Guest editorial

Work engagement: current trends

Over the past two decades, the number of studies on work engagement has increased rapidly. Work engagement refers to a positive, affective-motivational state of high energy combined with high levels of dedication and a strong focus on work (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010). It is highly desirable for contemporary public and private organizations to have engaged employees because engagement has been shown to coincide with high levels of creativity, task performance, organizational citizenship behavior, and client satisfaction (Bakker *et al.*, 2014).

In this paper, we briefly discuss the state of the art of the work engagement literature, and then outline new research trends and research questions. After that, we introduce the articles that have been included in this special issue of *Career Development International* that is devoted to work engagement.

Brief state of the art

Work engagement is most often defined as "[…] a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002, p. 74). Individuals who are engaged in their work have high levels of energy, are enthusiastic about their work, and are completely immersed in their work activities. The majority of studies have adopted a between-person approach, showing that there are mean level differences in work engagement between individuals as a function of working conditions, personal characteristics, and behavioral strategies (Bakker *et al.*, 2014). However, research over the past decade has shown that work engagement may also fluctuate within persons – across time and situations. For example, research has shown that workers are most engaged during challenging two-hour work episodes (Reina-Tamayo *et al.*, 2017), during workdays preceded by evenings when workers have recovered well (Sonnentag, 2003), and during workdays when they have access to a variety of resources (Bakker, 2014).

Job resources refer to those aspects of the job that help in achieving goals, reduce job demands, and often stimulate personal growth and development (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). Job resources may be physical, psychological, social, or organizational in nature, including equipment, participation in decision making, social support from colleagues, and flexible working times. Job resources are intrinsically motivating because they fulfill basic human needs – the needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy (Van den Broeck *et al.*, 2008). Job resources are also extrinsically motivating, because they help reaching work-related goals (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014). When workers have access to many job resources, they are able to deal with high job demands. In addition, personal resources may play an important role. Personal resources refer to employee cognitions or beliefs regarding the perceived control they have over their environment. The research evidence shows that employees are higher in work engagement when they have higher levels of personal resources, including self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience (Mäkikangas *et al.*, 2013).

Recent studies have started to investigate more distal predictors of work engagement – those that may predict job and personal resources, and indirectly influence engagement. For example, some studies have shown that human resources practices such as job redesign may positively influence work engagement – particularly through their influence on job resources (Alfes *et al.*, 2013; Holman and Axtell, 2016). In addition, an increasing number of studies suggests that leaders play an important role in employee work engagement, for example, by showing transformational leadership, thereby influencing

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employee personal and job resources (e.g. Breevaart *et al.*, 2014; Tims *et al.*, 2011; Tuckey *et al.*, 2012). Limited research on the influence of organizational-level resources such as strategic alignment has also been conducted (e.g. Biggs *et al.*, 2014).

One reason why work engagement is such a popular concept is that it is a very good predictor of important employee, team, and organizational outcomes. Because of their strong dedication to and focus on their work activities, engaged workers show better in-role task performance (Christian *et al.*, 2011) and better financial results (Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, because of their openness to new experiences, engaged workers have more creative ideas and are more likely to innovate and be entrepreneurial (Gawke *et al.*, 2017; Orth and Volmer, 2017). In addition to these individual-level performance outcomes, research has shown that engaged workers are more inclined to help their colleagues. At the team level, team work engagement has been found to positively associate with team performance (Costa *et al.*, 2015; Tims *et al.*, 2013). Engagement crosses over from one individual to the other, and therefore has important ripple effects in teams (Bakker *et al.*, 2006; Gutermann *et al.*, 2017; Van Mierlo and Bakker, 2018).

Job demands-resources (JD-R) theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014, 2017) is one of the most-often used theories to explain work engagement. This theory proposes that a combination of job characteristics and personal resources predicts job performance through employee work engagement. Accordingly, work engagement is most likely when workers are confronted with high challenges, and have sufficient job and personal resources available to deal with these challenges (e.g. Bakker and Sanz-Vergel, 2013; Tadic *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, the theory proposes that employees can proactively seek job resources and challenges – for example, by asking for feedback, support, and opportunities for development, and by starting new exciting projects. There is considerable evidence for the JD-R theory, and we refer to Bakker and Demerouti (2014, 2017) for overviews. In short, the theory proposes that job resources are positively related to work engagement; challenge job demands can strengthen the positive link between job resources and engagement; hindrance job demands can weaken the positive link between job resources and engagement; work engagement is positively related to performance; employees can use job crafting to increase their own levels of work engagement (see also, Demerouti, 2014).

The JD-R theory focuses particularly on job characteristics, employee behaviors (e.g. job crafting, strengths use; playful work design; Bakker, 2017), and personal resources (e.g. self-efficacy, optimism, self-esteem). However, research has shown that stable personality traits can also explain part of the variance in work engagement. The review by Mäkikangas *et al.* (2013) has shown that the classic Big Five factors, particularly extraversion, emotional stability, and conscientiousness, were able to predict unique variance in work engagement. However, they concluded that mechanisms responsible for the personality-work engagement relationship are largely unknown. Do extraverts seek social workplaces or are they shaped by their workplaces? Does emotional stability help to buffer the impact of job demands, or does emotional stability reduce (perceptions of) job demands? It is clear that still much needs to be learned about the complex link between stable traits and fluctuating job characteristics on the one hand, and work engagement on the other hand.

Current trends in work engagement research

We see several trends in the work engagement literature. Probably one of the most important trends is that engagement is studied as a phenomenon that may fluctuate within persons – across time and situations (Bakker, 2014; Sonnentag *et al.*, 2010). Daily work engagement (or weekly and episodic work engagement) is isomorphic, which means that its manifestation is usually the same when studied as a general phenomenon vs as a fluctuating phenomenon. Daily engagement refers to daily levels of vigor, dedication, and absorption

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that may fluctuate as a function of daily demands, resources, and proactive behaviors. For example, Xanthopoulou *et al.* (2009) have shown that daily work engagement (and, consequently, daily financial results) is a function of daily job and personal resources. Specifically, Xanthopoulou *et al.* found that employees working in fast-food restaurants were more engaged on the days they had access to many resources. Petrou *et al.* (2012) have shown that daily work engagement is a function of daily job crafting behaviors.

For organizational practice, it is important to know that employees experience fluctuating levels of engagement when performing their work. However, it is equally important to know what the general levels of engagement are, and whether these levels can be influenced by human resources practices. One trend in the literature is that human resource scholars have started to study the top-down impact of human resource management (HRM) systems and practices on employee work engagement. Albrecht *et al.* (2015), for example, drew from a number of theoretical frameworks to propose an integrated strategic engagement model that includes consideration of how organizational context factors, job context factors, and individual psychological and motivational factors influence engagement. Saks and Gruman (2017) have similarly proposed that engagement researchers might usefully draw from the ability-motivation-opportunity model to understand how HRM practices can influence engagement. Overall, there is a clear trend toward recognizing that HRM practitioners need to move beyond the routine administration of annual engagement surveys and need to embed engagement in HRM policies and practices such personnel selection, socialization, performance management, and training and development (Albrecht *et al.*, 2015).

One other important trend in the literature is the link between leadership and engagement. Although quite a lot is known about the association between transformational leadership and engagement (e.g. Breevaart *et al.*, 2014; Ghadi *et al.*, 2013), leaders of contemporary organizations are increasingly realizing the importance of organizational cultures characterized by flexibility, agility, and responsiveness (Denning, 2013). As a consequence, researchers are beginning to look beyond designated, formal and role-based sources of leadership, to instead look at a range of more inclusive leadership styles such as distributive, shared, collectivist, and adaptive leadership styles (Caulfield and Senger, 2017; Heifetz *et al.*, 2009; Yammarino *et al.*, 2012). Such leadership styles can potentially compliment the known benefits associated with transformational leadership, particularly in explaining the emergence and maintenance of engagement in dynamic team-based working contexts.

In addition to organizational-level and top-down approaches to work engagement, recent research has shown that employees may also influence their own levels of engagement. One popular bottom-up approach to work engagement is job crafting. Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) have defined job crafting as the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in their task or relational boundaries. Physical changes refer to changes in the form, scope, or number of job tasks or relationships at work, whereas cognitive changes refer to changing how one perceives the job. Using the JD-R theory, Tims *et al.* (2012) have argued and shown that job crafting can take the form of proactively increasing job resources, increasing challenge job demands, or reducing hindrance job demands. They found that employees in various occupations (e.g. teachers, tax officers, general practitioners, consultants, chemical plant operators, nurses) all show job crafting behaviors and modify their jobs on a regular basis. Particularly job crafting in the form of increasing challenge job demands and increasing job resources is positively related to work engagement and task performance. In addition, recent job crafting interventions have shown that employees can learn to craft their jobs, resulting in more job and personal resources, higher levels of work engagement, and improved performance (e.g. Gordon *et al.*, 2017; Van Wingerden *et al.*, 2017). This means that job crafting is an effective bottom-up strategy to improve work engagement, because it increases the meaning of work and the fit between person and organization.

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Perhaps one of the most important trends in the engagement literature centers on the increased number of intervention studies that has been published in recent years. Although it is important that research continues to incrementally improve our understanding of the nature, causes, and consequences of engagement, it is also vitally important that the accumulated knowledge about engagement is translated into practical applications aimed at promoting individual, team and organizational health, well-being, and performance (Guest, 2014; Schaufeli and Salanova, 2010). Steidle *et al.* (2017), for example, in a randomized controlled study, found that respite interventions helped employees replenish and build energy resources at work. Knight *et al.* (2017), using a non-randomized, matched control group, pretest, post-test design showed that a participatory action intervention increased work engagement in nursing staff. As noted above, several other studies have shown the efficacy of job crafting interventions for increasing employee engagement.

Future research

Although a wealth of knowledge has been accumulated over the past two to three decades about the nature, causes, and consequences of engagement, the changing world of work (Ployhart and Turner, 2014) continues to suggest a number of exciting research opportunities. Research will inevitably need to focus on determining how the advent of "big data," predictive analytics, and artificial intelligence will influence the theory and practice of work engagement. King *et al.* (2015), for example, proposed how the big data analysis of employee social media activity might be used to provide an indication of employee levels of engagement. King *et al.* also described how capturing managers' and employees' brief, unconscious "microexpression" data might help understand and monitor manager and employee engagement. More broadly, questions will arise as to how readily current theories such as the JD-R theory apply in the big data, artificial intelligence, gamified, lean, agile, and virtual working contexts. Such contexts certainly appear to have captured the attention of executives and practitioners wanting to better understand and predict employee experiences in the new world of work (Power, 2017).

Concurrent with "big picture" future research on employee engagement, ongoing research is needed to refine and develop current knowledge. Future research, for example, could usefully be devoted to systematically understanding what influences engagement in specific demographic groups (e.g. people with disabilities; millennials; older workers), across specific industry sectors (private, public, non-for-profit), and in differing occupations. Identifying the most salient job demands and resources specific to particular demographics, occupations and industry sectors will enable framing the most ecologically valid interventions that therefore have the most likely chance of being effective.

This special issue

The papers selected for this special issue "Work engagement: Current trends" pick up on the emerging trends and future research possibilities outlined above. In the first paper, Saks and Gruman (2018) investigate how newcomer work engagement can fluctuate during the first year of organizational entry and the role of organizational socialization in developing and maintaining newcomer work engagement. Saks and Gruman show that socialization resources such as supervisor support, recognition, and feedback may be crucial in this respect. Specifically, socialization resources seem to have the potential to influence employee personal resources and person-organization fit perceptions, and may indirectly foster newcomer work engagement. In the second paper, Alessandri *et al.* (2018) examine whether personal resources or psychological capital (i.e. self-beliefs regarding self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience) can predict work engagement and performance. Their findings show that both absolute levels and increases in psychological capital predict subsequent increases in work engagement, which, in turn, predict job performance increases – suggesting that in

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addition to job resources, employees beliefs about their personal resources are important determinants of work engagement. In the third paper, Caniëls *et al.* (2018) investigate how employee characteristics and leader behaviors act in concert to influence employee work engagement. The results show that particularly employees with a proactive personality are inspired and become more engaged when their leaders use transformational leadership behaviors that match with employees' growth mindset. This study is an interesting and important illustration of the notion that job and personal resources act in concert and together influence work engagement – a notion that is largely missing in the current literature.

In the fourth paper, Albrecht *et al.* (2018) expand previous work engagement research by showing how organizational-level resources and an organizational engagement climate relate to job resources and work engagement. Specifically, they show that organizational resources such as strategic alignment, human resources practices, and senior leadership are positively related to an organizational engagement climate and job resources, which, in turn, relate to employee work engagement. This suggests that top-down approaches to work engagement may have important potential. In the fifth paper, Moeller *et al.* (2018) take a different perspective and examine how employees may show various types of burnout-engagement profiles. Although there is considerable research showing that burnout is negatively related to work engagement, the authors show that there are various possible alternative profiles, including a profile combining high work engagement with high burnout. The latter group of employees with mixed feelings about work often show high demands-high resources profiles, suggesting that work environments that make people enthusiastic about their work may simultaneously drain their limited energy reservoir. In the final paper, Van Mierlo and Bakker (2018) investigate whether engagement can cross over between individuals who work in newly formed groups. Participants were asked to perform a dynamic, interactive building task under controlled laboratory conditions, allowing to observe the crossover process from a "zero" point, before any mutual influences had occurred. The results show that group member engagement scores indeed converge over time, supporting the proposed crossover effect of engagement, especially when the most engaged group member is highly engaged at the beginning of the group task. We hope that this special issue will inspire scholars and practitioners and help them in their efforts to better understand and foster employee work engagement.

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