who know the most about the subject being investigated and allowed the researcher to ensure the cases selected were not out of the norm, extreme, or atypical of the phenomenon under study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Participants were initially recruited from the researcher's personal professional network, developed over more than a decade in the legal field. The researcher gained access to a professional organization of legal assistants, NALS, in the Seattle, Washington area. The researcher coordinated through the president of NALS of Washington to identify volunteers. Snowball sampling was used from the initial respondents. Approval to use this group for this research project is found in Appendix E. Although it may be reasonable to assume that legal assistants who are interested enough in their careers to join and be active in a professional organization are interested enough in their careers to engage in their work, there is no research to support this assumption; therefore the EES was used as a demographic tool to identify the level of self-reported engagement perceived by each potential participant. An average score on the EES was determined to be 3.0 using a Likert-type scale of 1–5. Legal assistants who scored above 3.5 in EE at the time of the assessment were invited to participate. After invitations were extended, all connections between the EES score and the individual were removed.

When determining sample size, Patton (2002) said "it depends…there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry" and that a sample size needs to be judged in context and must support the purpose of the study (p. 244). Creswell (2014) suggested stopping when all categories or themes are saturated. For this study, the researcher used a sample size of 16 individuals, all of whom were interviewed.

Data Collection Methods

The method of data collection was the use of semi-structured interviews. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), interviews are the most common method of data collection in qualitative research. Interviewing allows the researcher to find out what is on the minds of participants and how they experience the phenomenon in question. The semi-structured interviews began with a limited set of questions posed to each interviewee, then allowed the researcher to follow the line of responses which provided the flexibility for follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interviewing allowed the researcher to elicit each individual's personal experiences to gain rich, detailed insight into the strategies used by the participants to engage in their work (Creswell, 2014). Interview questions are included (see Appendix F).

Interview questions were discussed with each participant before the interview. The questions guided the interview but did not define where the interview went. Each participant was given the flexibility to bring their own experiences to the interview. Providing flexibility assured a rich understanding of the engagement phenomenon experienced by each participant and the opportunity to explore new insights as they occurred (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Interviews were conducted using live, face-to-face Zoom conferencing over the Internet. This was the best solution considering the COVD-19 pandemic did not allow in-person interviewing. Using Zoom allowed a convenient and comfortable location for the interviews and also allowed a wider geographical distribution of study participants. Timing of the interviews was determined by the participant's schedules to allow them comfort, privacy, and convenience. Interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes, but flexibility was allowed and actual timing was determined by each individual. Interviews were recorded by Zoom's digital voice recording service. The recording service also provided an initial transcript that required the researcher to carefully review and edit. Creating recorded interviews provided the best way to preserve all that was said for later analysis. The recordings were immediately uploaded to a secure cloud-based location controlled by the researcher. Recording the interviews allowed the researcher to focus on the individual participants and to take notes for clearer analysis and to note non-verbal cues that may add color or clarification to the responses. All interviews were transcribed verbatim using Zoom's audio transcription service. Transcripts were carefully reviewed and edited to match the recording of the participants' actual words. Verbatim transcription is time-consuming but allowed the researcher to be as intimate with the data as possible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Transcribing the interviews allowed the researcher to listen to the responses multiple times, as well as have a written copy on which to make memos and interview notes. Participants were sent copies of the transcripts to allow them to make any corrections they felt necessary for clarification and better understanding.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis happens simultaneously with data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As suggested by Merriam and Tisdell, during this study, data were analyzed iteratively as they were collected, allowing for data refinement and the following of varying lines of questioning during interviews. Data analysis was both inductive and deductive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Inductive analysis was used to create abstraction among themes by identifying patterns, building categories, and developing themes from the bottom up (Creswell, 2013). As the themes were defined, the data were analyzed deductively to determine whether more data needed to be collected to support each theme (Creswell, 2013). Thus, the data were iteratively and cyclically analyzed. This process required organizing the data; developing classifications and themes; reviewing and creating memos, and describing and interpreting the data to discover meaning (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, Saldaña, 2016).

Managing and organizing

The collected data were uploaded to a cloud-based, secure server. The location is password-protected and only the researcher has access, thus mitigating data loss and ensuring protection. All data will be maintained for a minimum of three years, according to Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards before being destroyed. Microsoft Excel and PowerPoint were used as tools to graphically organize the data. Microsoft Word was used to create and store transcription data. A computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CADAS) tool, Quirkos (http://quirkos.com), was used to assist in organizing and managing data coding information, as recommended by Saldaña (2016). Quirkos is a document tagging tool to aid in creating codebooks for qualitative analysis. Using these tools helped the researcher manage, organize, and keep track of the large amount of data collected, and to maintain consistency throughout the analysis stages.

Reading and memoing

Interviews were transcribed from recordings immediately, converted to Microsoft Word documents, and edited for accuracy and clarity. Each transcription was reviewed by the participant upon completion. The researcher began developing codes and taking notes upon initial review. Each transcript was reviewed multiple times to ensure a full understanding of the data. The researcher kept memos in a notebook and online of any thoughts and ideas related to methods, theories, hunches, and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Saldaña, 2016). Memos on methods were used to ensure interview questions were appropriate for the research goals and to ensure consistency between participants. Methods memos were used to ensure appropriate strategies for collecting data were being maintained. Analytical memos were used by the researcher to gather thoughts, hunches, and initial patterns in the data. Memos on analysis were also used to record insights that might be lost otherwise. Memos on theory were used by the researcher to make the links and connections between application and practice. Theory memos helped the researcher develop the write-ups to justify the study's objectives, tie together the themes, and to help place the findings into context.

Memos were stored in Microsoft Word documents, uploaded to a cloud-based location, and stored with the transcripts as they were analyzed. The location for memo and transcript storage is password-protected and only the researcher has access, thus mitigating data loss and ensuring protection. Hard copies of memos are stored at the researcher's home and will be kept in a safe, secure location. All data will be maintained for a minimum of three years, according to Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards, before being destroyed. Each memo contains the date and major topic as a way to assist the researcher in developing a pathway to an evolving understanding of the data. Memos were written as data were analyzed and coded and were used to develop thematic context.

Describing, classifying, and interpreting

Qualitative research analysis relies on defining a link between the collection of data and their meaning or explanation. The term for this analytical linking is “coding.” According to Saldaña (2016), coding is usually a word or short phrase that creates a symbolic link defining the essence and summative meaning of the data. Coding allows for easy retrieval and organization of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The first cycle of analysis started with initial coding. The following cycles collected common codes into analytical contexts and axial coding was applied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Saldaña, 2016). In vivo coding was used as appropriate to pull direct quotes from the data in the participants’ own words. Coding of the data began during the first read-through and continued until the full meaning was derived from the data.

Coding can allow for lumping and for splitting of data. Transcripts were coded and recoded (Saldaña, 2016), allowing the researcher the flexibility to reflect on what the data were saying and to group and regroup as appropriate. This process allowed the researcher to organize and reorganize as the data were collected and analyzed, and as meaning was extracted from the information, and continued through the reporting process.

Broad categories were created from the codes. Categories of similar meaning defined emerging themes. Themes are the outcomes of analytical reflection and categorization (Saldaña, 2016). Themes are longer phrases or sentences that describe what the unit of analysis is about. Themes are the explanations to the “why” of the data and can be created by linking together concepts introduced by interviewees (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Themes were formulated from the data and were kept or dropped as determined by evidentiary support.

Representing and visualizing

Multiple methods were used to represent and visualize the data. The researcher used both electronic and manual methods. A Quirkos file was created to allow a flexible method to organize the categories of data. This method provided a simple way to quickly view the quantity of data within each category, assign tags to organize data in more than one category, when needed, and to visualize patterns within the data fragments. An Excel spreadsheet was used to represent the demographic data to better understand the pool of participants and to analyze the results of the EES. Individual transcripts were read and coded using Quirkos as a way to group and understand the emerging themes. This was a highly iterative process that helped ensure ideas were represented within the appropriate themes and allowed the researcher to consider (and reconsider) the meanings of each passage (Saldaña, 2016). Microsoft PowerPoint was used to graphically display the categories, themes, and sub-themes which allowed the researcher to visually understand the correlation between data links.

Trustworthiness

Basic qualitative studies are not designed to find an absolute truth (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2002). The aim of a qualitative study is to find a reality relative to the experiences of the participants in the study. The researcher in a qualitative study is the study's instrument of data collection. Still, internal validity is an important factor in research. Therefore, ensuring the validity of the data is an important consideration when collecting and analyzing information for a qualitative study. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), validity in qualitative research, however, is also relative. Qualitative studies, therefore, strive for trustworthiness of the data collected as a form of internal validity. For this basic qualitative study, trustworthiness was strengthened through the collection of rich, thick data. The analysis included direct quotes from all participants to ensure richness and provide a connection between the data and the research questions (Anney, 2014; Elo et al., 2014). This study was also strengthened through the use of triangulation through multiple informants (Anney, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and member checks (Anney, 2014; Savin-Baden, 2013).

Rich, thick descriptions

Rich, thick descriptions are often associated with transferability (Anney, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Anney (2014) stated that thick description also entails providing full details on methods and context. Providing thick descriptive details allows other researchers to reconstruct the study within their own context (Anney, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rich, thick descriptions help to contextualize the study so readers can determine for themselves if the findings are transferable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

In this report, the researcher laid out the context of the study. As data were collected, the voices of the participants came through the interviews and were included in the analyses. Each participant provided details of her employment context and her experiences with engagement strategies and the motivations that drove the employment of these strategies. Interpretations and findings reflected participants' own voices.

Triangulation

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) noted one of the most common forms of internal validity, or trustworthiness, is triangulation. Often associated with land surveying and navigation, triangulation relies on multiple measurements that converge on a single point. Triangulation helps to reduce researcher bias and serves to cross-examine participant responses (Anny, 2014).

In qualitative research, the multiple measurements may be different data sources or multiple similar sources that present data from differing viewpoints (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This qualitative study used interviews from participants of different work experiences, different employers, different geographical locations, different educational backgrounds, and different generations or age groups. The study was strengthened by allowing participants to voice their experiences from these differing and very personal perspectives (Elo et al., 2014).

Member checks

One technique, by some considered the most crucial strategy for establishing credibility of qualitative data (Anney, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), is member checks, sometimes called *respondent validation* (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Member checks is a method that allows participants to check the data they have provided, for example via interviews, to ensure their voice has been properly represented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data that have been analyzed and interpreted are sent back to participants for evaluation. Participants may suggest changes if they are unhappy with the interpretations, whether as socially undesirable or simply incorrect (Anney, 2014). Member checks should be conducted continuously as data is collected, allowing the researcher adequate feedback to ensure acceptable reconstructions of the participants' realities (Anney, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this way, the researcher fulfills their duty to "include the voices of respondents in the analysis and interpretation of data" (Anney, 2014, p. 277). Member checks is one way to remove bias by creating reconstructions that are recognizable to the participants in the study (Anney, 2014). Receiving agreement from the study's participants on the accuracy and adequacy of representations and interpretation by the researcher can go a long way in establishing trust in the readers of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

In this study, interpretive summaries of interviews were provided to each participant during the interview to assess participant intentionality. The participants were then able to help construct the results based on their realities. Participants were allowed to accept the researcher's interpretation, correct as desired, or make additional comments. The process aided the researcher in the various stages of analysis. Participants were also provided with complete, verbatim transcripts of the interview and were allowed to edit, add, delete, and clarify as they saw appropriate. Participant feedback was incorporated in interpretations and analyses. As suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), participants were able to comment on initial and emerging themes and analyses as the study progressed.

Ethical Considerations

Studies focused on human subjects always carry a certain amount of risk. To help mitigate that risk and protect the rights and welfare of human subjects, the University has instituted an Institutional Review Board (IRB). Oversight of all human subjects research is the responsibility of the IRB. Approval from the University of Arkansas IRB was obtained before participant recruitment was launched or data were collected. All ethical safeguards were appropriately detailed in the IRB application. All participants received for signature an informed consent form, a copy of which is attached in the appendix (see Appendix G).

To maintain confidentiality, all data were electronically stored in an encrypted and protected cloud-based location. The researcher is the only individual with access to the storage location. Participant names were replaced with pseudonyms. Any identifiable information was stored separately from unidentifiable information. The process for managing and protecting confidential information was discussed with each participant and was outlined in the informed consent form.

There was a risk participants would be uncomfortable answering questions about their work habits and strategies. Participants were reminded that the interviews were simply informational and that there would be no communication back to their supervisors or colleagues. They were also reminded that all identifying information was masked or removed from any printed documentation. In addition, participants were informed that they may withdraw from participation in the project at any time.

There was no monetary benefit to participants in the study. This study was designed to investigate EE strategies employed by legal assistants working in a law firm to engage, remain engaged, and reengage when necessary in their work. Participants were offered a copy of the resultant study after publication.

Researcher Subjectivity Statement

There is a debate in the literature about the place of subjectivity in a qualitative study. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) recommend being upfront about the subjectivity of the researcher. Marriam and Tisdell (2015) claimed that the mere act of interviewing assumes subjectivity. Patton (2002) has declared the death of subjectivity in qualitative research. To rise above the debate, the researcher wished to be open and transparent about possible subjective biases in this study.

The researcher for this basic qualitative study had worked in the legal field for over 13 years. He has also worked in flat organizations for over 30 years. His major field of employment has been HRD, mostly from a training perspective. He has likely formed both conscious and unconscious biases around HRD interventions. He has designed and delivered thousands of courses for individuals, as well as for small and large organizations. Some organizations he has worked with have deep, rich hierarchies. Most organizations he has worked for, however, have been hierarchically flat organizations. Over the past several years, his main focus has been providing career development for legal assistants in a large law firm.

The choice of literature for discussion in Chapter 2 may also have imparted some form of bias. In qualitative inquiry, it is not possible to separate the instrument of analysis from the researcher, nor is it desirable to attempt to do so (Patton, 2002, Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The literature collected may represent a bias toward the researcher's experiences.

The researcher approached the engagement phenomenon with an eye toward individual responsibility. This bias may ignore organizational responsibility in the engagement process, however, every effort was made to allow participants to share their own perspectives as they relate to the phenomenon in question: strategies legal assistants bring to engage, remain engaged, and reengage in their work as necessary, and why they choose to employ these strategies. As the coding process began and the data analysis unfolded, those biases may have become clearer.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the methods that were used in this basic qualitative study, the research design, and how data were collected, interpreted, and analyzed. A basic qualitative research design provides an elegant framework for understanding human phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2002). Humans construct their reality from their interpretations of the phenomena they experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2002; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). As shown in chapter 2, the preponderance of the literature discusses the onus on organizations to engage employees, such as what employers can do, how HRD interventions can be developed to increase engagement, etc. This study was designed to bridge a gap in current research regarding the obligations workers have in EE. In particular, this study looked at strategies legal assistants employ to engage, remain engaged, and reengage when necessary in their work. Participants were interviewed and were asked to verify interpretations and analyses of their own experiences with engagement strategies. Trustworthiness of the data collected and ethical considerations were also discussed. Chapter 4 will present the key findings that emerged from the in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The in-depth analysis included participant comments and research notes and memos.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the key findings from a thorough analysis of semi-structured interviews, observations, and analytic memos written throughout the data collection process. The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify strategies used by legal assistants to engage, stay engaged, and reengage, when appropriate, in their work. Much research has focused on strategies organizations may use to increase employee engagement (EE), but little has focused on what strategies employees bring to their work to increase EE. The central research question for this study focuses on the employee side of the EE equation and was addressed by examining the following questions:

1. What strategies do legal assistants employ to engage, remain engaged, or reengage when appropriate?

2. What are the drivers that cause a worker to employ engagement strategies to reengage when disengagement happens?

This chapter begins with a summary of participant demographics, followed by a discussion of the participant replies to the main research questions. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the findings.

Participant Demographics

Sixteen legal assistants participated in this research study. Each participant completed the Employee Engagement Survey (EES) (see Appendix B) prior to participation in the study. The researcher was looking for legal assistants who self-identified as highly engaged in their work, as defined by achieving an average score of 3.5 or higher on the EES. The ESS was specifically not designed to label "high engagement" or "low engagement" to avoid leaders weaponizing the tool against employees. Rather, an aggregate score is taken with lower scores indicating one is less engaged and higher scores indicating one is more engaged (B. Shuck, personal communication, February 3, 2020). The score of 3.75 was chosen by the researcher to screen for more engaged legal assistants, using a 5-point Likert scale with 5 being the highest. The score of 3.75 was the natural break in scores, with the next lowest score being 4.33. Table 1 shows the distribution of responses to the EES.

Table 1
Results of Employee Engagement Survey

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Average
3	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4.75
5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5.00
5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	4.92
5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	4.83
4	4	5	4	4	5	5	4	5	5	5	4	4.50
4	4	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4.67
5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4.92
4	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	3.75
4	4	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4.75
4	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4.83
5	5	5	5	4	4	4	5	4	4	4	4	4.42
5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	4.92
3	3	5	3	5	3	5	5	5	5	5	5	4.33
4	5	5	5	4	5	4	4	5	5	5	4	4.58
4	4	5	5	4	5	5	5	4	4	4	4	4.42
4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4.92
4.25	4.44	4.94	4.50	4.63	4.75	4.75	4.81	4.63	4.81	4.75	4.63	4.66

After the interviews were completed, each participant completed an anonymous demographic survey (see Appendix D). Of interest in this study were gender, age, experience, organization size, and education. A discussion of the demographic survey results follows. See Table 2, Full Participant Demographics, for more details.

All 16 participants (100%) identified as female. The legal assistants reported ages ranged from 27 to 70 years, with a mean age of 47.2 years. The time participants have spent in their occupation ranged from 3 to 40 years, with a mean of 22.6 years. The time with their current employers raged from 1 to 20 years, with a mean of 5.6 years. One (6.3%) of the legal assistants' highest formal education ended with a high school diploma, five (31.3%) had some college, four (25%) received an associate's degree (AA/AS), and six (37.5%) had bachelor's degrees (BA/BS). None of the legal assistants in this study had a graduate degree. Twelve (75%) of the legal assistants obtained professional certifications as either paralegal, legal assistants, or both. Seven (43.8%) of the study participants hold a paralegal certification, one (6.3%) holds a legal assistant certification, and four (25%) hold both a paralegal and a legal assistant certification. (See Table 3, Summary of Participant Demographics). The legal assistants in this study worked in Washington, Oregon, and California, although that was not a question on the survey.

Table 2
Full Participant Demographics

Gender	Age	Time at firm	Time in occupation	Number attorneys at firm	Highest formal education	Professional Certifications
F	42	17	20	40	AA/AS	Paralegal
F	70	8	30	34	Some college	Paralegal
F	47	20	27	675	AA/AS	Paralegal
F	60	0	35	0	Some college	
F	51	5	25	86	Some college	
F	48	2	7	500	BA/BS	Paralegal
F	62	6	40	250	AA/AS	Professional Legal Assistant
F	37	1	14	100	BA/BS	
F	45	5	30	500	HS	Paralegal Professional Legal Assistant
F	28	3	3	500	BA/BS	

Table 2 (Cont.)
Full Participant Demographics

Gender	Age	Time at firm	Time in occupation	Number attorneys at firm	Highest formal education	Professional Certifications
F	48	8	30	0	AA/AS	Paralegal Certified Legal Assistant
F	50	1	31	700	Some college	Paralegal Professional Legal Assistant
F	42	1	23	100	Some college	Paralegal
F	56	6	25	1	BA/BS	Paralegal Certified Legal Assistant
F	42	3	17	0	BA/BS	Paralegal
F	27	4	5	2	BA/BS	Paralegal

Table 3
Summary of Participant Demographics

Demographic characteristics (n=16)		n
Gender	F	16
Age		
Range	27 to 70 years	
Mean	47.2 years	
Time in current position		
Range	1 to 20 years	
Mean	5.6 years	
Time in occupation		
Range	3 to 40 years	
Mean	22.6 years	
Number of attorneys at firm		
Range	0 to 700 attorneys	
Mean	218 attorneys	
Education		
HS	6.3%	1
Some college	31.3%	5
AA/AS	25.0%	4
BA/BS	37.5%	6

Table 3 (Cont.)
Summary of Participant Demographics

Demographic characteristics (n=16)		n
Professional Certification		
Paralegal	43.8%	7
Legal Assistant	6.3%	1
Both	25.0%	4

The study included 16 participants who work or have worked at law firms in Washington, Oregon, and California. Since this study includes personal feelings, including how participants approach their work and employers, each participant was assigned a number to be used as a pseudonym in the transcript as a way to ensure anonymity and to make the participant feel comfortable sharing personal information. For the narrative to flow more smoothly and to humanize the responses, the researcher has replaced the numerical pseudonym with a name (see Table 4).

Table 4
Participant Pseudonyms

Participant #	Pseudonym	Time in Career (years)
01	Marie	5
02	Sally	17
03	Suzanne	25
04	Margaret	23
05	Linda	31
06	Lisa	30
07	Stephanie	3
08	Julie	30
09	Karen	14
10	Kelly	40
11	Shari	7
12	Cheryl	25
13	Rebecca	35
14	Hannah	27
15	Anne	30
16	Micah	20

Overview of Categories and Themes

Each person in this study had a unique experience and a distinctive story about their work experiences with EE. There were, however, 10 themes that emerged from the data which addressed the study's two primary research questions regarding strategies legal assistants use to engage, remain engaged, or reengage when necessary, and what are the internal drivers that cause a legal assistant to employ these strategies. This study reports on the collective story of the 16 participants in how they engage in their work and what drives them to do so. Figure 1 shows an overview of the categories, themes, and sub-themes that came from the data.

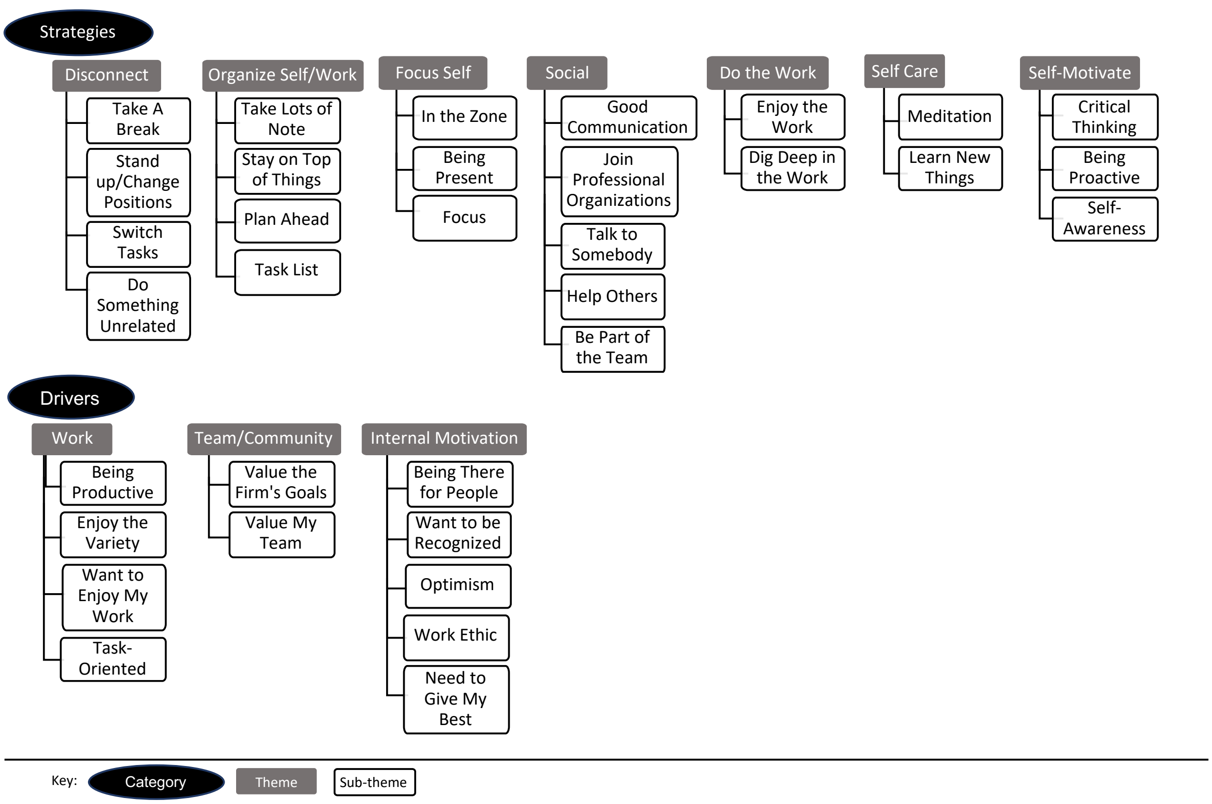

Figure 1
Overview of Findings: Categories, Themes, and Sub-themes

Category 1: Strategies

Employee engagement appears to be a source of concern for organizations globally, with less than 15% of workers worldwide reporting full engagement in their work (Gallup, 2017b).

The focus of this study was on legal assistants who reported high levels of engagement. Of particular interest was engagement strategies employed by these workers to engage, remain engaged, or reengage in their work when necessary.

The legal assistants in this study used a variety of strategies ranging from how they work and how they disconnect from work, how they organize themselves and their work environment, to how they socialize, take care of themselves, and self-motivate. Figure 2 provides an overview of the themes and sub-themes clustered around the first category. What follows is a discussion of the strategies employed by the participants in this study. Although each individual talked about their personal experiences, many participants shared similar ideas in their strategies to engage in their work.

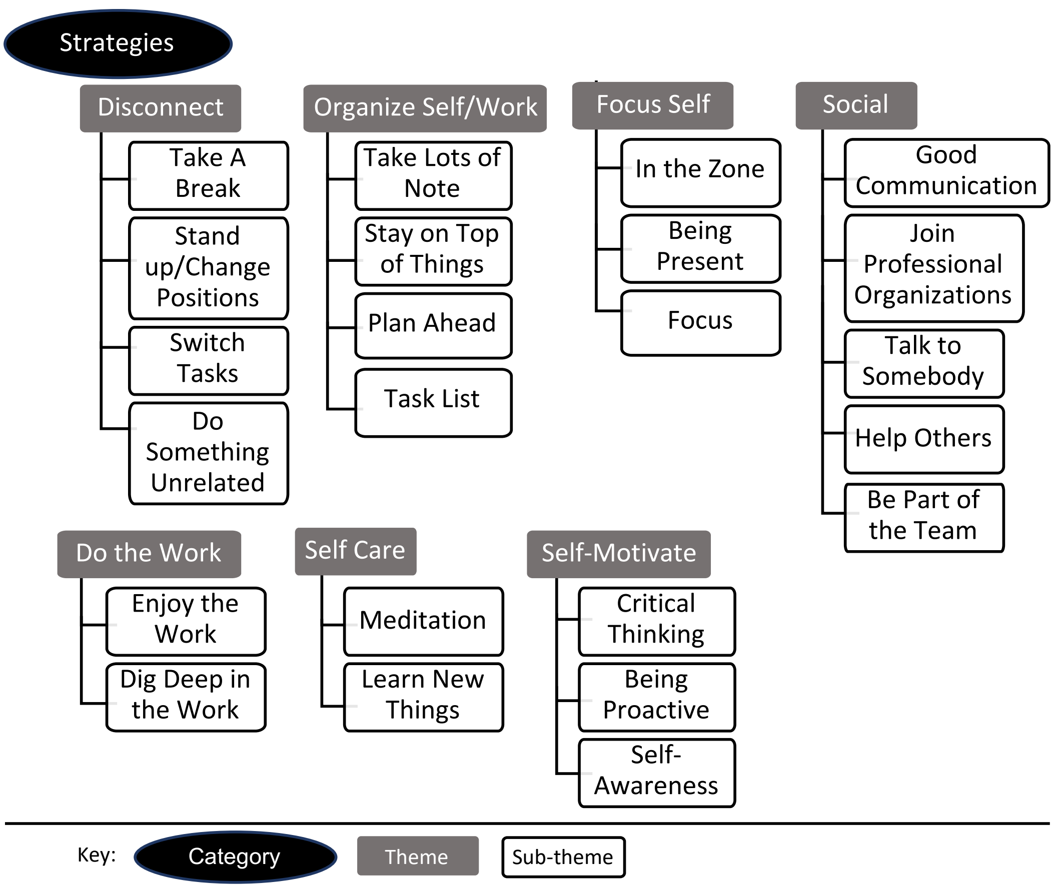

Figure 2
Overview of Category 1: Strategies

Disconnect. One of the most common strategies cited by the study's participants for engaging, remaining engaged, or reengaging in work is to disconnect from that work. Of the legal assistants in this study, 81.3% cited some form of disconnection as a strategy to get connected or to reconnect to the work.

Take a Break. Taking a break was cited by nine participants (56.3%) in some form as a strategy for engagement. According to Julie, "pauses and breaks are very, very important in this kind of work." Breaks included walking away, eating snacks, and getting coffee. There were also comments about the reasons breaks are helpful and how to take them.

Kelly recommended to "take breaks throughout the day," indicating that breaks can be "between 15 minutes to an hour." Stephanie agreed, saying "you can take this, like, five to ten-minute break" and come back ready to engage. Karen concurred, claiming "I also do take my breaks." She recommended to "get some fresh air and just like go outside and just get some sun." Stephanie commented that when she knows she has lost focus it is time to take a break. Hannah said that simply "removing yourself from the situation for a few minutes," which can include getting up and taking a walk, is enough to reengage.

Breaks include getting outside, as Karen noted, and can also include some kind of distraction, getting food, water, or coffee. Marie said, "It might mean looking at a funny video on the Internet briefly for five minutes." Stephanie recommended getting "a snack or water or coffee, and then come back" ready to work. Or maybe "you need some caffeine" (Julie). Julie figured "I'll grab a snack. I'll grab a drink…It may be a lack of protein. Sometimes you just need to eat something." Anne said, "I go and get M&M peanuts. I have found them to be a big help…I bought four of the jumbo, jumbo size bags, and I'll snack on them when I need a comfort-food break."

Several participants found taking a break to be good for their mental health. Julie said, "I walk away from my desk. It's the best thing that you can do. You just need to step away from that computer, look at something else…sometimes for mental purposes." Marie agreed, saying, "I think trying to take those rest breaks and just kind of giving in to them I think ends up better for my morale overall." Lisa called these short breaks "mental rest stops." As Sally put it, "sometimes you might just need a break, because your brain's not operating the way it's supposed to…so you walk away and just come back and get right back to it. I will conquer this." Sometimes those breaks need to be longer. Anne said, "I took a few days off and came back in a better mood. I just really needed to take a break." Julie recommended, "Give yourself a bit of a break. You're going to wake up tomorrow. You're going to have renewed vigor and energy. And you're going to jump on this and you're going to run."

The reasons for taking breaks varied. Marie, Lisa, Sally, and Anne all talked about the mental health benefits of even a short break. Anne talked about taking a break to chat with coworkers as a source of support. Marie talked about taking many breaks when she is "working on something and I just don't feel like I'm getting the work that I want done on it."

Stand up/Change positions. Standing up, changing positions, and exercise were strategies cited by 10 (62.5%) of the legal assistants in this study. Similar to taking a break (above) standing up and changing positions is a strategy cited when participants "just need a moment… [and] just need to step back" (Julie). This strategy includes stepping away from difficult situations, taking a walk or other form of exercise, switching locations, or just standing up.

Hannah stated for her that it is important to "remove yourself from the situation for a few minutes." Grabbing a cup of coffee or getting some fresh air and "getting up, leaving the situation, getting some clarity, and then coming back to it" keeps her engaged in her work. Karen agreed, saying in "a lot of instances…I wanted to just pull away [and] take a breather." Lisa echoed that comment, saying "I have to just like push away and step back, take a breather." Julie also talked about the "need to step away for a second." Sally concurred, saying she needs to either "get up and walk away, or I need to switch tasks." Julie kept things in perspective by adding the work is "on standby and I'll come back to it."

Eight participants (50%) talked about taking a walk or exercising. Hannah said, "Sometimes when I felt completely unengaged, I would just get up and just walk the floors." Others, including Julie and Kelly, like to walk outside around the neighborhood. Shari added that taking a walk "will then make me come back and reengage." Karen uses walks to get away and "take a breather" to help her stay engaged. When she is clearly "not focused," Stephanie needs to "stand up, walk around." Julie wanted to make the point that a lower level of engagement "doesn't mean that I'm going to walk away from it. It means I'm walking away from it for a moment."

For some people, a change of scenery is important to remain engaged. Karen, Stephanie, and Sally each said they like to get up and switch locations, working from another room or workspace. Both Julie and Susan like to get out of their offices and move into the kitchen. Even without moving away, sometimes standing up or just changing her position is enough to reengage for Stephanie. Julie stated there are times she has been at the computer so long:

> you're going cross-eyed…it might be [time] to step away…I just need a break. I need a moment. I need to…walk away from my desk. It's the best thing you can do. You just need to step away from that computer, look at something else.

Marie agreed that taking a walk kept her engagement levels up when "looking at the same materials for so many hours."

All the participants appeared to be aware of when they were disengaging. Kelly commented that she will often notice she gets “less engaged as the day wears on. I’m very aware of that.” Susan remarked, “I know I’m not engaged because I’m not doing what I’m supposed to be doing when I’m supposed to be doing it.” Sally said she knows she’s no longer engaged when it is easier to just get up from her desk and do something else. They also appeared to be aware of their need to take some kind of action to reengage when they are feeling disengaged. Susan went on to say, “When I’m not engaged I get up. That’s what I do. I get up…I’ll go to the kitchen…at work or…at home, because I don’t want to sit here anymore. I’m not engaged.”

The legal assistants found there were benefits to stepping back from their work. Lisa mentioned it helped her in figuring out where her focus needed to be. Sally added that stepping away and taking a walk was important for clearing her thoughts “because I know I’m not going to be able to address [the work] with everything it needs to be addressed with.” Julie found stepping back gave her “a little bit more balance” and a better mindset to then “com[e] back at it with a fresh pair of eyes…ready to go jump in again.”

Switch Tasks. Seven (43.8%) of the legal assistants in the study talked about switching tasks as a strategy to either remain engaged or to come back and reengage in their work. Sally discussed knowing when she is no longer “addressing things…with the same vim and vigor,” it is time to switch to new tasks. Kelly also said that as she notices herself becoming less engaged, she considers what she needs to do to switch things up. Julie and Susan both concurred that switching the work tasks helps them reengage. Switching it up can mean different things, including doing other tasks that need to get done, managing email, or finding simpler, less intense work.

Susan commented, “I might be working on something and I’m not very engaged in it, so I’ll switch and I’ll look at email or I’ll do something else,” because she knows she is not addressing the work with her full attention and capabilities. After switching tasks, she will then return to her primary work more engaged. By switching tasks, Susan is looking for things that will excite her, force her to go outside her normal work, and make her happy. Julie, on the other hand, looks for routine work she can “kill off” allowing her to put more thought into the major projects she is working on so she can “pick it back up and go with it.” Anne will take up proofreading work for various attorneys, even those she is not assigned to. She said it allows her to focus her concentration on something completely different and come back refreshed for her normal work.

Julie has organized her work so that there is a lot of variety. She makes sure to have “work that…allows me to bounce around…[and] allows me to be almost constantly engaged.” If she feels disengaged from one project, she can “jump back and forth…if I get frustrated, or need to disengage…for any reason.” She keeps several projects going she can engage with. Lisa does something similar. She keeps several minor projects going so she can “work on these 10 smaller things so that I feel I can get some low-hanging fruit tackled.”

Do Something Unrelated. Ten (62.5%) of the study participants talked about doing something that is not related to the work they are doing as a strategy to engage or reengage when they feel they are losing engagement with a project. Ideas ranged from reading and managing their email, reading their attorneys’ email to taking out the trash or doing the laundry. Hannah even found taping her baseboards to be a successful strategy because “it’s quiet and I can actually bring myself back to being focused.”

The participants provided many examples of unrelated tasks. Some were still work-related, while others were more personal. Shari talked about cleaning up and organizing files in the document management system. She also talked about keeping specific client-related activities organized. Cheryle spoke of looking “for the little things to do that I wasn’t able to do during the week,” or what Shari called “stuff that sort of sits there.” Anne and Shari spoke about keeping email organized and “making sure that you’ve responded [to] and handled” everything (Shari). Reading email is also “often very entertaining because they are sarcastic, and they curse, and it’s funny” (Anne). Linda works on content for a presentation she does for legal professional organizations. Marie keeps up with paperwork tasks, getting signatures, and scanning in documents, stating that those automated tasks allow her to reengage. Anne likes to take breaks to find out what is going on by reading the legal news and researching social issues surrounding legal cases of her attorneys.

Not all the unrelated breaks were work-related. As noted above, Hannah talked about taping her baseboards in preparation for painting her walls. Kelly reads “something non-work-related because that helps me” stay engaged in the work. Julie will step away and “take the dogs out…go get the mail…bring up the garbage cans…clean something…talk to my daughter…talk to my boyfriend…something completely non-work-related, because you just need to step away for a second” to stay engaged. Sally also spoke of getting the mail and bringing in the trash cans, as well as putting in a load of laundry. “I will physically change what I’m doing,” she said. Marie spoke of texting her husband or just “give myself a different thing to look at that’s not a computer screen.”

The legal assistants talked about how doing something unrelated to their work benefitted them as a strategy for engagement. “That thing kind of helps,” said Hannah. “Removing yourself from the situation for a few minutes…leaving the situation, getting some clarity, then coming back to it" helps Hannah remain engaged:

> When you're doing something like [taping your baseboards] that absolutely gives you a few moments to think about what you're doing and what you know needs to be done. Moving on to something, when I'm unengaged with work, moving on to something else that's just completely outside of work, it kind of brings me back in. It makes me refocus, it refocuses me on the things that I actually have to get done at work because now I'm taking some time away from work to do something else. (Hannah)

Anne concurred, "Just focusing on something else for a little bit [allows me to] get back to being my fully engaged self…sometimes I just need to do something different." By completing smaller tasks, Lisa said, "I'm still being productive. I'm just being productive on other things that end up making me feel more accomplished so that I'm bolstered to do the big, bad thing." Marie said:

> although a lot of people think those [smaller tasks] are really boring, I like to save those up because I think that it's pretty straightforward and easy…I'm still getting things done, which makes me happy…I can shut my brain off and there's not really anything to it…Sign. Stamp. Scan.

As Anne said, "Sometimes mundane work needs to be done." Sally said that getting away for five to 10 minutes allows her to approach difficult work problems "in a little bit different way." Reading her attorneys' email helps Anne stay abreast of what they are working on and gives her insights into their cases. Anne also said reading legal news and corresponding social issues is "a little break for my mind" and gives her a "front-row seat…and…an insider perspective" into some of the bigger issues the country is facing. "It's kind of soothing when I'm in that 'I don't really want to deal with what's on my desk right now'" frame of mind.

Organize Self/Work. Organization was the most common category of strategies cited by the study's participants for engaging, remaining engaged, or reengaging in their work. Of the legal assistants in this study, 93.8% cited some form of organization, either of self or their work, as a strategy to get connected or to reconnect with the work they do. Organization strategies included preparing themselves, preparing their attorneys, and preparing the chunks of work they perform.

Take Lots of Notes. Two (12.5%) of the legal assistants in this study talked about notetaking and list-making in the sense of strategies they use in the organization of their work. Lisa talked about taking notes when in meetings as a way to stay engaged. She also talked about heading to her desk immediately after a case meeting to begin setting up files for her notes in the document management system, noting the case caption, necessary motions for filing, and determining the depositions that will be coming up. Making lists keeps Lisa engaged in the case from the beginning. Susan discussed making notes on what needs to get done and putting those notes "somewhere where I'm going to see it." The notes keep her focused on the work she is performing.

Stay on Top of Things. Seven (43.8%) of the participants in the study talked about how they stay on top of the work as a strategy to remain engaged or to reengage when engagement levels wane. Strategies included keeping on top of casework, keeping track of attorneys, and making sure to have everything one needs on hand. Other strategies to help keep on top of the work included making lists of project needs, setting alarms, and sending themselves email.

Rebecca said she tries to stay on top of the case, making an effort to be in the middle of things. Micah said she is always "keeping the case moving through the process, whatever the case is." Engagement strategies for her included making sure investigators were interviewing the right people, reading through interview notes looking for "needles in the haystack and what sort of statements can be used in our favor and what statements can be used against us" and letting the attorneys know. "I think that's my drive, to keep it rolling" (Micah). Anne said keeping on top of everything is "a part of myself that I bring…I pay extreme attention to detail and I care about things" working well. Strategies for keeping on top of cases included making to-do lists and using the list to plan out the projects. Lisa said the lists allow her to "step back and say, 'Wow, okay, I've got these 50 projects, but only two of them are due tomorrow, not 50 of them." It helped her stay engaged in the work by making her "feel a little [less] frazzled." Keeping on top of attorneys was also cited as a strategy to stay engaged. "Staying on top of them and bugging them is also one of my strategies. I actually write down in my notebook, 'Well, bug this attorney, bug that attorney'" (Hannah).

Other ways to stay engaged in the work included setting alarms and sending email reminders. Susan said she sets alarms on her phone. "You know what? You keep getting off track here, you need to reengage, so set an alarm on your phone to say, 'Hey, by this time you have to do this because it's going to take an hour" (Susan). Susan also sends herself email because "I'm constantly checking email…[email and alarms] work real well…[to] reengage myself."

Keeping her surroundings organized and "staying with what I need within reach" (Linda) helps keep Linda engaged. She tries to keep "a glass of water at my hand so I don't have to get up and go to the kitchen, which…[has] this gorgeous view" encouraging her to look outside rather than stay engaged. Marie talked about keeping herself organized before starting work. Her strategy is to start work mentally before showing up at the office. Marie said this strategy helps keep her on top of her work and fully engaged from the start of the day.

Plan Ahead. Seven (43.8%) of the legal assistants in the study talked about planning ahead as a strategy to stay engaged. Planning included setting long-term and short-term goals and keeping calendars. Marie said, "My focus is either on the task at hand or kind of the plan for the day." Other plan-ahead strategies included giving others "down the line" what they need and keeping an inventory of tasks for projects.

Shari makes an effort to stay engaged. She said, "I strive to stay engaged…I have goals set and things I want to accomplish each year. That keeps me focused and engaged…I think highly engaged people set goals for themselves and work hard to get them." Kelly agreed. She approaches each day with a set of goals she needs to accomplish that day. "I feel like having a list of goals or tasks in front of me every day helps me be more engaged" (Kelly).

Karen talked of using her calendar as an engagement tool, allowing her to think ahead and look ahead at the projects and tasks. Marie keeps engaged by maintaining focus on the plan for the day. "I'm one of those people who wake up in the morning and I'm lying in bed and I'm kind of planning out…what I want to accomplish for the week…knowing what my attorneys' deadlines are" (Marie). Marie also said she plans her outside activities based on her work engagement, always anticipating what's on the agenda:

> On Tuesday night, my husband and I are maybe going out to a movie. I want to make sure that I get to bed at a decent hour. Otherwise, my brain won't be there on Wednesday and I won't be able to deal with the deadline very well. (Marie)

Getting things to other people "who will receive output down the line" (Stephanie) is a strategy discussed by Stephanie and Lisa. "I try to be a very organized person and I have a very high volume" (Lisa) so managing the workflow is important to Lisa. Stephanie said, "I feel the most engaged when I'm really trying to make the paralegals' job easier…so that they have everything and they have every single piece, that nothing is lost…It's just a really appealing zone." Stephanie added that finding tasks that she enjoys keeps her engaged in the work:

> I will…inventory what I have pending…what are the open tasks…trying…to find not necessarily the next by importance, but by what I actually enjoy doing, and then using that as the gateway. 'Okay, I'll do this and that'll feel really good.' And then we'll repeat down the list. (Stephanie)

Task List. Eight (50.0%) of the study's participants talked about using lists and notebooks to stay engaged or to reengage in their work. All of the eight said they are task- or list-oriented. They also discussed how lists enhance their engagement. Hannah summarized what all eight discussed when she said, "I'm a list person…just being very task-driven, I think, shows when I am engaged."

Each of the eight participants who discussed lists talked about lists being a key strategy in staying engaged or coming back to engagement when they feel engagement waning. Hannah said, "I'm a list person. I like making lots of lists. I have lists on my phone, on my Alexa. I have handwritten lists. And so when I'm fully engaged, I have my lists." Cheryl keeps lists to maintain engagement with all the cases she works on and teams she works with. Shari keeps lists to "make sure I'm keeping track of everything that needs to be done," tracking attorney-client relationships. Kelly keeps task lists and goals lists. She said she feels keeping her goals in a list in front of her each day keeps her more engaged. She said:

> The way I look at every day is a list of my goals and a list of my tasks. Maybe a list of my projects. That's how I like to start my day off so that I know what's ahead of me. (Kelly)

Stephanie also keeps lists of her projects so she can engage in those tasks that bring her the most pleasure. Julie commented that when she becomes less engaged she slows herself down, takes a few breaths, and goes to her list. Lisa said that her lists help her to focus and "not feel like everyone's pulling on me at the exact same time." Anne said the first thing she does each day is to go through her list to know "exactly what projects need the most attention" which helps her engage and makes her feel energetic. Shari said it makes her feel good to check things off at the end of the day. "I feel like that is my way to engage" (Shari). Kelly also said it helps keep her engaged to be "constantly checking things off the list."

Focus Self. Another common category of strategies among the legal assistants participating in this study was finding ways to focus on the work. Fourteen participants (87.4%) cited getting in the zone, focus, or being present as a strategy to get engaged or to reengage with the work they do. Participants also described how being focused felt and how that enhanced engagement.

In the Zone. Nine of the study participants (56.3%) talked about getting themselves into the flow of the work and "generally pretty tuned in to what I'm working on" (Cheryl). Stephanie described it as "just kind of a zone." Marie, Stephanie, and Lisa also described getting "in the zone" as a strategy to get fully engaged. Keeping the workflow going and moving quickly is one of the strategies used to get in this zone. Karen said, "Being involved with your desk and your attorneys so that you can create a team flow and environment" keeps her engaged. Micah described her strategy as "making sure the flow of the work is going smoothly…firing the work out…sort of moving [it] along at a fast pace" She said, "That's when I can tell I'm fully engaged."

Knowing one is in this zone was described as important to maintaining the strategy and staying engaged. Kelly said, when she is fully engaged, "the day…flies by and I'm not tired…I'm so focused on a project that I'm not aware really of anything else going on around me." Stephanie said time just disappears. Rebecca, Stephanie, and Lisa all talked about working right through lunch. "All of a sudden…I feel hungry. Why is that? Oh, because it's lunchtime. I've been working on this project for four hours straight!" (Lisa).

Being Present. Six participants (37.5%) talked about making yourself present in the work as a strategy for being engaged. Hannah spoke of "being present in your desk and your assignments," as well as being involved with attorneys and the practice groups. Shari simply said “being there” is her strategy. Marie said her strategy is “being present and try not to be focused on things that are outside of the office.”

Anne said her strategy is being highly conscientious. Hannah’s strategy to be engaged included being “present…be[ing] active…stay[ing] involved…not to be sleepwalking through the day or…through a task.” Stephanie agreed, including “capturing [your] energy…mentally…emotionally…in whatever the task…is in front of [you] and in [your] daily responsibilities.” Lisa called this “putting your all in or, like I said before, my 150%.”

Focus. Eleven participants (68.8%) talked about being focused as a strategy for staying engaged. Lisa, Linda, Kelly, Julie, Anne, Susan, and Marie each discussed getting focused on her work. Kelly and Julie both talked about being focused from the moment they get into the office and not allowing themselves to be easily distracted. “It’s kind of the way I operate” (Kelly). Julie talked about having tunnel vision and being laser-focused on the tasks for the day. Linda’s strategy is to be “hyper-focused” and block out normal distractions. Marie found it easiest to focus on only one thing at a time and not jump around. She said she gets better engagement when she’s focused on one thing at a time.

Many of the participants talked about removing distractions. Susan said she becomes less engaged when she’s thinking about the dishes, or the laundry, or an email that just came in. “To make myself reengage, I have to say, ‘Stop to do this!’” (Susan). Shari, Marie, and Linda talked about removing distractions as a strategy to stay engaged. Linda mentioned tuning out barking dogs or yelling kids, and ringing phones. Marie talked about not looking at her phone and not paying attention to things happening outside the office, but staying focused on the plan for the day.

Shari talked about being in tune with the task at hand, and not letting the mind wander, and not worrying about what other people are doing or not doing. One of Shari's strategies is to turn her back on the hallway so as not to be distracted by passers-by. Julie said paying attention to what she is doing helps keep her focused and engaged. Micah said her strategy is to keep herself alert and "making sure everyone is paying attention to the work that's coming in and going out." Anne agreed. An engagement strategy for her is "paying close attention to everything that I'm doing…concentrating on doing the best job that I can. I pay extreme attention to detail" (Anne). Strategies for maintaining focus varied, but Karen and Linda both said putting on music helps. "Music plays a big role…it helps me focus" (Karen). Linda uses music to "minimize outside noises that could otherwise catch my attention."

Julie and Lisa said staying focused keeps them engaged when the work gets difficult. Julie talked about being overwhelmed after missing a day of work. By staying focused, she was able to push through and catch up, adding to her feelings of engagement in the overall work. Lisa said some days she just needs to push through the feelings of overwhelm, focus, and "find a way to want to work and get my job done." She added, sometimes it's a post-engagement feeling of "Wow, I spent all this time on this thing and look how much I've gotten done…four hours have gone by and I only thought it was an hour" and that keeps her engaged going forward.

Social. Participants in this study talked about strategies that may be classified as social in nature. Thirteen participants (81.3%) cited communication, professional organizations, helping others, and being part of a team as strategies they employ to engage, remain engaged, or to reengage in their work.

Good Communication. Two of the participants (12.5%) talked about communication as a strategy of engagement. Shari said voicing an opinion helps her stay engaged or reengage if she has pulled away from a project. Lisa found communication to be key to being engaged. “If you’re not communicating with somebody the right way, things are not going to get done” (Lisa). Good communication can keep her engaged while poor communication will negatively impact her engagement. Lisa said, “It’s really important to understand what the other party’s communication style is…make sure that the communication is appropriate and open between parties” if you want to stay engaged.

Join Professional Organizations. Joining a professional organization was cited as a vital engagement strategy by three (18.8%) of the study participants. Rebecca thought “every legal secretary should belong to a professional organization.” Margaret said about defining her engagement strategies, “The other important thing…is finding outside associations, outside memberships that help you manage….To reengage is to spend time with colleagues.” Margaret has been inspired to work harder and engage more as she met “colleagues that are going through the same things and may even be better so that you can aspire to be like them, so you have somebody to look up to.” Margaret was inspired to gain multiple professional certifications by meeting colleagues through professional organizations. Shari said professional organizations provide camaraderie with people from other firms. When she feels unengaged, Margaret goes back to meetings and goes teaching through the professional organization. “When I feel I’m getting disengaged, or I’m just down and I’m thinking this is not going to change, I run to my professional organizations…my colleagues” (Margaret).

Professional organizations were cited as places to reengage through classes, networking, exposure, and learning about other people’s experiences. Rebecca was sent to attorney conferences, bar association meetings, and Capitol Hill hearings because of her involvement in professional organizations. These experiences kept her more engaged in her work experiences.

Shari and Margaret were able to learn new tactics for handling work projects by attending professional organization meetings and conferences. Sometimes "there's somebody else [who] has an idea that I just couldn't think of because I hit a roadblock" (Margaret). Rebecca built a network of colleagues around the state, many of whom assisted when she needed help, because "when we belong to our local association, that gives us membership in the state association….I went to a lot of conferences and met a lot of people."

Talk to Somebody. Taking time out to go talk to a coworker was mentioned as an engagement strategy by nine (56.3%) of the participants in this study. Sometimes the discussion was work-related, other times a non-work-related chat seemed a better choice. Sometimes the other person was a dog. Talking allowed legal assistants in the study to vent, share ideas, "clear things up" (Shari), reconnect, or just spark a desire to reengage in the work.

Hannah said, "Sometimes when I felt completely unengaged I would just get up and just walk the floors, maybe go have a conversation with a colleague." Stephanie talked of similar experiences. "If I was feeling particularly unengaged…I would go talk to someone for like five or 10 minutes. Just a little socialization. Maybe that person's energy kind of also helps spark some new energy for the afternoon." Hannah said she would talk to a colleague about work and:

> she'll start going through this list of things and then it may give me a moment like, 'Oh, okay. I'll be right back, I gotta go. Something she's said that dings me and kind of refocuses me. It's like that trigger word…and then you're back at your desk and engaged again. (Hannah)

Anne recounted a similar experience. Talking to colleagues:

> would help to get reengaged because sometimes we're facing similar challenges and we're frustrated about something that's happening [at the courts]. Just vent a little bit and get support, then you can kind of go back and deal with it with maybe a little bit less resistance. (Anne)

Margaret found that sharing "whatever you learn so that you are not recreating the wheel" with colleagues helped her and her colleagues stay engaged. "Anything I learned about the courts or the clerks or any inside information, I get to share among my colleagues so that we're all on the same page" (Margaret).

Not all the experiences the participants shared were work-related. Karen said she likes to "touch base with some of my coworkers, check in with some of my attorneys, kind of work and not work. Just, you know, keeping that connection going" helps to stay engaged. Kelly agreed, saying one engagement strategy she likes is to "not talk about work for a little bit…talk about whatever's going on in the world. Something not related to work." Julie took that a little further when she said:

> I have my pets…including my therapy guy....When I need a break, he actually recognizes that and he'll jump into my lap. He can feel me getting maybe a little stressed and he'll jump in my lap and just stay here…while I type.

Julie said this allows her to stay engaged.

Help Others. Helping others as a strategy for engagement was cited by five (31.1%) of the participants in this study. Helping can mean training someone in a new skill or aiding in completing a big project. Rebecca said she "would stay engaged by training other people that were working on the case…with whatever they had to do." Bringing work from other assistants to the working attorneys and making edits also kept Rebecca engaged in her work. Stephanie shared a similar experience:

> Offering to help someone else out is actually a really good way I've found to reengage myself. I put my best foot forward for someone else's projects…and refocus and then reengage and use that way to kick myself out of disengagement, too.

Margaret talked about helping as an engagement strategy for herself and the person she is helping: "I find someone I can help that really likes what we're doing and likes being in this field and they can succeed." Kelly also found it engaging to help and added, "It makes me feel good to think that I've really helped people."

Be Part of the Team. Five (31.1%) of the study participants cited being part of the case or matter team, being part of a professional team, and staying in the loop as strategies for engagement. Rebecca said being part of the case team kept her engaged. Micah agreed, saying she likes "to be part of the client meetings or any attorney team meetings," making herself "present at the table" so she can fully engage in the casework. Both Anne and Cheryl agreed, saying it is important to be part of the team. "If you fall out of the loop, you fall out of the excitement of being in the middle of a case or attached to a team or really getting into the meat of the case" which is the heart of engagement for Cheryl.

Rebecca said engaging with a professional organization helped her engage with her work. The organization provided a community of support that helped keep her engaged in the profession, as well as in her daily work. Margaret said she has a "tribe I will text. If I'm feeling really down, I will text them with, 'This is what I'm encountering. What do you do?'" That tribe is made up of her colleagues in various professional organizations where she is a member. Margaret said:

> When I'm disengaged and I'm just ready to, like, I'm done. I'm just done. I call them like, 'All right, this is what happened.' And there's been a couple times where they're like, 'Listen, you're wrong. You need to go back in there and apologize and figure it out because you know, you gotta figure this out.

This is her strategy to get reengaged during difficult times.

Do the Work. The legal assistants in this study talked about strategies around the idea of doing the work. Thirteen participants (81.3%) said enjoying and taking pride in your work and digging deeper into the matters are strategies they employ to enhance engagement in their work. They also discussed taking pride in the act of being engaged in what they do.

Enjoy the Work. Ten (62.5%) of the study participants talked about making sure to enjoy the experience of working in the legal field as a strategy they bring to their work engagement.

They also talked about sticking to mundane tasks because they enjoy the overall work. Julie said, "I like the work. I want to be doing it. I'm one of those who love what I do." Susan agreed and added that if she "hate[d] doing this, then I'm not engaged." Sally said she is engaged because "I really enjoy what I do. I really, really love my job…I want to keep doing more." Anne said her engagement comes partly because she enjoys her work. The work is not always fun and enjoyable, according to some of the legal assistants. In these situations, the participants relied on their strategy of enjoying the overall work and sticking to the task to get them through. Sometimes "your expectations go out the window, and when that happens, you've got to pick up the pieces and keep going" (Julie). Other times, a task is boring "but I know I have to do it" (Lisa) and try to "always power though it…suck it up and buckle down and get to it" (Marie).

Participants also talked about taking a sense of pride in what they do and translating that to enhanced engagement. Shari said, "I think it gives you this sense of pride that you're doing what you should be doing and are happy with what you're doing." Sally agreed with that feeling, finding it an emotional experience "because I take pride in what I do." Anne commented that it matters to her how the work product looks. Cheryle added, "I take a sense of pride in being engaged." That sense of pride extends to the firms these legal assistants work for. Julie called it "firm pride." She continued, "It's going to come out of our office or from my client through me and it's going to reflect on either of those, so it's really important to me to have that engagement in the work that I do." Micah agreed, "I want to represent them in a way where I feel good about what we're saying to the court…to opposing counsel, so that's what keeps me engaged, personally."

Dig Deep in the Work. Digging deeper into the work was cited by 10 (62.5%) of the participants in this study. The strategies used by these legal assistants included taking action on their own and being proactive in their engagement. “I really like to be really involved in a project. I get a lot of satisfaction from that” (Stephanie). “Once I turn on that computer, I’m engaging myself. I plug in” (Julie). “You have to be proactive” (Rebecca). When she is not busy, Cheryl said, “I just accept it and look for the little things to do that I wasn’t able to do during the week.” Stephanie tries to “look for new opportunities…something to help kick me out and light a fire a little bit.” Lisa said she has always believed “that if you finish your task and you have nothing to do, find something to do, go ask for something to do…when I’m finished with this, what else can I do?” Sally commented that employers want someone who can think for themselves and keep themselves involved and busy. By looking for the work, Anne feels more connected to the cases and the attorneys working on them. “In order to reconnect with…that good energy, I just will look around and find something” (Anne). Cheryl will “look for little things so they don’t fall through the cracks.” Shari credited being busy with her high level of engagement and other people’s “lag time that makes them totally disengaged and doing things that they shouldn’t be doing.” Shari said she keeps busy “because that keeps me engaged…when I feel myself getting out of being fully engaged…when I’m not doing something or being involved in what I’m looking at or whatever, I’ll find something.” Sally had similar comments. For her “it’s very easy…to stay engaged because I’m constantly going from one to another to another to another.”

The legal assistants in this study discussed the strategy of digging deeper into active cases and matters. “Always [be] part of the case” (Rebecca). “I’m really like in deep in the work” (Kelly). “I try to work a lot with my attorneys. Are there things that I could do that…[I can take] off their plate” (Stephanie). Margaret pays close attention to court details so she can ensure documents are written according to individual court and judge preferences. Micah said she stays engaged by digging deeper into cases:

> I'm not just reading the pleadings to proofread them, I'm reading them to get a deeper understanding of what the case is and sort of stand behind what the client is standing up for. I like to be part of the client meetings or any attorney team meetings so that I can understand our position completely. (Micah)

Rebecca agreed, "You have to really kind of read into the correspondence that you get." Cheryl tries to get as much information as possible "because I want to be part of it. I want to know what's going on in the cases." Lisa said, "I'm going to dig into whatever project I've got going on." Anne added that on days she feels unengaged:

> I just go and read [my attorneys'] email. It…gives me more information about the cases that we're working on. I'm getting a bigger picture behind the scenes, nitty-gritty, what it's like for them dealing with the judge, and what it's like dealing with opposing counsel, who they often disparage, and so that is helpful to me. (Anne)

Not being involved early in cases had the opposite effect on Cheryl. "I found myself becoming a little disengaged because I wasn't in those meetings and I didn't really know what was going on" (Cheryl).

Self-Care. Six participants (56.3%) in the study talked about various strategies that were of the self-care nature to enhance engagement in their work. In particular, they talked about meditation and learning. Both strategies provided a chance to refocus on their engagement efforts but in different ways.

Meditation. Two (12.5%) of the legal assistants in the study talked about meditation and stress. "My whole motivation for it is like I need to feel less stress" (Lisa). When Lisa sits back and takes "just a mental breather," she can "reprioritize…I feel so much better…I can focus on things I need to focus on." Julie agreed that "sometimes the work gets really pressured. It can be overwhelming with the volume that we have." She added, "You always have to work on ways to keep yourself in good spirits and flowing." The strategy Julie uses is breathing, although she said she is considering yoga, as well. "I lean back in my chair. I relax. I stare at the ceiling and I take several deep breaths and I just relax and breathe. That's number one: Breathe." Julie uses meditation breathing to bring her blood pressure down, slow herself, and reprioritize. "When I sit back and think, it's just relaxing" whether she is thinking about a project or just staring at the clouds. "You need to disengage to reengage" (Julie).

Learn New Things. Eight (50.0%) of the participants in this study talked about learning as a strategy to maintain or enhance engagement. "I'm always learning new things and I get personal satisfaction…so to me, that's a big deal to keep me engaged" (Lisa). Margaret suggested "continuing your education as much as you can." Cheryl said, "I get as much information as I can on whatever case we're working on. That ignites my initial engagement." Shari recommended taking extra training and continuing learning education (CLE) to remain engaged, "I have hundreds of hours of CLEs." Stephanie talked about learning new technology tools as a way to stay engaged. "I really like that learning something new automatically triggers, like, 'How could this work in my daily day-to-day uses?'" (Stephanie). Learning new things, she said, gets her more engaged. Margaret's strategies include taking CLEs, learning court rules, as they change regularly, and staying active in professional organizations and the training they provide. Sally said closely reading case materials allows you to "learn a lot of new techniques or situations that have come up. Every situation is different." Anne reads legal articles in the news and researches social issues that relate to cases.

Learning is important enough to these participants that they recommended making time for it. Cheryl "made a point of carving out time…even though it's going to be a really busy day. That's how I'm getting reengaged." Stephanie said one of her engagement strategies is to "try to find opportunities for improvement or learning." Margaret agreed. Her strategy is to "take additional courses, constantly improving, finding new ways" to adapt to the work and stay engaged (Margaret). Being curious is another strategy for enhancing engagement. Shari observed that "a lot of people that don't engage haven't had the background, the education, the knowledge, or have the curiosity to know more about what it is they're doing. They just don't have that drive to really know what they are doing and ask the question and get the education." Shari went on to say, "I just don't know that I could do it without having ever learned those things…and kept learning and growing." Margaret shared that going through all the certifications took a long time. Now she shares her knowledge because "it's reengaging helping out others who are just starting. That's really engaging because you're going back and you're thinking. You remember why you got into this in the first place."

Self-Motivation. The legal assistants in this study talked about strategies that required self-motivation. Thirteen participants (81.3%) discussed strategies they employ to enhance engagement in their work, including thinking critically, proactively addressing problems, getting involved in casework, and taking control of their careers. They also discussed being self-aware and self-critical.

Critical Thinking. One legal assistant (6.3%) talked about her critical thinking strategies. Sally explained that she is not going to work as a "gobot" automatically doing what traditionally legal assistants have done. Her recommended strategy is to "bring their own beliefs and values and work ethic" to remain engaged. "I can think, obviously, and think for myself…and it's my thinking and attention to those details…they do appreciate the fact that I can do a lot of deeper thinking, that it's not just a matter of I can put something in this bucket and put something in that bucket" (Sally). Sally believes she stays more engaged in projects because she likes to "think about them and then I can give them a more thorough and accurate answer when they're asking for my advice."

Being Proactive. Nine (56.3%) of the participants in the study talked about proactive strategies for staying engaged in their work. Karen talked about "being proactive with what's on your desk so that…your attorneys feel supported" as one strategy. Lisa recommended seeking out the incentives and finding other ways to stay motivated. Lisa said, "I choose my work, I choose my projects." Shari said to be curious enough to learn about the cases, look up the prior case references and court rules, look up words that you don't understand. Sally added reading defendant statements. Anne said to read emails between case team members. Cheryl said to call the court and shepherd through court orders and decisions. Anne called these strategies her "way of feeling connected to the attorneys and [knowing] what's really going on with the case," thereby feeling more engaged in what she is doing.

Sally also recommended asking questions and not just going along with things. Try to understand how the law works. By following these strategies, Cheryl said her coworkers "don't have to second-guess or check up on me" which makes her feel more engaged. Hannah likes to "make sure every step is followed" even if keeping ahead of the case makes her look "bossy." Micah said it makes her feel engaged. "That's my drive, to keep it rolling" (Micah).

Self-Awareness. Seven (43.8%) of the participants in the study talked about the need to be self-aware to engage, stay engaged, or reengage in the work. According to Linda, knowing yourself and your limitations is a strategy to reengage when things are difficult. She learned that her disengagement did not mean she was escaping. She "needed to figure out how to reapply what my interest is in the first place…then reengage because of that motivation" (Linda). She recommended not to be too critical of yourself, but to "use it as a reflective tool to help lessen the harshness of the disengagement" (Linda). Margaret added that "you have to really look at the situation and know your limitations…it's an introspective thing." Anne agreed that knowing yourself is an important strategy. "I'm pretty well aware of my mood and energy level, It's just a way of taking care of myself, being kind to myself, to notice how I'm feeling and try and make it better in some way" (Anne). Kelly talked about limitations on engagement and said she "noticed that I'm starting to get less engaged as the day wears on…[so] what do I need to do to switch [things] up?" Taking time out when energy levels drop was recommended by Julie and Linda. Julie also suggested sticking to regular working hours that match your energy levels.

Being able to set your own expectations is another strategy Linda talked about. "If I go into it knowing whatever productivity needs to happen, I'm good. I'm capable of doing that and not be hard on myself about it because it's my expectation, no one else's." Margaret said a strategy for her engagement "is to know that you're in the right career, and not just something you fell into. This is what I worked for, I went to school for, I studied for…it's something that is of value to me." Margaret continued to say you should be sure this is what you want, otherwise, you will not like it and not be engaged. Rebecca agreed, "For me, it was not just a job, it was a career and I was a professional at what I did."

Kelly realized that she is self-competitive and uses self-talk to get herself engaged. "I have a competition with myself…[to] see how much I can get done during one day." When she wanes in her engagement, Kelly says to herself, "You've been here before. What have you done before when you're feeling like this? And think how good you're going to feel once you overcome this and you get reengaged again. Think how good you're going to feel." Kelly also believes in self-rewards as a way to stay engaged, such as a workout at the end of the day, or a beverage with her friends.

Category 2: Drivers

The previous section discussed the strategies employed by the legal assistants in this study as they engage, remain engaged, and reengage when necessary in their work. Those strategies were grouped into themes and sub-themes based on similarity of the responses from the participants. The following will address the results of the second category of findings: Drivers.

The purpose of this section is to talk about the impetus the legal assistants in this study felt as they chose a particular strategy. Drivers ranged from how they approach work to how they feel about working in communities to the types of internal motivations they experience. Figure 3 provides an overview of the themes and sub-themes clustered around the second category. What follows is a discussion of the drivers impelling the employment of strategies by the participants in this study. Although each individual talked about their personal experiences, many participants shared similar ideas of what drives them to employ strategies to engage in their work.

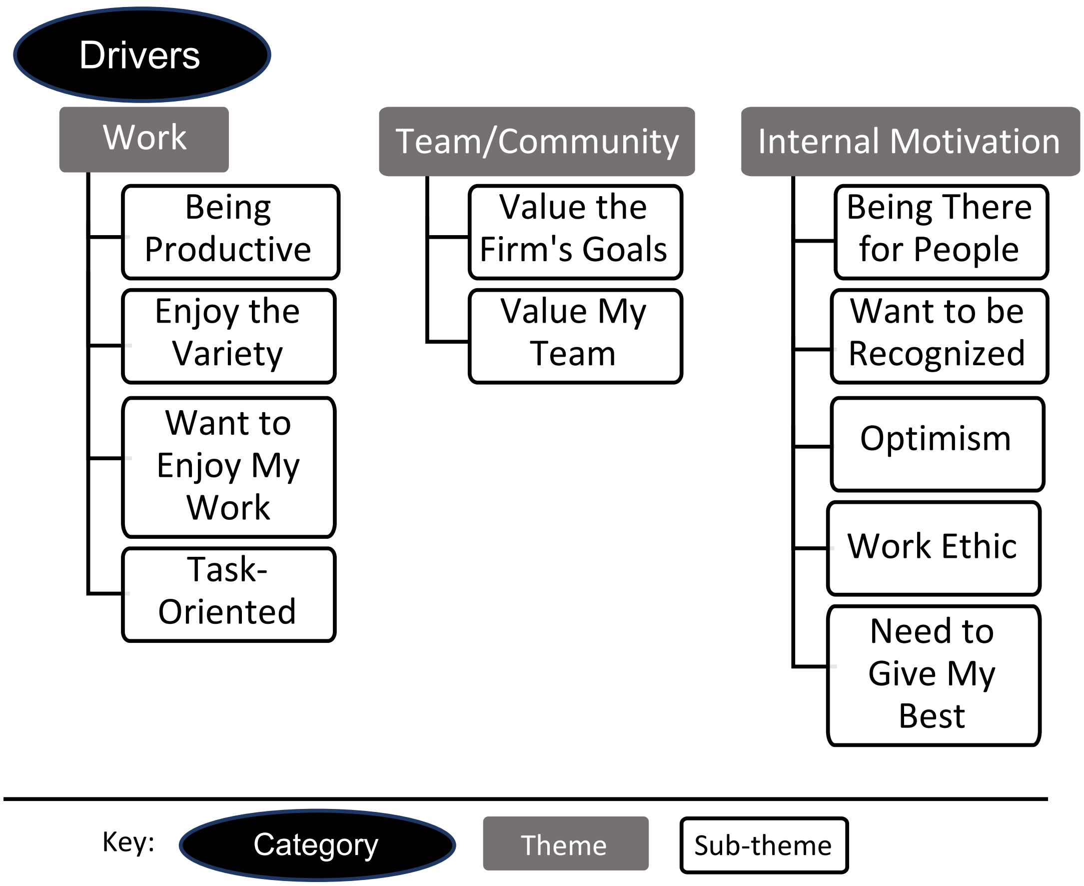

Figure 3
Overview of Category 2: Drivers

Work. Nine (56.3%) of the participants in this study talked about work-related drivers that pushed them toward the engagement strategies they employed. Work-related drivers included the perceived need to be productive and being goal- or task-oriented. It also included an enjoyment of the variety of work they are asked to perform, as well as the desire to enjoy the time they spend at work.

Being Productive. Of the participants in this study, three (18.8%) talked about feeling a need to be productive while at work. Shari said she felt that she needed "to be doing something that is productive if you're there" at work. Shari felt she needs to be "a productive person in society…More than anything, that's what drives me." Shari also spoke of an "innate need to do the right thing" which she described as being busy. Kelly is motivated by productivity competition. “I have a competition with myself every day [to] see how much I can get done.” Kelly and Marie are driven by a “rewarding sense of completion” (Marie) when everything is done. “I just like to get things done. I like to get things done” (Kelly).

Enjoy the Variety. Two (12.5%) of the legal assistants in the study cited an enjoyment of the variety of their work as a primary driver for choosing engagement strategies. Susan spoke of the use of different senses to stay engaged. Julie talked about “doing the same things, but it’s constantly different at the same time….It’s ever-changing, so each piece of the puzzle is something new, and it’s rewarding. Having the ability to work all this different stuff, learning new things, that’s what keeps me going every day” and drives her to use her strategies to stay engaged.

Want to Enjoy My Work. Six (37.5%) of the study’s participants talked about a need to enjoy their workday as a driver to engage. Enjoyment ranged from the need to stay busy to a deep love of the type of work they do. Stephanie talked about not finding it “satisfying to just sit around or not like” what she is doing all day. I like that feeling of productivity and…doing my absolute best” (Stephanie). She would rather be “in that zone of just handling all of my tasks and materials; I just find that really satisfying. There’s just way too many hours working this job to spend it unsatisfied.” Kelly said, “I like to be busy.” Anne does not “like feeling bored.” Margaret said, “I want to reengage if I start to feel like I’m not engaged.”

Love of the work and desire to be doing the work were discussed by Karen, Julie, and Anne. Anne is driven to be engaged because “I want to be doing this job.” Karen’s engagement motivation “stems from like, I genuinely love the legal field. I feel like that’s my go-to. I kind of tap into that when I feel myself [disengaging]. It really is because I really do like it….You have to love the field you're in, and I genuinely love the field I'm in." Julie echoed that sentiment saying:

> I love the work that I do. I keep going because I love the work. I do what I do because I love it straight up. I love it. I love my job. I can't imagine doing anything else. It's all for the love of law…I can't help but be engaged because I really enjoy this stuff (Julie).

Task-Oriented. Three (18.8%) of the participants talked about being driven by the need to complete tasks and accomplish goals, which are often due by strict deadlines. Susan looked at all the tasks as "a lot of balls in the air, all the time" and finds herself motivated by the deadlines. Kelly described her motivation as being task-oriented. She likes to set short-term and long-term goals. "It makes me feel really good at the end of the day if I can knock out a bunch of those things that were on my list" (Kelly). Marie agreed, saying she likes to check things off her "imaginary checklist, and sometimes the real checklist that I have in front of me. Overall, I really enjoy being task-oriented."

Team/Community. The connection to the team and the firm was cited by seven (43.8%) of the study's participants as a driver for employing engagement strategies. The team included both within the firm and outside the firm. Sharing values with the firm was also cited as driving engagement strategies.

Value the Firm's Goals. Two participants (12.5%) talked about sharing the firm's goals and values as a driver of engagement strategies. Sally spoke of sharing "the same values and work ethics" of her firm. She found it important to know those values were part of their mission statement. "I value those values" (Sally). Marie also talked about the firm's mission statement as a driver for her. "I value our team and our goals that we have as a firm together. I think all of us being on the same page about our mission statement and really believing in what we are doing makes me a better worker overall" (Marie).

Value My Team. Valuing the team and being part of a team was cited by six (37.5%) of the legal assistants in the study. The team included colleagues inside the firm, as well as those outside the firm, often found through networking within professional organizations. Rebecca talked about the motivation she gets to engage because of the resources she has built throughout the state. "When you belong to a professional association…you actually have a resource…that can help you" work in areas outside your normal jurisdiction. Rebecca said she stays engaged working on long-distance projects because she "can call one for the legal secretaries that I met at a conference and ask them to help me." The driver for building those networks is her enjoyment in "talking to people." Rebecca likes "going out and meeting people…I just enjoy that."

Valuing the team you work for and with was a driver for Cheryl, Karen, Julie, Hannah, and Marie. "Working for good people drives me" (Hannah). Julie agreed, saying, "Who you work with makes all the difference in the world. It…does not hurt to work with the most amazing team…If you don't have good people surrounding you, you're not going to be engaged." Karen talked about "that relationship you build with your colleagues" as "a big motivator." She added, "When you have the support, it plays a big impact" for engagement "because it turns more into like a family." Cheryl said she wants each of her "attorneys to really believe and feel that their practice is important" to her. Karen said she is driven to employ engagement strategies because she "genuinely love[s] this firm" and is "really enjoying it." Marie said, "I really value my bosses. I value our team" which keeps her working to stay engaged. She was reminded of other firms where she "didn't feel that connection to the supervisors or the company or the bosses or whatever" and that caused her to not want to make her best effort to engage.

Internal Motivation. The most common set of drivers cited by the participants in this study were internal motivators, such as pulling their weight, pleasing the client, feeling trusted, and feeling respected. Similar drivers were a sense of optimism, not wanting to feel unappreciated, having a strong work ethic, and not wanting to create extra work for themselves or others. Fifteen (93.8%) of the legal assistants cited some form of internal motivation as a driver for employing engagement strategies.

Being There for People. Ten (62.5%) of the legal assistants in the study talked about how they like to be there for the people they work for as a driver to employ engagement strategies. “I like the feeling that I wake up, I go to work, and I make a difference in someone’s life. Not just my own, but someone out there” (Margaret). Hannah stated, “I hate to feel like I let people down and it fills me with guilt and unease.” Margaret agreed, saying she wants that feeling that “you’re not gonna let anybody down.” Susan said her driver is she does not want people mad at her. “If I’m not doing what my attorneys want, they’ll call me on it…I don’t want to be called out on it. It’s almost like you’re gonna get in trouble. I don’t wanna get in trouble.” Hannah thought it was “the fear of failure or fear of looking like a failure” that drives her to employ engagement strategies. Lisa said the fear of “inadvertently missing something that’s really important” drives her. “The motivation for why or when I need to employ my strategies is…the fear of missing something important that I maybe didn’t realize was important” (Lisa). Marie added, “there’s a lot of trust in me.…My actions, the way I get tasks done reflects on [my attorneys’] reputations, as well as my own.” As Micah said, “I don’t want it to fall flat or I don’t want it to fall in anyone else’s lap.”

The participants in the study felt the responsibility toward the people they work with and for was a driver. Stephanie wants “to pull as much weight as possible.” Lisa spoke of following through with what she had committed to do. She added, “If I committed to something, I likely had an interest in it in the first place” (Lisa). Margaret wanted to make sure her attorneys see her as an anchor in the storm and that “their success is my success.” Marie called it “being that stable rock for people.” Shari wanted to make sure her attorneys see and feel her enthusiasm for her work and their practices. Julie is motivated to please the clients: “I love the client. I want to get this done. I want to make them happy.” Marie said she was also motivated to please her clients and is “happy to say, pretty much all our cases…have been great successes and gotten the client the desired outcomes.”

Want to Be Recognized. Eleven (68.8%) of the study participants talked about the need to be recognized as a driver for employing engagement strategies. The responses were split between wanting to be successful and wanting to be appreciated and respected. Hannah talked about wanting to be “successful in what I do” as a motivator for employing her engagement strategies. She added, “I hate failure within myself” (Hannah). Cheryl said she employs engagement strategies because “I want to succeed. I want to win and I want to be at the top of my game…and be acknowledged for what I do.” Kelly employs engagement strategies because she likes “to get ahead…[get] good references…good recommendations.” Micah agreed that she wants “to keep a good reputation and that’s probably the biggest drive.” Julie built a very particular practice, which is a success she takes great pride in. “I think engagement means pride, as well. You can’t have pride in your work and not be engaged. You can’t be engaged in your work and not have pride in what you do. They go hand in hand” (Julie). She added, “I’ve taken myself to somewhere where I never believed I thought possible and that helps me with engagement” (Julie). Marie agreed that success is a driver for her engagement. “I know how others perceive our actions, so I think that makes me want to come into work and be ready to take on whatever happens” (Marie).

Being appreciated for their work is also a driver. Hannah is motivated by working for people "you feel not only appreciate your work but respect it…it shows your value. It shows they value you." She added, "When you have people who don't appreciate your work, it's easy for you to become unengaged and disengaged. Working for someone who respects your work, trusts your work is really important and it helps keep you engaged" (Hannah). Margaret put her motivation to employ engagement strategies this way, "It's not good to feel disrespected." Cheryl talked about one of her attorneys calling her because he had not heard from her on a matter, knowing that was not like her. She said:

> It meant a lot to me because he called me because he knows this is not like my assistant. It gives me a sense of pride that they depend on me so heavily and that I can provide that kind of assistance, where they know they can count on me. (Cheryl)

Kelly concurred, saying, "It makes me feel really good and confident…because obviously they trust me enough to know I can do the high trust-level tasks they send me." Cheryl recognized "there's a deep need in me to feel needed. I want them to think that there's no way they could do their jobs without me." This sentiment was echoed by Stephanie who wants the respect that comes for producing a good work product that adds value to their practice. She said, "I get a lot of satisfaction form demonstrating to my attorneys, or even my coworkers, that I am a valuable resource for them" (Stephanie). Micah added, "I want to make sure that the attorneys and anyone else on the staff know that they can rely on me to get a job completed."

Optimism. Five (31.3%) of the participants discussed their desire to feel good about themselves as a driver to employ engagement strategies. Anne said she "want[s] to feel good as much of the time as possible." Margaret concurred, saying she employs engagement strategies to avoid feeling down. "It's not good to feel down…I can't handle being on the low. It bothers me and I take it to heart" (Margaret). Because her job is stressful, Susan said she employs engagement strategies that are “going to make me not stress out later or tomorrow or whatever.” Similarly, Lisa said the “motivation for why or when I need to employ my strategies is [to avoid] feeling overwhelmed, avoid feeling anxious.” Julie called herself optimistic, and that drives her motivation to employ engagement strategies. “I seek the pleasure…the bright light.”

Work Ethic. Nine participants (56.3%) talked about their work ethic as a motivating driver to employ engagement strategies. Being productive was a common theme for the participants in the study. Shari, Lisa, and Micah all said they cannot just sit around during working hours. Shari’s work ethic, which she described as “innate”, tells her she:

> wouldn’t feel like it was okay to be being paid to not do something that was firm progressive. You need to be doing something that is productive if you’re there. When I’m at my desk, I expect to be doing something that’s a benefit to the company and engage as best I can with everything that I’m doing. (Shari)

Lisa said her motivation comes because “I owe my employer my time when I’m there. I owe my employer quality work and so I’m going to dig into whatever project I’ve got going on.” Lisa added, “I want to do a good job.” Micah said, “I like to make sure that all the things that I’m responsible for that people depend on me for [get] completed.” Stephanie added, “I really care about the end product. Being disengaged works against that. I’m likely to make more mistakes. I’m less likely to notice things…that could be really important if everyone on the team manages to miss it.” As Micah pointed out, “This is the job that I am hired to do. [It’s] a responsibility aspect for me.” Anne commented that even the simple tasks are important to get done. Stephanie talked about her motivations to do more than what is required and mentioned working around other people who “know exactly where their job boundaries end” and are not willing to go beyond that. “They just have fences around what they’re willing to do and engage with” (Stephanie). Julie’s work ethic included doing as much as possible for the clients she works with and “help to achieve their goals, which are my goals.”

Kelly felt her work ethic is simply a part of herself and is key to her motivation to engage. “I’ve always been this way thought my entire life. It’s just the way I run. It’s the way that I run. I also don’t want to lose my job, by the way” (Kelly). Lisa felt likewise: “This is what I do.” As Sally said, “That’s my value system. I have a lot of difficulty in not performing to the degree that I know I’m capable of.” Micah’s engagement driver is her “very strong work ethic” and the fact she “like[s] to do a good job.” Marie added that it is a “sense of duty to other people, that responsibility that I have in my position makes me end up getting whatever done” and focusing on engaging. Micah summed it up: “I am a responsible adult. I thrive on that.”

Need to Give My Best. Eight (50.0%) of the legal assistants participating in this study talked about giving their best and completing the job as drivers motivating them to employ engagement strategies. “I take pride in my job and I have a lot of integrity around that” (Cheryl). Shari said she employs engagement strategies to “ensure that I am doing what I need to do” to meet her goals and complete work to her best ability. Kelly added that engaging so she can accomplish good work “makes me feel good about myself. I like a sense of accomplishment.” Shari said she has “that innate need to do the right thing…do the best I can. I think those are the things that motivate me more than anything.” Linda wanted to make sure to see projects through to completion. When asked what drives her engagement strategies, she replied, “For me personally, that would be the desire to finish something that I’ve started. I want to see the end result. And I’m willing to do the work to get there.” Sally agreed:

> It’s that desire that I can’t leave something undone and I can’t leave it done improperly. I can’t do something poorly. I can’t just leave things not done right. It would probably gnaw at me and I would not be able to sleep if I left something that I knew I didn’t give it my best. (Sally)

Stephanie is motivated to be engaged because “being disengaged, you’re just not going to notice nearly as many things and my work product goes down and I don’t feel like it’s a good reflection of what I want to be putting out into the world." Lisa said she employs her engagement strategies because she does not want to "create extra work for myself or others" and does not want to spend "more time on my job than I need to. I'm always trying to think of how can I help myself do my job the best I can do, rather than spinning my wheels." Micah added, "I like to make sure that all the things that I'm responsible for that people depend on me for" get completed. Julie said she takes pride in the things she can do, including taking on last-minute requests. When asked late in the evening, "Are you still available? Yes, I am. I am always engaged." Hannah pointed out that giving her best means more work for her attorneys "and when they get more work, they get more money. When they get more money, we get more money." She acknowledged her engagement is about the success of her attorneys: "It's not just the money, it's about the overall success" (Hannah).

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings from a comprehensive analysis of 16 in-depth, semi-structured interviews detailing the engagement strategies employed by the participating legal assistants. The chapter began with a summary of participant demographics. This was followed by a detailed presentation of the categories and themes that emerged from the data and the story of how these legal assistants created strategies to manage employee engagement. Participants felt motivated to employ their strategies by their internal drive to be productive, to do the work they are assigned, to achieve success for themselves and their attorneys, and from a sense of community with their firms and colleagues. The strategies they employed included temporarily disconnecting from the work, work organization tactics, self-care, and self-motivation. These strategies supported their internal drives, just as the internal drives supported their strategies. Overall, the participants were fully engaged the majority of the time they are at work, they recognized the need to be engaged, and they felt driven to develop strategies, and bring those strategies to their employers, to engage, remain engaged, and reengage when appropriate in their work.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

This chapter begins with a summary of the research questions, then proceeds to a discussion of the findings as they related to the theoretical framework that guided this study. After the discussion of the findings, there is a presentation of recommendations for practice and further research.

The purpose of this study was to explore the question of strategies employed to engage, remain engaged, and reengage when necessary in work. The researcher found 16 highly engaged legal assistants working in law firms who, through semi-structured interviews, were willing to tell their experiences and reflect on the strategies they employ, along with the drivers that motivate them to employ their strategies.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What strategies do legal assistants employ to engage, remain engaged, or reengage when appropriate?

RQ2: What are the drivers that cause legal assistants to employ engagement strategies to engage or reengage when disengagement happens?

Discussion of Findings

This study was originally driven by the idea that employee engagement (EE) represents shared roles between an organization and its employees. Much of the literature, as cited in Chapter 2, focuses on the employer's role in developing an atmosphere for EE. With only 15% of workers worldwide being fully engaged (Gallup, 2017b), it appears that EE is a serious issue to consider. Does this number indicate that only 15% of organizations engage their workers? Or does it imply that, despite an organization's efforts, some employees will engage and some will not? Furthermore, if an organization embraces EE tactics, why is it that some employees in that organization are still not engaged, while others are engaged? This dilemma germinated the initial seeds of thought that defined this study. In an organization that provides equal opportunities of engagement, whether endorsing or not endorsing basic EE concepts, managed by the same managers, with the same vision, mission, and values, why are some employees engaged and some employees not engaged? Why are 15% of workers fully engaged while 24% are actively disengaged, according to Gallup? Does the answer to this question lie in the employee side of the EE equation? Is EE a partnership between an individual employee and the organization? If we define, in part, EE as Kahn (1990) did when he first coined the term as "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles…[in which] people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (p. 694), then it seems important to examine the role employees play, the strategies they employ, and what drives those strategies that allow themselves to be "harness[ed]…to their work roles."

Some research (Kahn, 1990; Thomas, 2009; Valentin et al., 2015) indicates that when an employee sees value in engaging in their work, they will develop corresponding strategies to engage. Conversely, when they do not see value, they will not employ such strategies.

The site for this study was law firms. Law firms are difficult places to work, with high job demands (Forstenlechner et al., 2008). Forstenlechner et al. noted law firms have low organization-level job resources, such as poorly defined career opportunities and career paths with little investment in talent development for support staff. Yet, some law firms show the turnover rate of legal assistants is not high and many are engaged in their work (S. Astrup, personal communication, August 5, 2019), prompting the researcher to wonder why that is. What keeps some legal secretaries highly engaged in their work when there is no opportunity to advance? What drives them to engage in their work and what strategies do they bring to the organization that keeps them engaged?

RQ1: What strategies do legal assistants employ to engage, remain engaged, or reengage when appropriate?

The findings of this study were supported by the primary theoretical framework that was used, the JD-R model. JD-R posits that developing more job resources will help a worker meet job demands. This study explored the job demands of 16 legal assistants and resources they developed through the creation of engagement strategies. Job demands are the facets of the job which require an effort, mental, physical, emotional, or social and exact a physiological or psychological toll on workers (Demerouti et al., 2001). Job resources include various aspects of the job, including organizational, physical, social, and psychological resources required for achieving work goals, reducing demands, and stimulating growth and development, which compensate for job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Personal job resources include perceptions of self-efficacy, motivational tactics, optimism, and resilience. Developing both job and personal resources to meet job and personal demands is hypothesized to create a balance for the individual between the demands and available resources. According to Marathe et al. (2019), the perfect balance between job demands and job resources would result in perfectly engaged workers. The findings in this study reinforce these concepts of the JD-R model. A common thread throughout this study was the demands legal assistants feel in their work. The participants in this study spoke of the mental, emotional, and social demands of working as a legal assistant in a law firm. Some of the oft-cited demands included stress, trying to stay noticed and part of important work teams, and constantly being busy as part of their roles. Other demands included a close focus on work matters, work product quality, work volume, organization of work and self, motivation, and social issues. This study found that fully engaged legal assistants developed personalized strategies they brought with them to employers to manage the demands of their work. These strategies allowed the participants to engage, remain engaged, and reengage as necessary in their work. The study found evidence that highly engaged legal assistants were engaged because of their strategies, they developed these strategies on their own, and they brought their strategies to their employer for their own purposes. There is evidence that EE is a balance between what an employer provides, for example in opportunities and work environment, and what an employee provides, for example in engagement strategies and drivers to employ those strategies. The results of this study support the concepts of Bakker et al. (2008) suggesting that engaged workers develop their own job resources over time. The findings also suggest support for research (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2008, Marathe et al., 2019; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007) showing EE may be the result of the balance between job demands and job resources, in particular when the employee develops those resources. Additionally, the results of this study suggest that highly engaged legal assistants are internally motivated to be engaged.

Individuals in this study developed engagement strategies as a way to more easily meet their job demands. To deal with the stress and constant busyness, participants in this study developed strategies to disconnect temporarily from the work. They took short breaks, stood up to change positions, moved to different rooms, took walks, switched to less-demanding tasks, and found something unrelated to their work to take the focus for a short time. To deal with the volume demands, these legal assistants developed organizational strategies, such as notetaking, planning, task lists, and ways to always stay ahead of the work. To deal with the demands of focus, the participants spoke of strategies to get “in the zone,” to define how they work to stay present, and how they maintain focus. Participants developed social strategies to handle their work demands, including joining professional organizations, maintaining clear communications, talking to colleagues, helping others learn, and integrating themselves into the matter and case teams. To handle the demands of getting all the work done that they face daily, this group of legal assistants discussed their strategies to dig deeper into the work and to enjoy the work they do. They talked about self-care strategies such as meditation and learning new skills. To handle the demands of self-motivation, they talked about strategies such as being proactive, thinking critically about the work, and being self-aware.

The findings of this study reinforce the notion that resource-building may lead to higher levels of EE. An example of resource building is job crafting, which has been shown to lead to EE (Bakker et al., 2014). Bakker, et al. proposed that EE may lead to job crafting, possibly creating a virtuous cycle, which was one of the findings from this study. One participant in particular spoke of her involvement in job crafting. Julie developed an entirely new platform for delivering services to her attorneys and to one of the firm's large clients. She talked about how much pride she has in having built the program, redefining her role in new ways for the industry. She said, "It's one of the reasons I love what I do," and spoke of how this made her more engaged. Being fully engaged led to job crafting. Job crafting led to being fully engaged.

This study is one of few dedicated to understanding how and why individuals choose to engage through the development of personal strategies. It provides insights into individuals' strategies to engage to help individuals deal with job demands, as suggested by Bakker & Demerouti (2007). The findings show some evidence that employees with high EE characteristics bring to their organization, and employ, specific strategies to enhance their available resources, which in turn leads to increased EE.

This study showed evidence of individuals in high demand jobs developing strategies to enhance engagement and reduce the risks of disengagement. Bakker et al. (2008) indicated that high job demands may result in higher job resource loss, which makes developing resources all the more important in certain high job demand conditions, since, as Marathe et al., (2019) pointed out, an individual's work experience is defined by the relative proportions of the job's demands and the available resources. The findings in this study indicate that having resources may enhance EE, while the lack of resources may influence disengagement.

The findings in this research study also suggest that strategies individuals use to create personal and job resources may lead to EE. These findings show evidence that individuals who develop their own strategies to enhance EE seem to identify more closely with their jobs and their employers, although it is not clear whether the drive to identify with their jobs was antecedent to the strategy development or if the strategy development led to closer job identity. There appeared to be some form of entanglement between the desire to engage and the strategies developed to enhance engagement. It was clear, however, that the participants in this study felt compelled to engage, as demonstrated by the drivers that motivated them to develop engagement strategies. There is also evidence that the development of engagement strategies drives not only higher levels of engagement but the development of more strategies. This cycle appears to drive more engagement. As the data emerged, the researcher was led to develop an engagement strategy cycle. As illustrated in Figure 4, internal and external drivers led individuals to develop engagement strategies. When employed, these strategies led the individuals to enhance their levels of engagement. The feelings of enhanced engagement appeared to bring a closer work identification to the legal assistants. Closer work identification seemed to lead individuals to greater work satisfaction. As work satisfaction increased, the legal assistants appear to have felt a greater desire to engage. This desire was a motivating driver, leading to the development of additional strategies. This virtuous cycle could be investigated through further research.

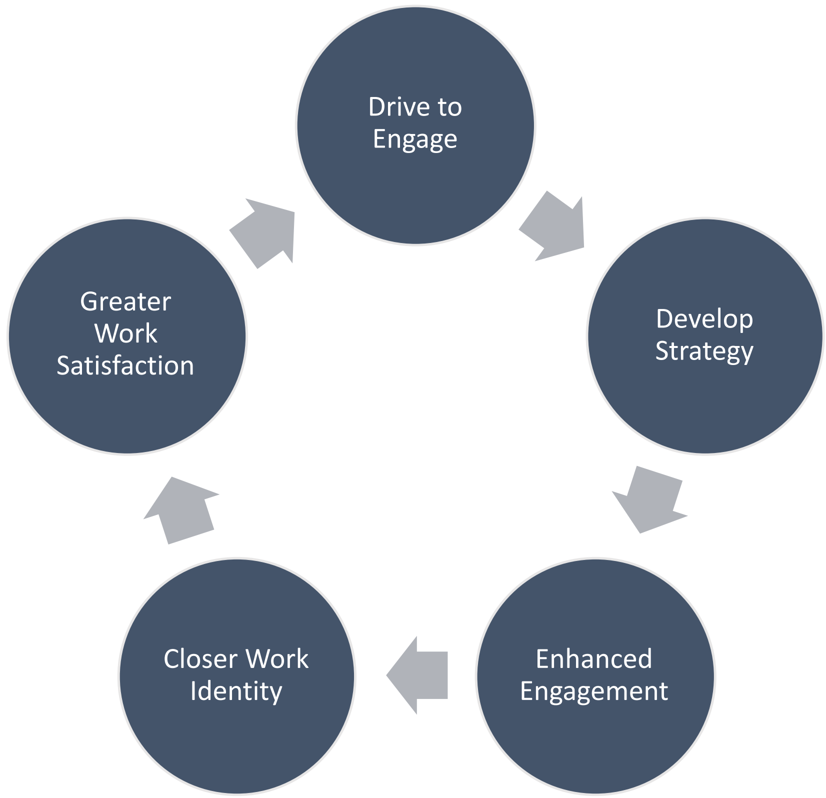

Figure 4
Engagement Strategy Cycle

RQ2: What are the drivers that cause legal assistants to employ engagement strategies to engage or reengage when disengagement happens?

The findings in this study show that EE is an individual construct. It is a decision made, for personal reasons, by an employee. The idea of individuals creating and using strategies to engage in work is supported by the findings in this research, suggesting engaged workers develop their own job resources over time and employ those resources to enhance EE through either initial engagement, remaining engaged, or reengaging when necessary. There may still be value in looking at ways organizations can create an environment for EE, but management initiatives may not be enough without conscious participation by employees. This study found there are many influences on individuals’ intentions to engage or disengage. The organization is just one part of the equation. When asked for a personal definition of engagement, organizational resources were rarely mentioned by the legal assistants who participated in this study. Personal attributes and personal drivers were most often discussed within examples of EE by participants as they tried to define its meaning. The primary drivers cited in these findings included the following main themes: work, team and community, and internal motivation (see Figure 3 above). The legal assistants in this study were often motivated by internal drivers such as their work ethic. For most of the participants, a strong work ethic is innate. Kelly said she has been this way her entire life, even as a kid: “It’s just the way that I run.” Shari felt it was “just that innate, ‘you need to be doing something’.” She added, “I wouldn't feel like it was okay to be being paid to not do something that was firm progressive, working for a client or whatever it was.” Others said, “This is my job….I owe my employer my time when I’m there”, “I really care about the end product…being disengaged works against that”, “It’s my value system…I have a lot of difficulty in not performing to the degree that I know I am capable”, “It’s a responsibility aspect for me…I am a responsible adult. I thrive on that…and I like to do a good job.” These are personal motivations that are not related to what the employer brings to the organization, but is completely driven from the employee side.

Other personal drivers included a desire to be recognized for their work, a desire to be available and to help people, and a need to give their all. Work motivations included being productive, wanting to enjoy the time they are at work, and being task-oriented, needing to accomplish things daily, weekly, or annually. Finally, the participants were motivated by being part of a team or community, including matter teams. Study participants often said they were driven by associating with others who shared the same values and goals.

This is not to say that EE is only an individual concept. It is a mutual process between the worker and the organization. These findings do suggest, however, that EE should not fall solely on the organization. This study shows that for EE to be realized, one should take into account the obligations of workers to develop engagement strategies. There is some evidence in the findings that EE may be partially influenced by the organization. Organizations can support employees in developing, sharing, and enhancing those strategies among their workers. However, it is up to the individual to choose how to manage the confluence of organizational influence and personal drivers and to either engage or disengage.

Recommendations and Implications for Research and Practice

Recommendation for research

This study has significance for future research in the area of EE as it relates to the balance between the obligation of organizations and that of individuals to provide the right environment for engagement. This study focused on engagement strategies employed by legal assistants in their primary work roles who work in law firms. Future research could broaden the results of this study to look at engagement strategies employed by non-legal assistants in law firms. Research could also focus on employees in flat organizations that are not law firms. Since law firms are considered flat organizations (Forstenlechner et al., 2008), a study of engagement strategies employed by workers in hierarchically rich organizations with many levels and greater career development opportunities may also be of interest. This study primarily used participants who were active in professional organizations. Future research may center around whether active members of professional organizations are more engaged in their regular work roles than employees who are not active in professional organizations.

Much of the literature provides lists of ways organizations can enhance or develop engagement in their employees (Antony, 2018; Gallup, 2017a; Kelleher, 2011; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Saks, 2006). Shuck and Wollard (2010) note that this is a sort of broad, scattered approach and may be detrimental to developing a coherent EE strategy. Additionally, Knight et al. (2017) point out that there is very little data available to determine whether any of these interventions are effective. It is also unclear whether engaged employees work as productively in any environment. Since this study investigated strategies legal assistants employ to engage, reengage, and remain engaged in an environment that does not provide traditional forms of career development support, it would be helpful to conduct a study of strategies employed by legal assistants in a career supportive environment. This study used the EES to screen for individuals who self-identify as fully engaged workers. The aim of this study was to look at strategies employed by workers who identify as fully engaged in their work to engage, remain engaged, or reengaged when necessary. Further research could include individuals who do not self-identify as fully engaged to see if organizations benefit if less-engaged workers learn strategies that will lead them to become more engaged in their work.

There appeared to be some form of entanglement between the desire to engage and the strategies developed to enhance engagement. It was clear, however, that the participants in this study felt compelled to engage, to develop strategies to enhance engagement, and felt more desire to engage when employing the strategies, leading to the development of additional strategies. This virtuous cycle could be investigated through further research.

Implications for practice

This study provides the basis for the following guidance for HRD, HRM, and recruiting practice. The findings in this report support the idea that there is an individualized component of

EE. Therefore, it may be desirable to find a balance between the role of organizations and that of individuals to provide the right environment for engagement. By understanding the resources individuals bring with them to job tasks and job roles, organizations can better understand how to aid workers in the development of personal and job resources and increase individuals' strengths in these areas. The findings of this study support Shuck and Wollard (2010) who observed that looking only at the organization "distorts the nature of the concept" of EE (p. 105). Managers can and should provide an environment that empowers employees to develop their own strategies for building job resources that enhance engagement. The traditional styles of leadership grounded in authoritarian roots will not foster EE. Nor will providing great benefits and a positive work environment alone. Management needs to work with employees to foster strategy-building and provide a forum to share best practices. This study's results may help HRD professionals focus their talent development on programs tailored to the needs and strengths of the employees they have, with particular attention to those in flat organizations.

Using the findings of this study, employers may be able to better identify candidates for open job positions. Hiring managers may be able to use the results of this study to identify candidates who use engagement strategies that will make their organizations more successful. Managers typically hire for specific skill sets. Engagement strategies represent unique skill sets employees bring with them to their work. Prior studies (Anitha, 2014; Fletcher, 2015; Kahn, 1990) show that these skill sets help make organizations more successful. Being aware that employees bring their own successful engagement strategies may help hiring managers focus on candidates who will bring the appropriate skill sets with them to the organization. A better understanding of the types of strategies current employees use, along with the drivers that motivate employment of these strategies, may help hiring managers better screen potential employees. Understanding the role employees play in the balance of engagement will help in identifying what to look for and what to ask.

The findings of this study show some evidence that when employees are engaged, they are aware of their responsibility to the business goals of the organization. Other research (Anitha, 2014; Thomas, 2009) supports the finding that this sense of responsibility may lead to more engagement behaviors, continuously moving the purpose forward. Engagement is psychological (meaningfulness, availability, safety) with behavioral consequences (Fletcher, 2015; Kwan & Park, 2019). Programs that foster goal self-concordant employees may develop a sense of commitment to the organization's purpose and encourage employees to care enough to invest discretionary effort in the success of the organization.

By understanding and recognizing that fully engaged employees bring their own strategies to their organizations, managers can pair workers together to better leverage their strengths. Managers can better develop their teams to take advantage of each individual's contribution to the work. According to Antony (2018), engaged employees need management support to enable them to employ successful strategies if they are to remain engaged.

The findings in this study support earlier findings (Glavas, 2016; Kahn, 1990; Marathe et al., 2019) that work experience includes both work-related and personal-related forces. HRD programs that help individuals build engagement strategies may bolster EE and may create a greater sense of autonomy among employees. Developing programs to support individuals in building resources, particularly at the personal level, may help organizations create a sense of autonomy and self-efficacy in workers (Knight et al., 2017, p. 794). By understanding the resources individuals bring with them to job tasks and job roles, organizations can better understand how to aid workers through the development of personal and job resources such as perceptions of self-efficacy and resilience, and increase individuals' strengths

The results of this study may provide insight into the job resources, in the form of strategies, developed and used by legal assistants in a law firm to engage, remain engaged, and reengage when appropriate. Understanding the job and personal resources required for a particular job position may help HRM professionals develop performance criteria that affect better work outcomes. This understanding may lead to the development of HRD interventions that support performance criteria. Gaining insights into individuals' strategies to engage may help organizations understand how individuals deal with job demands. Understanding how individuals choose to engage, through personal strategies, may improve organizational performance. Managers hold the key to empowering individuals to be engaged (Shuck et al., 2014). Managers who understand the strategies their workers employ may find that encouraging individuals to employ their own strategies will improve their sense of autonomy and purpose, and may improve performance outcomes.

Job resources may be located within an organization, a task, how work is organized, or an individual (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Helping individuals define and develop more job resources may buffer the negative impacts of job demands and thereby lead to greater EE (Kwan & Park, 2019). Accumulation of job resources has been hypothesized to play an intrinsic role in motivation, personal growth, learning, and development, as well as in achieving work-related goals (Bakker et al. 2008). An example of a job resource that evidence suggests may lead to EE is job crafting (Bakker et al., 2014). Job crafting describes allowing workers to redesign their job tasks and coworker interactions in ways that may increase resilience and satisfaction and may lead to more EE (Berg et al., 2007).

Understanding the strategies highly engaged employees use to be fully engaged in their work may help HRD professionals design interventions to engage, reengage, and maintain engagement among employees. Learning professionals can design learning tools that leverage employee strategies. This study supports earlier studies (Saks, 2006; Shuck & Wollard, 2010) showing organizations must understand individual needs when designing programs for improving engagement. The findings here may help learning professionals design tools that tap into employees' need for autonomy (Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Shuck et al., 2014; Valentin et al., 2015) as well as their need for social connectedness (Fletcher, 2015; Saks, 2006). By understanding the role individual employees must play to engage, coupled with each individual's personal strategies, learning professionals can create tools that capture teamwork and strategy sharing, thus fostering an engagement culture that leverages the inherent skill sets individuals bring to the organization while building new skill sets in other individuals.

As this study focused on one particular class of employees in one particular class of employment, the findings may provide new insights that will assist HRD professionals working with legal assistants in developing better practical applications to engagement interventions. Each legal assistant may display different levels of engagement, and therefore different strategies. This study may reveal both intrinsic and extrinsic strategies. This study supports Langelaan et al. (2006) who reported that not all employees at a given organization exhibit similar levels of engagement. Organizations creating a "one size fits all" approach to EE will find success to be difficult, at best. As Markos & Sridevi (2010) pointed out, EE must be seen as a two-way process between employer and employee, with the employee taking responsibility for the strategies they choose to employ. By identifying the role individuals must play for being and remaining engaged, HRD professionals may develop better, more targeted activities that support individuals' engagement strategies. This study found that not every employee reacts the same under the same set of circumstances. Individuals bring their own vigor (high energy and resilience), dedication (enthusiasm, pride, inspiration, work involvement), and absorption (deep engrossment, attachment, concentration), independent of the organization or position in which they are employed. A prescribed set of engagement initiatives may fail without understanding what individuals bring with them and what they need for support.

Limitations

This study included the assumption that people being interviewed responded candidly and honestly about their work experiences, as it relates to engagement, periods of disengagement, and their strategies around those experiences. This study assumed there are duties and measures employees can and do take to engage in their work. There was also an assumption knowing and recognizing this responsibility and resultant actions will benefit HRD professionals and bring balance to the EE equation. This study also looked only at individuals who self-identify as fully engaged. It is possible participants were not honest about their level of engagement. It is also possible that workers who are less engaged also bring strategies to their work in periods of engagement.

A delimitation of this study was that participants were volunteers. Also, the participant pool was entirely female and it is possible to have a gender bias in the participant responses. The participants may not represent all legal assistants and their experiences. Additionally, all participants worked at legal services firms and were not necessarily representative of all categories of workers. An outcome of this study was the discovery of strategies utilized in flat organizations where traditional concepts of engagement support are not fully provided. The participants may not represent employees in other environments or even similar environments within other industries.

The researcher for this study had worked in the legal field for over 13 years, and in flat organizations for over 30 years. He had also worked during that period primarily in HRD. He had likely formed both conscious and unconscious biases around HRD interventions designed for larger, hierarchical organizations. These biases may have crept into this study.

The scope of this study was limited to legal assistants in law firms located in Seattle, Washington, Portland, Oregon, Sacramento, California, and San Diego, California. There were 16 participants who responded to semi-structured interviews. The results of the data collected cannot be generalized beyond the participants themselves and some strategies uncovered may be unique to the interviewees.

Conclusion

This basic qualitative study sought to better understand the strategies legal assistants develop and employ to engage, remain engaged, and reengage when necessary in their work. The goal was to open a dialog around the obligations of employees in enhancing EE. The bias in the literature is toward organizations and what they can do to engage their workers. This study assumed there is something employees bring to an organization to engage themselves, regardless of what the organization offers.

The findings in the report provide insights into the balance between employee and employer in the equation of EE. Each of the 16 participants in the study provided many examples of their engagement strategies, as well as the drivers that motivate them to employ their strategies. The strategies supported each individual’s need to perform, develop social interactions, and their need to help and develop others. Their strategies ranged from how they temporarily disconnect to how they focus their attention and included organization of work and self, self-care, and losing themselves in their work.

This study looked only at self-identified fully-engaged legal assistants. Through the interviews, it became clear that these were people who cared deeply about their work and loved what they do. The findings reinforced the original idea of EE as a personal and individual concept wherein employees bring their full selves to their work (Kahn, 1990).

Insights from this study can help HRD and HRM professionals develop programs and interventions focusing on the uniqueness of individuals and the strategies they develop and bring to their work efforts. Programs that develop self-efficacy, resilience, and the sharing of best practices may enhance EE in an organization. There is also a hope that the collective story told in this report will help shift the dialog on EE toward a balance between organization and individual.

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Appendices

Appendix A – IRB Permission

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

To:	Thomas Arthur Steele
From:	Douglas James Adams, Chair IRB Expedited Review
Date:	06/02/2020
Action:	**Expedited Approval**
Action Date:	06/02/2020
Protocol #:	1912239263
Study Title:	Employee Responsibility for Engagement: A Study of Engagement Strategies Employed by Legal Administrative Professionals
Expiration Date:	05/25/2021
Last Approval Date:	

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Vicki Dieffenderfer, Investigator

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Appendix B – Employee Engagement Survey (EES) (Word version)

CE1. I am really focused when I am working.

CE2. I concentrate on my job when I am at work.

CE3. I give my job responsibility a lot of attention

CE4. At work, I am focused on my job.

EE1. Working at <my current organization> has a great deal of personal meaning to me.

EE2. I feel a strong sense of belonging to my job.

EE3. I believe in the mission and purpose of <my company>.

EE4. I care about the future of <my company>.

BE1. I really push myself to work beyond what is expected of me.

BE2. I am willing to put in extra effort without being asked.

BE3. I often go above what is expected of me to help my team be successful.

BE4. I work harder that expected to help <my company> be successful.

Adapted from Shuck, B., Adelson, J. L., & Reio, T. G. (2016).

Appendix C – Permission to Use Employee Engagement Survey

Hi Thomas --

Good afternoon -- I am pleased to hear of your work; congratulations on reaching this milestone.

You have my express permission to use the EES in your research. If you need an actual letter, I will be home later this week (I am traveling) and can get one to you -- but, wanted to see if this might work. If you need anything, have questions, etc., please let me know, I would be glad to help.

Be well and take care -- Happy Holidays!
Brad

Dr. Brad Shuck
Associate Professor
Commonwealth Scholar, Commonwealth Institute of Kentucky
Associate Editor, New Horizon's in Adult Education and Human Resource Development
Educational Leadership, Evaluation, and Organizational Development
College of Education & Human Development
University of Louisville
Louisville | Kentucky | 40292
[redacted]

Appendix D – Demographic Survey (Word version)

Gender	F	M	Transgender Female	Transgender Male	Gender Variant/Non-Conforming	Not Listed	Prefer Not To Answer
Age (at last birthday)							
Time at current firm (in years)							
Time in occupation (in years)							
Number of attorneys in your current firm							
Number of attorneys you support							
Highest level of formal education	HS	Some college	AA/AS	BA/BS	MA/MS	JD/Doctorate	
Special certifications							

Appendix E – Permission to Access Site

From: Steele, Thomas
Sent: Thursday, March 14, 2019 11:47 AM
To: King, Michelle
Subject: REQUEST - Assistance on a Project

Hi,

I have a special request that isn't related to work exactly....

I am working on my doctorate in human resource and workforce development. I am about to start work on my dissertation. I am interested in understanding a few things about engagement, especially by legal secretaries.

With your knowledge of NALS, do you think I could get 15 people to talk to me? I would like to send out a survey to find people who are highly engaged and then pick 15 from that pool to talk with. What are your thoughts on that?

Thank you for at least considering this ☺

From: King, Michelle
Sent: Thursday, March 14, 2019 11:54 AM
To: Steele, Thomas
Subject: RE: REQUEST - Assistance on a Project

Absolutely! There are a ton of us who live and breathe our careers, and love the opportunity to assist with things like this! You can count me in!

~Michelle F. King, PP, PLS-SC, RLA

From: Steele, Thomas
Sent: Thursday, March 14, 2019 11:57 AM
To: King, Michelle
Subject: RE: REQUEST - Assistance on a Project

Thank you! I will reach out to you as I start to develop my methodology. How would I reach others? Can you help me with that somehow?

From: Steele, Thomas
Sent: Thursday, March 14, 2019 12:01 PM
To: King, Michelle
Subject: RE: REQUEST - Assistance on a Project

Sure! I can assist by facilitating the first contact. Give me the parameters of the folks you are interested in chatting with and I can either gather a group to see if they are interested and connect you with them, or I can send an email and just cc you.

~Michelle F. King, PP, PLS-SC, RLA

Appendix F – Interview Protocol

I’d like to begin by thanking you for taking the time to meet with me today. I know you are very busy and I am grateful for your time.

You have been asked to participate in this interview because you scored high on the Employee Engagement Survey, indicating you are fully engaged in your work at the firm. The purpose of this study is to better understand the strategies legal secretaries bring to their organization and use to engage in their work, remain engaged, and reengage when necessary.

Today’s interview is approximately 60 minutes in length. Interview questions will cover topics including your impressions of employee engagement, strategies you employ to engage and remain engaged in your work, how you know you are disengaging and reengaging, what triggers engagement strategies, and what are the perceived benefits of engagement. The audio of your interview will be digitally recorded with your permission and transcribed for the purpose of accuracy. You will receive a copy of the transcript so that you may verify that your words have been captured correctly. I will also take written notes during the interview.

No direct benefits are associated with this research project. However, the results may have implications in the understanding of employee engagement.

All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law. All identifiable information will be removed and replaced with pseudonyms. All transcripts will be stored in an encrypted, protected cloud storage location. Only the researcher has access to the storage location. Any identifiable information will be stored separately from unidentifiable information. Electronic recordings and transcripts will be kept for a minimum of three years. Printed transcripts will be destroyed after the project completion. At the end of the three-year time period, all electronic files will be erased. The responses and analyses will be used as part of a doctoral dissertation.

Participation today is voluntary. You are free to decline to participate, and you are free to stop the interview or withdraw from the project at any time. No penalty or risks are associated with withdrawing your participation. Feel free to ask any questions at any time about the nature of the research activity and the methods the researcher is using.

What questions do you have for me before we begin?

1. To get started, please tell me a little bit about your job and what you do. [probe]
2. What does the term “employee engagement” mean to you?
3. What does it mean to be engaged? [probe]
4. How can you tell when you are fully engaged?
5. How can you tell when you are no longer engaged, or are actively disengaging?

6. What strategies do you employ to engage, remain engaged, or reengage when appropriate? [probe]

7. What causes you to employ engagement strategies to reengage when disengagement happens? [probe]

8. What are the perceived benefits to you when you utilize engagement strategies? [probe]

9. What are the perceived benefits you bring to the firm when you are fully engaged?

Thank you for your time today. I appreciate it. As I mentioned, I will be following up with a printed transcript. I would appreciate if you will review it an let me know right away if there are any changes you would like to make. I want to represent your ideas as faithfully as possible. My contact information is on the form I gave you at the beginning of our interview. If you would please leave me your email address, I will send you the transcript as soon as it is ready. I will need to hear back from you with any changes within a week. If I do not hear back from you within a week, I will assume you have no changes. Does all that sound okay to you?

Again, I appreciate your time and participation in this project!

Appendix G – Informed Consent Form

Project Title:	Engagement Strategies of Legal Secretaries
Investigator:	Thomas Steele Doctoral Candidate University of Arkansas [redacted]
Faculty Advisor:	Dr. Vicki Dieffenderfer Clinical Assistant Professor of Human Resource and Workforce Development Department of Rehabilitation, Human Resources, and Communication Disorders College of Education and Health Professions GRAD 101 University of Arkansas Fayetteville, AR 72701 479-575-5239 vmdieffe@uark.edu
Purpose:	The purpose of this study is to better understand the strategies legal secretaries bring to their organization and use to engage in their work, remain engaged, and reengage when necessary.
Procedures:	You are invited to participate in one interview of approximately 60 minutes in length. Interview questions will cover topics including your impressions of employee engagement, strategies you employ to engage and remain engaged in your work, how you know you are disengaging and reengaging what triggers engagement strategies, and what are the perceived benefits of engagement. The audio of your interview will be digitally recorded with your permission and transcribed for the purpose of accuracy. You will receive a copy of the transcript so that you may verify that your words have been captured correctly. The interviewer will also take written notes during the interview. You may be asked to take two surveys. One survey will be used to assess engagement levels. The other survey will be for demographic purposes only and will be conducted if you are selected for an interview. All information will be anonymous. Once you have been selected to participate in an interview, all identifying information will be removed from your engagement survey results. If you are not selected or choose not to participate, identifying information will be immediately deleted from your survey results. No identifying information will be collected in the demographic survey.

All survey results will be maintained for three years in a secured location. All personal information will be deleted.

Risks of Participation:	There are no known risks associated with this project that are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.
Benefits:	No direct benefits are associated with this research project. However, the results may have implications in the understanding of employee engagement.
Confidentiality:	All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law. All identifiable information will be removed and replaced with pseudonyms. All transcripts will be stored in an encrypted, protected cloud storage location. Only the researcher has access to the storage location. Any identifiable information will be stored separately from unidentifiable information. Electronic recordings and transcripts will be kept for a minimum of three years. Printed transcripts will be destroyed after the project completion. At the end of the three-year time period, all electronic files will be erased. The responses and analyses will be used as part of a doctoral dissertation.
Compensation:	No compensation will be offered for participation in this study.
Contacts:	If you have questions about this research project, please contact: Thomas Steele Doctoral Candidate University of Arkansas [redacted] You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research. Ro Windwalker, CIP Institutional Review Board Coordinator Research Compliance University of Arkansas 109 MLKG Building Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201 479-575-2208 irb@uark.edu

Participation Rights:	As a participant in this research, you are entitled to know the nature of my research. You are free to decline to participate, and you are free to stop the interview or withdraw from the project at any time. No penalty or risks are associated with withdrawing your participation. Refusal to participate will not adversely affect any other relationship with the University or the researcher. Feel free to ask any questions at any time about the nature of the research activity and the methods the researcher is using.
Signatures:	I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form has been given to me.

__________________________________ ______________________

Signature of Participant *Date*

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

__________________________________ ______________________

Signature of Researcher *Date*

Appendix H – Participant Recruitment Email

Hi All,

Thomas Steele is working on his doctorate in human resource and workforce development. His area of focus is workplace engagement strategies. As part of his dissertation, he would like to interview legal secretaries to better understand your perception of engagement and strategies you employ to engage in your work. He also wants to know what you do to reengage when you start to feel disengaged.

He is looking for 15 volunteers to meet with him for about an hour. To help him screen for engagement, you will complete a survey, located here. We anticipate more than 15 people will respond. The study is designed for up to 15 people to be interviewed.

Important: For those scoring high on the survey, he will schedule an hour to ask a few questions, record your responses, and use that for writing his dissertation. All information will be anonymous. Survey results will include your contact information in order to reach you for an interview. Once you have been selected to participate in an interview, all identifying information will be removed from your survey results. If you are not selected, identifying information will be immediately deleted from your survey results.

All survey results will be maintained for three years in a secured location. All personal information will be deleted.

To make an informed decision about participating in this study, please see the attached document explaining the nature of the research, your rights, and all contact information if you have questions or concerns.

Appendix I – Selected-Participant Recruitment Email

Hi <name>,

Based on the results of your engagement survey, you are invited to participate in an interview of approximately 60 minutes in length. Interview questions will cover topics including your impressions of employee engagement, strategies you employ to engage and remain engaged in your work, how you know you are disengaging and reengaging what triggers engagement strategies, and what are the perceived benefits of engagement. The audio of your interview will be digitally recorded with your permission and transcribed for the purpose of accuracy. You will receive a copy of the transcript so that you may verify that your words have been captured correctly. The interviewer will also take written notes during the interview.

Please respond to this email so we can set up a date and time where we can meet, either in person or via Skype (or similar method).

Thank you! I appreciate your willingness to assist me in my research.