

Work engagement and the impact of a social identity crafting approach to leadership: A case from Africa's air transport industry

Abstract

- **Purpose**

Managers of public organizations in liberalized sectors face the dual imperative of retaining skilled employees who might be poached by commercial competitors, and improving service performance levels, without a free hand to invest resources. While employee work engagement has been previously suggested as a solution to such management challenges, limitations in its ability to retain employees have been identified. We therefore examine how a social identity crafting approach to public leadership that confers a sense of group identity among team members, can enhance and extend beyond employee work engagement in addressing this dual imperative.

- **Design/methodology/approach**

We report findings from a survey of employees (n = 199) in 'ATCO' a state-owned national airline that is facing challenges from commercial rivals within a new, competitive environment.

- **Findings**

We confirm previously identified limitations of employee work engagement and, further, demonstrate that a social identity approach to leadership offers a promising avenue for public managers not only by enhancing employee engagement but more importantly enhancing retention and service performance.

- **Originality**

We contribute to studies of leadership, particularly for managers operating in the public sector and resource constrained environments, demonstrating how social identity crafting, which does not require costly investment to attain, can deliver improved service performance and reduced employee turnover intention, operating beyond employee work engagement which reaches a plateau in respect of the latter.

Article Type: Research Article

Keywords: social identity theory, airline industry, HRM, employee engagement, turnover intention, service performance

Introduction

Employee work engagement (EWE) is associated with a range of beneficial HRM-related outcomes, as more engaged workers expend greater discretionary effort than their less engaged counterparts (Bakker, Albrecht and Leiter, 2011; Christian, Garza and Slaughter, 2011). Studies have indicated, for example, that organizations with engaged workers benefit from greater customer satisfaction and profitability and lower staff turnover (Menguc *et al.*, 2017). Beneficial outcomes associated with EWE might be especially important to managers in organizations where retention of staff and improved job performance must be achieved within tight resource constraints. In particular, managers in public and semi-public organizations (Rainey, 2014) face tight resource constraints and have the challenge of dealing with the dual imperative of retaining employees and improving service delivery (Luu, 2019; Mikkelsen, Schuster and Meyer-Sahling, 2021).

However, scholars have raised questions about the relationship between EWE and beneficial HRM outcomes, stimulating consideration of a 'dark side' to EWE (Bakker, Albrecht and Leiter, 2011; Sonnentag, 2011; Guo *et al.*, 2019). In particular, recent contributions have discussed whether EWE reaches a plateau or a point of decline with respect to beneficial outcomes, for instance as workers become drained from their additional efforts and cannot fulfil their roles (Caesens, Stinglhamber and Marmier, 2016; Shimazu *et al.*, 2018; Kibatta and Samuel, 2022). Therefore, while EWE is recognised as an important construct in the HRM literature, we need to identify practices that extend beyond EWE since its effectiveness at higher levels may decline. Taking our lead from Kibatta and Samuel (2022), this study explores how leaders might work to overcome the apparent limitations of EWE.

Although not examining the potential ineffectiveness of EWE at high levels, Steffens *et al.*, (2018) report that when leaders craft a social identity with the organization, associated turnover intentions are directly and indirectly reduced; the indirect effect is by enhancing EWE which in turn further reduces turnover intentions. Embracing a social identity approach to leadership confers a sense of social support, belongingness, purpose and group identity among team members (Steffens *et al.*, 2018, p. 374). We postulate that such an approach to leadership, which seeks to craft a social identity (Steffens *et al.*, 2014)¹, will have far-reaching implications (Piccoli *et al.*, 2017), especially for resource-constrained organizations, by enabling them to engage and retain employees while offering job autonomy which is also important in enhancing service performance (Clark, Hartline and Jones, 2009). In this paper, we develop and test in a semi-public organization context whether a social identity crafting approach to leadership may on the one hand enhance EWE and on the other ultimately lead to higher levels of employee retention and service performance beyond what EWE can achieve on its own.

We therefore pose the following research question: to what extent does a *social identity crafting approach to leadership* enhance employee retention and service performance? To answer this question, we report findings from a study of ATCO, a state-owned national airline in Africa responding to mounting commercial pressures. The state-owned incumbents in Africa's air transport industry are grappling with the competitive challenges of change which are disrupting the relative stability enjoyed by incumbents that

¹ With the original contributors describing leaders following such an approach as 'entrepreneurs of identity' (Reicher, Haslam and Hopkins, 2005). This approach is later operationalized as Leader Identity Entrepreneurship in a model of social identity management and described as an approach to leadership focusing on 'crafting a sense of us' (Steffens *et al.*, 2014). In this paper, while we remain consistent with the definition of the original authors, we refer to the same leadership approach as 'Social Identity Crafting' based on the description of Steffens, Haslam, Reicher, *et al.* (2014). The reason is that the term entrepreneurship is loaded with other meanings such as innovativeness, competitive aggressiveness and risk taking (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996) which extend beyond creating a sense of belongingness to the team.

must now also compete for valuable and scarce human resources (Amankwah-Amoah and Debrah, 2011a). As a state-owned entity facing commercial and political pressures, ATCO can be framed as a semi-public organization (Rainey, 2014) which faces particular sets of challenges for leaders (Borst *et al.*, 2020; Knies *et al.*, 2022).

This paper makes three contributions to HRM research and practice. Firstly, our study lends support to discussions concerning the limitations of EWE, in relation to beneficial outcomes (Caesens, Stinglhamber and Marmier, 2016; Kibatta and Samuel, 2022). Secondly, it develops and empirically tests a model focused on a social identity approach to leadership by the middle managers of a semi-public organization. More specifically, our study of practices in a semi-public sector organization in West Africa, responds to recent interest in HRM in organizational contexts beyond a public-sector/private-sector dichotomy (Knies *et al.*, 2022) and moreover expands the study of work engagement-outcomes research beyond European and North American contexts (Borst *et al.*, 2020). Thirdly, by considering a *social identity crafting* (SIC) approach to leadership in a semi-public organizational context, it addresses the call for public sector leadership studies to consider social identity leadership theory (Crosby and Bryson, 2018). In this manner it also examines the crucial role of middle managers in public organizations (Ancarani *et al.*, 2021) who need to employ SIC as a means of addressing the dual challenges of delivering increased service performance and reduced turnover intention. The following section develops our proposed hypotheses.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Public Leadership, Social Identity and Middle Managers

Crosby and Bryson (2018) call for social identity theory to be utilized when exploring public sector leadership. The logic of this argument is that employees who identify with their public organization build trust and form a bond that shapes their attitudes and behaviours in a manner which provides support to organizational objectives (Campbell and Im, 2015). In this respect, developing a shared social identity has been advocated as the basis for creating a special relationship between followers and leaders (Steffens, Haslam and Reicher, 2014). More specifically, the importance of crafting a social identity within organizations (Ashforth and Mael, 1989) expresses the view that individuals derive a sense of self not only from their personal identity, but also from their social identity based on the distinct characteristics of groups to which they belong (Steffens *et al.*, 2018). However, another question arises about who should craft such a social identity within organizations. The answer appears to arise from literature that has identified the critical role of senior and middle managers in leading change and implementing reforms in the public sector (Wallace *et al.*, 2011), but also highlights the importance of direct supervisors rather than potentially distant executives (van der Voet, 2016; Ancarani *et al.*, 2021).

The Role of Social Identity Crafting

Social identity crafting involves ‘defining core values, norms, and ideals’ which provide clarity on what the group does and does not, stand for (Steffens, Haslam, Reicher, *et al.*, 2014, p.1004). A leader engaging in social identity crafting is concerned not only with

creating a sense of group identity, but also takes on the role of developing a shared identity within the group (Steffens *et al.*, 2018).

We consider that social identity crafting, with its focus on values and belonging, could offer some sense of ‘fit’ and direction to employees. Steffens *et al.* (2018) find that leaders who craft a social identity are associated with greater EWE and reduced turnover intentions. This is also consistent with the finding that identifying with public organizations leads to EWE (Hameduddin and Lee, 2021). Further, organizational job embeddedness, which includes a sense of fit with the organization, is negatively related to turnover intention among public managers (Liao and Sun, 2020). This is echoed by Paillé *et al.* (2013) who indicate the importance of the supportive environment created by the manager in reducing turnover intentions. In this sense, employees who identify with the organization are more engaged and less likely to leave the organization. We therefore set out the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Social Identity Crafting is positively related with EWE

Hypothesis 2: Social Identity Crafting is negatively related with staff turnover intentions

In their study, Zheng *et al.* (2020) encourage public organizations to provide employees with job autonomy as it leads employees to feel that their work is more meaningful and makes them more satisfied. This is critical advice as job autonomy in public organizations influences autonomous motivation (van Loon, Baekgaard and Moynihan, 2020) which enhances an individual’s self-determination resulting in employees finding more purpose and direction in what they pursue (Deci and Ryan, 1985). While leadership style is associated with job autonomy (Gözükara and Simsek, 2015), a leader’s support for social identification contributes to employee empowerment, which connotes job autonomy (Kark,

Shamir and Chen, 2003). With positive links between relatedness and autonomy reported, ‘...autonomy refers not to being independent, detached, or selfish but rather to the feeling of volition that can accompany any act, whether dependent or independent, collectivist or individualist’ (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p. 74). Since social identity crafting facilitates a sense of belonging and shared values (Steffens *et al.*, 2018), job autonomy should not be interpreted as antagonistic to these characteristics. We therefore hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 3: Social Identity Crafting is associated with higher levels of job autonomy

Job Autonomy and Service Performance

Autonomy emphasizes the importance attached to an individual’s own efforts and initiative as opposed to implementing prescribed actions (Hackman and Oldham, 1976). Treated as an organizational resource, job autonomy has been positively associated with dedication in work engagement as customer contact staff play an essential role in service businesses (Salanova, Agut and Peiró, 2005). High job autonomy influences the degree of work engagement (Man and Lam, 2003) but is also beneficial for work outcomes (Hackman and Oldham, 1976; Man and Lam, 2003). Overall, autonomy and leadership characteristics have been shown to contribute in achieving public EWE (Tioumagneng and Njifen, 2020).

Hypothesis 4: Job autonomy is related positively with EWE

Studying leadership roles in service-sector environments, Clark *et al.* (2009:213) show that customer service can be significantly improved when ‘employees are provided the necessary authority and autonomy that enables them to exercise control over decisions in the workplace’. In fact, high levels of autonomy are an important resource for public employees

in order for them to meet their job demands (Bakker, 2015). With autonomy being associated with more vitality i.e., public employees having more energy available for themselves (Tummers *et al.*, 2018), such a vitality is crucial in delivering improved service levels. In the air transport industry, where front line staff face a variety of customer requirements that can be wide ranging and hard to rationalize, the need for employees to have degrees of autonomy to deliver customer service is especially relevant (Bowen and Lawler, 1992; Browning, 2006). Based on the above we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 5: Job autonomy is related positively with service performance

Outcomes of EWE

EWE is described as a salient feature in managing public organizations (Hameduddin and Lee, 2021). Such engagement is defined as ‘a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption’ (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004, p. 295) and is associated with employees expending greater discretionary effort than their disengaged counterparts (Kahn, 1990; Bakker, 2011). In service contexts, discretionary efforts can help ensure that customers are satisfied. In this manner, work engagement contributes to a service climate that delivers service performance that enhances customer loyalty (Salanova, Agut and Peiró, 2005). By being psychologically present (Kahn, 1992) workers who are engaged beyond basic motivation are responsive and creative to unfolding challenges, potentially engaging in innovative work behaviours (Agarwal, 2014).

As such, EWE is considered theoretically important owing to its relationship with job performance (Rich, Lepine and Crawford, 2010) and has received considerable attention in the public sector literature. As Bakker (2015, p.724) notes, ‘engaged workers bring in their physical, cognitive, and emotional resources to perform their roles as well as possible.’ Such

an engagement is a direct expression of Public Service Motivation, appropriate to our research context, enabling the public employee to deal with daily work challenges and ultimately leads to better performance (Camilleri, 2007). It also implies lower voluntary staff turnover, which avoids disruption to service delivery and the costs associated with replacing those leavers. Organizations with engaged employees benefit from a wide range of associated outcomes, including greater customer satisfaction and profitability and lower staff turnover (Menguc *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, Saks (2006) finds that EWE explains variance in job satisfaction, and intention to quit. Overall, the notion of the ‘public sector service value chain’ captures the importance of EWE with positive public sector service outcomes (Heintzman and Marson, 2005).

Nevertheless, Kibatta and Samuel (2022), drawing on the work of Caesens, Stinglhamber, and Marmier (2016), report a curvilinear relationship between employees’ work engagement and turnover intentions. Studying millennial frontline employees in the demanding context of the hospitality sector, Kibatta and Samuel (2022) find that reductions in turnover intention associated with increasing levels of work engagement reach a plateau. Beyond this plateau, highly engaged workers might perceive that their efforts are not reciprocated by the organization, such that further increases in work engagement could lead to those workers seeking alternative employment (Caesens, Stinglhamber and Marmier, 2016; Kibatta and Samuel, 2022).

We therefore hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 6: EWE (a) is positively associated with service performance, and (b) has a curvilinear relationship with turnover intentions

Overall, the above set of hypotheses implies that EWE mediates (fully or partially) Social Identity Crafting and autonomy with our two performance variables turnover intentions and service performance. While we do not explicitly hypothesize for these indirect effects², the mediating role of EWE in our conceptual model (Figure 1), is consistent with the conceptualization of other work in the literature (Steffens, 2018; Saks, 2006; Salanova, 2005). Further, we also report our indirect effects (Table 5).

Research context: ATCO

The air transport industry in Africa offers a fascinating context in which to study public sector leadership, specifically semi-public contexts characterized by political involvement and commercialization, giving rise to a new competitive environment (Amankwah-Amoah and Debrah, 2010, 2011b; Abate, 2016). Commercial entrants to these markets have challenged state-owned incumbents, which now must adapt and compete for customers (Amankwah-Amoah and Debrah, 2010; Akwei, Tsamenyi and Sa'id, 2012). While the management capabilities of those leading the sector have been questioned (Njoya, 2016), Amankwah-Amoah and Debrah's (2010:258) analysis of Ghana Airways observed how 'institutional pressures from the government restricted the management's response to changes in the external environment.'

The organization selected for this study, ATCO, was founded in the mid-1990s as a state-owned national carrier. Liberalization brought competition to the Passenger Handling business where some ATCO employees left to start up rival ventures while ATCO is expected to operate along commercial lines and not burden national finances. With

² We thank an anonymous reviewer for their relevant suggestion

Entrepreneurship scale developed by (Steffens *et al.*, 2014), Job Autonomy by Salanova et al. (2005) while EWE is drawn from the shortened version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli, Bakker and Salanova, 2006). The Turnover Intentions scale was adopted from the work of Aliyu and Nyadzayo (2018), and the Service Performance in a service context scale from Brown et al. (2002). The items for each scale are shown in Table 2. Gender, Organizational Tenure and Education were used as control variables in a manner similar to other relevant studies (Lee and Allen, 2002; Steffens *et al.*, 2018).

The survey asked front line employees to respond based on how they are managed by their line manager. We adopted this focus because line managers are an important influence on the service delivery process (Clark, Hartline and Jones, 2009). We reasoned that, in this environment, unit managers are well-placed to influence staff attitudes rather than focusing solely on distant leaders further up the organization structure who are removed from front line service delivery (Spreitzer, de Janasz and Quinn, 1999).

Analysis and results

Measurement model evaluation

To test the proposed hypotheses, data were analyzed using the consistent PLS-SEM procedure (SmartPLS 4.0). The reason for selecting this procedure over standard PLS-SEM is that consistent PLS-SEM addresses the inconsistency of path coefficient estimates in the case of reflective measurements (Dijkstra and Henseler, 2015). All item loadings were reviewed to be significant at the .01 level, the average variance extracted (AVE) values were higher than 0.5, and composite reliabilities (CR) were higher than 0.7 (Table 2) indicating acceptable

reducing turnover intentions. Further, social identity crafting has a strong indirect effect on service performance through being associated with higher levels of EWE and higher levels of autonomy.

Implications for theory

Our research contributes to contemporary discussions concerning the limitations of EWE but also suggests ways to overcome them. While our results offer support to the findings of Caesens *et al.* (2016) and Kibatta and Samuel (2022), indicating a curvilinear relationship between EWE and turnover intention, they also add insights from a novel empirical semi-public context in which staff retention is both important and highly challenging. Furthermore, our work responds to calls for further engagement with social identity leadership theory (Crosby and Bryson, 2018), finding that crafting a sense of social identity with shared values and norms (Steffens *et al.*, 2018) is associated with low turnover intentions and higher levels of service performance, as well as contributing to employee autonomy and engagement. In the context of debates concerning the limits of EWE, our findings indicate that as EWE reaches a plateau in reducing turnover intentions, an increasing sense of social identity with shared values and norms continues to reduce turnover intentions. Service performance evaluation was associated with a more balanced range of influences from social identity crafting, autonomy and engagement.

Our findings are important for human resource management researchers for three reasons. First, while EWE remains a very powerful construct associated with higher levels of employee retention and performance, its limitations at high levels need to be recognized and the underlying mechanisms for these limitations need to be explored in more depth. In this manner, we contribute to the growing stream of literature that supports the curvilinear effect

of EWE. Second, our work indicates that social identity leadership does indeed have a place beyond private sector management (Crosby and Bryson, 2018) as it is not only able to overcome EWE's limitations with regard to employee retention but also indirectly enhances service performance. Finally, we contribute to the literature that examines HRM practices in (semi)public sector organizations (Knies *et al.*, 2022) and we do so in West Africa, responding to recent interest in research beyond developed market contexts (Borst *et al.*, 2020). By addressing the calls for HRM to be studied in context (Vincent *et al.*, 2020; Mayrhofer, Gooderham and Brewster, 2021), we contribute more broadly to the knowledge-base of HRM research.

Implications for practice

Our findings also have important practical implications for managers to reflect on. Our work speaks particularly to managers operating in resource constrained contexts such as public and semi-public organizations facing competitive challenges in liberalized markets and especially work environments beyond those of well-studied American and European workplaces. For some managers, therefore, the insights from our study can be more readily applied to their own organizational context. In particular, while highlighting the limitations of EWE as a means of reducing staff turnover intention (Kibatta and Samuel, 2022), our findings suggest that social identity crafting offers a way through which to strengthen their organization's competitive position. Social identity crafting appears to overcome the potential risk of highly engaged workers viewing their efforts as unreciprocated by the organization, leading them to seek alternative employment (Caesens, Stinglhamber and Marmier, 2016; Kibatta and Samuel, 2022). Further, there are clear service performance benefits arising from the support of social identity crafting on autonomy and EWE. Especially noteworthy for managers

working within tightly resource constrained contexts, such as that of ATCO, the actions associated with social identity crafting, namely ‘defining core values, norms, and ideals’ providing clarity on what the group stands for (Steffens, Haslam, Reicher, *et al.*, 2014, p.1004), need not imply additional expenditure. Rather, organizations’ senior leaders might productively reflect on which skills are recognised and developed among line managers. Placing a greater emphasis on someone’s ability to engage in social identity crafting might lead to changes in which colleagues are promoted and how they are trained.

Limitations and directions for future research

Notwithstanding the contributions of this paper, the theoretical and empirical scope of the research design imposes certain limitations and creates specific opportunities for promising future research. Our single organization study design gives us pause before seeking to generalize our findings to other environments. While this design offers consistency in terms of a specific context and the challenges faced by managers, it may limit the generalizability of our findings. Similarly, the cross-sectional nature of the study leaves untouched questions of whether the encouraging evidence of effective management has developed over time and whether it might be sustained. Future research could follow a longitudinal design in order to more confidently demonstrate causality between study variables. Such a design could also incorporate interventions where relevant training with the purpose of enhancing social identity crafting has been offered to managers. In this manner, the value of such interventions could also be assessed. Further, besides social identity crafting, the ability of other leadership styles to extend beyond the limitations of EWE should be explored.

Conclusion

Given the resource limitations of semi-public organizations while competing with private sector firms, we identify social identity crafting as a leadership style that can overcome the weaknesses of EWE. In particular, social identity crafting remains effective in deterring employee turnover when EWE proves to reach a plateau at higher levels of employee engagement while providing continuous support for improved levels of service performance. Thus, social identity crafting is capable of addressing the dual imperative of retaining skilled employees who might be poached by commercial competitors, and improving service performance levels without requiring significant resource investments.

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