

Why employee engagement fluctuates – new research



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Research Briefing

Employee engagement has become one of the hot topics in research, for practitioners and organisations, and is particularly important for organisational development and human resources practitioners. Employee role engagement is a subset of the broader concept of employee engagement and is the focus of a new study.

When people talk about employee engagement, it tends to be used as an absolute or a measure of unvarying general engagement. Few studies hitherto have looked at how engagement fluctuates and changes from day to day or even within a single day.

- [Levels of employee engagement](#)
 - [Trait engagement](#)
 - [State engagement](#)
- [New study](#)
- [Employee role engagement](#)
- [B&B – the broaden and build theory](#)
 - [Psychological meaningfulness](#)

- [Psychological availability](#)
- [Psychological safety](#)
- [Findings](#)
- [References](#)

Levels of employee engagement

Previous studies have found that role engagement tends to operate on two levels:

1. Trait engagement
2. State engagement.

Trait engagement refers to the attributes or characteristics of the individual that tend to remain reasonably constant over time.

State engagement on the other hand, refers to the individual's emotional or mental reaction or the predicament an individual finds themselves in at any moment. State engagement tends to fluctuate, depending on the individual's perception of their work context and what is going on around them.

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A number of previous studies found that how an individual experiences the organisation and its practices shapes the employee's behaviour. This is due to that individual's traits creating a perception of what is going on, which in turn creates state engagement. In other words, an individual's traits define how the individual sees and perceives what is happening and those perceptions create a state. The state then informs the individual's behaviour or behavioural reaction to the situation.

New employee engagement research

New employee engagement research looks at how and why state engagement fluctuates or changes during the working day and to see how an individual's trait engagement influences their state engagement.



Employee role engagement

The researchers decided to focus on individual role engagement, rather than the wider defined work or employee engagement. Work or employee engagement tends to refer to the energy, dedication and how engrossed in individual is in their work, generally. Role engagement, on the other hand, refers to what is known as 'situated human agency'. This means how able an individual is to act or take action in any particular situation or context.

So, role engagement refers to the sense that an individual has that they have the ability and capacity to be able to take action in any particular environment or set of circumstances or conditions. Another way of looking at this is "what can and should I do in this situation". The level of role engagement, therefore, is based on how well the individual knows what to do next and how much they are inclined to do that.



B&B – the broaden and build theory

The study also looked at what is known as the broaden and build theory. Known as the B&B theory, the broaden and build theory is that positive emotions, such as joy, enjoyment, happiness and positive anticipation, tend to broaden an individual's awareness and encourage novel, diverse and exploratory thoughts and actions. Over time, these novel, diverse and exploratory thoughts and actions build skills and resources. An example of this would be when someone's curiosity about the landscape starts to build a series of navigational skills.

The B&B theory has been found to have a series of psychological conditions that underpin it:

1. **Psychological meaningfulness** which refers to the sense that something is worthwhile, useful and valuable. Situations and contexts that have psychological meaningfulness tend to generate higher levels of engagement.
2. **Psychological availability** refers to the sense of having the resources (physical, emotional and psychological) to engage in the situation or work at hand and leads to the belief that one has the ability to engage in a meaningful way.
3. **Psychological safety**, which means the ability to be able to do things, without feeling anxious or worries about any negative consequences.

Findings

The study found the following:

1. Employee perceptions of their work, in particular
 1. Task clarity
 2. Access to resources
 3. Co-worker support

are positively related to state role engagement.

2. Psychological meaningfulness and psychological availability are positively and significantly correlated to state engagement, however, psychological safety isn't. This means that, in order for an individual to feel engaged, the work has to be meaningful and the individual has to have the sense that they have the resources to engage in a positive manner with the situation or work at hand.
3. When psychological meaningfulness and availability are present, an individual can overcome safety fears. However, if there are low levels of psychological meaningfulness and availability, psychological safety becomes a significant factor in whether or not an individual will engage in any particular work situation.
4. The study also found empirical evidence to assert that trait engagement turns into state engagement through the lens of an individual's perception of meaningfulness of the work they do and their perception of their ability and the level of resources they have, which in turn leads to a sense that they have the ability to engage in that context or situation.



What this means is that role engagement, or how able an individual to act or take action in any particular situation or context, comes from three different factors:

1. The traits and characteristics of the individual or their predilection to be engaged in work (trait engagement).
2. The employee's perception that they have:
 1. Clarity about the task they are being asked to do
 2. Access to the resources needed to do their job
 3. Co-worker support whilst doing it.
3. And the level of
 1. Psychological meaningfulness
 2. Psychological availability (the sense that they can actually do the job).

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