

THE IMPACT OF WORK ENGAGEMENT ON EMPLOYEE MENTAL WELL-BEING

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of work engagement on employee mental well-being. On the basis of the literature review, it was hypothesized that 1) There would be an impact of work engagement on the well-being of the employee, and 2) There would be a gender difference in work engagement and mental well-being of employees. Data for this study was taken from large to mid-size organizations from three large industries within Karachi: 1) Banking 2) Telecommunication, and 3) Manufacturing. A total of 449 (373 males, & 76 females) participated in this study. Work engagement was assessed by the DDI Work Engagement Survey (Wellins, Bernthal, & Phelps, 2005) whereas Mental Well-Being was measured using The Warwick-Edinburgh Well-Being Scale (Tennant et al., 2007). The result was analyzed by using Linear Regression to test hypothesis one and t-test was used to assess hypothesis two. The research results do not support the two stated hypotheses. The implication of the study for businesses and organizations are the tangible and intangible benefits on employee well-being. The insights gained would indicate that work engagement is a major component to, and provides for (increased) levels of mental well-being of employees, thereby resulting in a productive and effective workforce. Employees, as a consequence, have a balanced approach towards work and life with fewer overall work concerns.

Keywords: Employees, Mental Well-Being, Work Engagement, Effective Workforce.

JEL Classification: M190

Introduction

Workplaces are diverse. Whether in the public or private sector, they vary in size, type of activity and in the cultural traditions of the organization. In spite of these differences, the work life has been, and remains, an essential part of adult life (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005a). Intertwined with economic and personal connections, work offers a secure livelihood as well as an astute sense of self-affirmation and self-worth leading to strengthening of the self-esteem.

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Work is an essential part of social integration and community living, and consequentially it is integral that employees feel committed to the organization (Shuck & Reio, 2011). In the past, extensive literature has been reviewed and analyzed to understand the relationship(s) between the psychological aspects of work life (CIPD, 2006).

There are manifold benefits associated with both high work engagement and well-being scores. An organization's success depends on maintaining and sustaining a talented and productive workforce working within a stable environment, and delivering high quality products and services (O'Malley, 2000). In the future, changes in the economy and global competition will increase the challenges present in the nature of work, technology infusion and demographics changes (Robinson, Perryman, & Hayday, 2004). Chandler and McEvoy (2000) studied a lingering question in management research: is there a consistent set of principles or practices that can be said to universally represent a holistic view to managing employees and increasing mental well-being? Research, studies and theories suggest that used in combination as well as separately, HR practices remain associated with improved organizational performance (Boxall, 1996).

Well-being has been researched extensively in the last 20 years. The research offers multiple theories as to the meaning, definition and constructs of mental well-being (Sumner, 1996). Thomas (2009) argues that mental well-being is elusive, difficult to define and often hard to measure. Work engagement has been defined concurrently as an employee attitude and behavior, and organizational phenomenon (Tiberius & Hall, 2010). However, the definition notwithstanding, in nearly all of the descriptions engagement is construed and linked with employee mental well-being (Yousuf-Morgan & Bockorny, 2013).

Lewis, Donaldson-Feilder and Tharani (2011) offers a definition of work engagement as an approach focused on what one does (thinking), feeling good about oneself within the assumed role and the organization (feeling), and acting in a positive manner and commitment towards organizational values and objectives (acting). There are multiple factors that have an impact on the environment. These elements continue to make demands on mental capital and well-being, and at the same time offer opportunities for people to develop and flourish (Bamberger & Meshoulam, 2000). Challenges within the environments global and national - have forced organizations to relook at their ability to evolve with time and cater to the changing requirements of both employees and customers. Such changes, imperative for growth and profitability, refer to systems, structures and processes as well as skills and abilities of staff.

The changing nature of work implies that today, as organizations expand and shrink in accordance with market demands, the workplace is becoming increasingly unpredictable with a decrease in job security and increased layoffs. Extensive changes and developments have occurred in the work place during the past decade. Caliskan (2010) found that employees who were involved in a change program and communication strategy reported significant increase in self-evaluated

performance. The emergence of knowledge on the nature of work, motivation of employees and business fundamentals has resulted in a growing need to further explore and determine the capabilities of employees – both psychological and physical – in order to perform the assigned tasks (Weehuizen, 2008).

Within the context of internal and external factors and the changing climate, an important issue is how organizations can gain a higher level of commitment from their employees. High levels of organizational commitment result in and encourage loyalty, decrease levels of absenteeism and increase levels of productivity (Bunting, 2004). For a number of employees change causes feelings of uncertainty and unease given the nature and future existence of their jobs. These changes are on-going and together with a shrinking labor market, contribute to a heightened sense of job insecurity. Budh Raja (2008) states that employees are often unable to cope with increasing demands, limited resources, and a (perceived) lack of control. Organizational instability causes some employees to shift their commitment from increasingly transient work organizations to seek relative stability with other organizations, within the domain of their occupations (Johnson, 2004).

The evolving mix of cultures, altering family structures, developing patterns of migration and increasing need for communication drive the need to connect with greater access across cultural groups and generations (Wellin & Concelman, 2005). Several aspects of emotional capital and mental well-being could be affected by learning through life, developing approaches to flexible work and encouraging the involvement of baby boom generation in a continued fashion (Eichinger & Lombardo, 2005). The cycles of opportunities, social cohesion, togetherness across generations will be required as a result (Tatli, Ozbilgin, & Worman, 2006).

“What drives an employee to go to work each day?” Employees choose a course of action and engage in certain behaviors and attitudes due to internal and external forces of motivation (Newstrom, 2007). Workplaces are designed with the objective of creating sustainable environments functioning optimally. Employees who are committed to the organization’s goals and values are further motivated to contribute to the organizational success (Ulrich, 1997a). As such the level of commitment, or the lack thereof, can influence the employee’s sense of mental well-being. Engagement programs or processes therefore have the objective of improving the mental and physical health of employees (Dollard & Bakker, 2010).

Studies indicate that one of the fundamental methods for employee retention is to develop engaged employees through investment in their mental well-being. Bevan (2010) noted that a large number of employers, particularly in large organizations, were adopting measures to promote and support health and mental well-being of their workers in order to improve productivity and endurance (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004). The subject of mental well-being has been studied extensively in the last decade (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Kahneman, Diener & Schwarz, 1999). In recent times there has been great interest in work engagement and employee mental well-being

(Stratham & Chase, 2010). However, there has been considerable variance in the approaches towards the subject of mental well-being (Spector, Cooper, Sanchez, Schmotkin, & Ryff, 2002).

In sum, this study explores the evidence regarding linkages between employee mental well-being and work engagement. The definition of work engagement as an employee attitude has strong implications for, and overlaps with, mental well-being and health (Schaufeli, Taris, & van Rhenen, 2008). Engagement is defined as a set of actions (or the associated intensity of action) and it is possible therefore that actions will influence mental well-being (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002)

This study will assist to identify the threats pervading the mental well-being. The threats in this case can be psychological as well as emotional. The two hypotheses of the study are as follows:

1. To determine if there will be an impact of work engagement on mental well-being.
2. To determine gender differences in measurements of mental well-being and work engagement.

Methods

Sample

Data for the study was collected from employees of four organizations. The participants consisted of permanent staff at various levels within the organizations. Questionnaires were distributed and sent to the researcher via email. Prior to completing the questionnaire, the participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that all information would be treated confidentially. The participants selected for the study were mid to junior level managers. Exclusion criterion in the research study were based on the following: Top Line Management and Leaders and Contract Staff. A total of 700 questionnaires were distributed of which 449 completed questionnaires were returned. The returned questionnaires indicated a response rate of 64%.

Measures

Each participant received a Consent form, a Demographic form and a copy of the two scales utilized for the study. The details of the scales are as follows:

1. The DDI Work Engagement Survey (Development Dimensions International Inc.). DDI states engagement as “the extent to which people enjoy and believe in what they do and feel valued for doing it.” To assess engagement, the DDI E3® Employee Engagement Survey, a 20 item scale was used. Responses from participants were elicited on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. All questions were scored positively. The score was calculated by totaling the scores for each item. A high engagement score indicates a high level of work engagement.

DDI's engagement value proposition includes five fundamental areas: Empowerment, Teamwork and Collaboration, Development Plans, Support and Recognition and Satisfaction and Loyalty. The scale offered five characteristics: Short, Valid, Reliable, Limited Flexibility and Actionable.

2. The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) was developed to capture a broad concept of positive mental well-being. It covers most aspects with 14 positively worded items of positive mental health, including positive affect (feelings of optimism, cheerfulness, and relaxation), satisfying interpersonal relationships and positive functioning (energy, clear thinking, self-acceptance, personal development, mastery and autonomy). A 5-point Likert scale (none of the time, rarely, some of the time, often, all of the time) offers a score for each item from 1 to 5 respectively, giving a minimum score of 14 and maximum score of 70. All items were scored positively. The overall score for the WEMWBS is calculated by totaling the scores for each of the 14-items, with equal weights. A higher WEMWBS score indicates a higher level of mental well-being.

Results

All data was analyzed in SPSS v.21. Frequencies and descriptive statistics were calculated for the demographic variables. To test hypothesis one i.e., There will be an impact of work engagement on employee mental well-being, linear Regression model was applied. Second hypothesis i.e., There will be gender differences in the mental well-being and work engagement of employees, was assessed by applying t-test.

As per the findings of the study of the first hypothesis, the regression model predicts the outcome variable is not significant. This indicates the statistical insignificance of the regression model that was applied. Here, $P \geq 0.0005$ which is more than 0.05. (See table 2). The second hypothesis was assessed by applying t-test. According to the results both Mental Well-being ($t=-.331$, $Df=447$, $p>.05$) and Employees Engagement ($t=-.259$, $df=447$, $p>.05$) are not statistically significant.

Table 1.
Represents Demographic Information of the Respondents (n=449)

Demographics	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18-25	157	35%
	26-40	180	40%
	41-45	63	14%
	46-50	27	6%
	50+	22	5%
Gender	Female	76	17%
	Male	373	83%

(Table Continued...)

Marital Status	Married	287	64%
	Single	162	36%
Family	Joint	81	18%
	Separate	368	82%
Children	0	166	37%
	1 to 3	238	53%
	4 to 6	40	9%
	7 and above	4	1%
Work Experience	1 to 5	180	40%
	6 to 10	31	7%
	11 to 15	139	31%
	16 to 20	72	16%
	20 +	27	6%
Industry	Banking	225	50%
	Telecom	99	22%
	Services	76	17%
	Manufacturing	9	2%
	Other	40	9%
Area of Work	Sales	153	34%
	Administration HR	81	18%
	Information Tech	45	10%
	Finance	31	7%
	Other	139	31%

Table 2.

Analysis of Variance for Linear Regression with Employees Engagement as predictor of Mental Well-being

Model		SS	df	MS	F	Sig
1	Regression	8.128	1	8.128	1.417	.234 ^a
	Residual	2563.306	447	5.734		
	Total	2571.434	448			

a. Predictors: (Constant), Employee Engagement

b. Dependent Variable: Mental Well-being

Table 3.

Coefficients for Linear Regression with Employees Engagement as predictor of Mental Well-being

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	58.389	2.516		23.209	.000
	Employee Engagement	-.027	.023	-.056	-1.191	.234

a. Dependent Variable: Mental Well-being

Table 4.

Summary of Linear Regression with Employees Engagement as predictor of Mental Well-being

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square
1	.056 ^a	.003	.001

a. Predictors: (Constant), Employee Work Engagement

b. Dependent Variable: Mental Well-Being

Table 5.

The Mean Difference between Male and Female on the Variable of Mental Well-being

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Dev	t	df	Sig
Mental Well-being	Female	75	55.48	2.468	.331	447	.741
	Male	374	55.38	2.384			

Note. According to the results Mental Well-being is not statistically significant ($t = -.331$, $df = 447$, $p > .05$).

Table 6.

The Mean Difference between Male and Female on the Variable of Employees Engagement

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Dev	t	df	Sig
Mental Well-being	Female	75	55.48	2.468	.331	447	.741
	Male	374	55.38	2.384			

Note. According to the results Employees Engagement is not statistically significant ($t=-.259$, $df=447$, $p>.05$).

Discussion

This section comprises of the summary of the research findings and strategic recommendations for leaders, managers and employees within an organization in order to understand and support importance of work engagement and mental well-being. Improved standards may be established for organizations in the context of present and approaching challenges. These challenges are complex and demanding and constitute of both external and internal influences. Awareness, anticipation and management of such factors provides the backdrop that can assist organizations develop and nurture the future growth and well-being of employed staff in accordance with the requirements of the staff.

An absence of mental well-being affects not only the individual on a personal basis but also affects areas linked to increased productivity in the work place – namely motivation, satisfaction and fulfillment. Low job output/performance is a growing reality and organizations need to manage this issue successfully with a systematic approach to mitigate the possible outcomes originating from the above stressors within the workplace, because the truth is, low job performance is a phenomenon that is increasingly becoming more problematic. The research goal of the study was to understand the impact of work engagement on well-being. This section places the research results of the study in context of obtained results. Two hypotheses were developed for this research study and statistical analyses were performed using linear Regression Analysis and t-test. The findings from the study are presented below:

H1: There will be an impact of work engagement on employee mental well-being.

Results from the present study nullify the stated hypotheses and are not consistent with the stated hypotheses. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected. This research study examined the impact of work engagement on employee mental well-being at the workplace. The literature review presented in the earlier sections on employee engagement and mental well-being cited theoretical and academic perspectives whereby the relevance, significance and linkages between the two topics were examined.

The primary contention internationally (and in certain cases nationally) has been that mental well-being and employee engagement factors overlap to a great extent, have elements that offer a modicum of duplication (as opposed to segregation) and create a mutually influencing environment. Since work hours occupy a large percentage of waking hours, it was hypothesized that a congenial or otherwise a non-congenial work environment would have an effect on and directly influence mental well-being.

The review below presents views as to reasons and perspectives as to why there is a clear segregation of employee work engagement and mental well-being: changing employee perceptions leading to an enrichment of mental well-being in spite of lower engagement scores. Sennett (1998) argued that, with increased complexities within the work environment and external pressures work dissipation has taken the place of pride amongst workers. The short-term perspective and gains have taken the place of the long-term outlook. As a result, instant gratification has become the norm and is no longer the exception with a parallel erosion of feelings of pride and loyalty. Commitment, therefore, as a result of the changed workplace, has been replaced with an employee solicited “what’s in it for me” approach. Employees realize today that there is no dearth of workers and they can often be replaced easily. As a result, Sennett argues that people altruistically selfish and their interests lie in their own well-being most of the time. Therefore, most of life and decisions is sustained out of a desire to be focused on the self and remains personal.

The repercussions of this particular mind-set are multi-fold: the notion of the self-taking precedence and being the center of all activities including work, the erosion of loyalty and commitment towards the organization, the resilience and accountability factors imbued for the individual rather than accountability at the organization. Employees strive to seek identity and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943), we often see a reversion of employees towards basic and fundamental concerns in the turbulent work environment today. Prospects of good governance, able leadership, good management and fulfillment of employee concerns require a sustainable approach towards creating employee engagement.

With the changes in the social, environmental, legal and work factors, it can have envisaged that in this era a visible change is occurring in the domain of the work environment with a redefinition of the traditional psychological contract between the employer and employee. Social norms, technological developments, demographic patterns, competitive global and national organizational demands and changing expectations of employees will change the landscape of how organizations function and how employees adapt (Sparrow & Cooper, 2003). Changing requirements in allocation and distribution of factors such as empowerment, autonomy and job challenges can shift employment patterns since these requirements may be very different from those of the earlier generation in the country (Park, 2004 to 2013).

Zuboff (2010) argues that there are potential opposing views and turbulence as workers move towards their own interests and organizations follow the path to greater profits at the expense of employee concerns. The ethical and organizational values stand in varying conflict to employee personal values thereby raising inevitably dynamic changes in employee perceptions regarding trust, loyalty, engagement and obligations of both parties (Guest, 2004). Studies have shown that the measurement of engagement is somewhat related to, but does not predict performance beyond the traditional attitude of satisfaction and commitment (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011). Cause and effect therefore between the two elements, performance and engagement, is dubious at best as most

studies have not demonstrated cause and effect. Schaufeli and Bakker (2010) state that: “Instead of presenting scientific evidence it is merely stated in (consultancy) reports that a positive relationship between employee engagement and company’s profitability has been established”.

The challenges of validity and thereby application of employee engagement scores to new concepts are: an accurate and agreed upon definition of employee engagement, measurement of engagement, understanding if indeed engagement is a new phenomenon as opposed to earlier definitions of commitment and loyalty and scientific evidence of the potential impact and value of employee engagement (Briner & Denyer, 2012). In a given culture, the degree to which an employee experiences satisfaction in their work organization indicates important aspects of organizational effectiveness and employee well-being. Support provided from the manager and the amount of autonomy given will lead to overall work satisfaction, task engagement and psychological well-being. (Deci, Ryan, Gagné, Leone, Usunov, & Kornazheva, 2001).

Self-esteem is defined as the ability to maintain a positive perspective of the self (Branden, 1994). Employees with a high self-esteem are presumed to have a high sense of mental well-being and are psychologically happier and healthier and feel good about themselves and their life (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Such employees are able to cope effectively with challenges and negative feedback in spite of the social environment and enjoy life with a clear perspective even if it does not have a substantial impact on career success, productivity and other measures of life. Employees with low self-esteem are perceived to be psychologically distressed and perhaps even depressed (Tennen & Affleck, 1993).

Research evidence indicates that a high self-esteem helps to develop a defense mechanism which prevents external and organizational slights from having an adverse effect on the well-being of the individual (Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989). Coopersmith (1967) defines self-esteem as the evaluation which the individual makes and maintains about his capabilities and worth. Self-esteem is therefore the judgment a person holds of his own worth. Self-esteem is thus an attitude regarding the self and is related to personal beliefs the individual holds related to knowledge, skills, abilities and social relationships.

Humans are driven by a need to survive. As such resilience plays a vital role in the quest for survival, facing challenges and face adverse events in challenging times. The capacity to mobilize characteristics enabling individuals to prevent, tolerate, overcome and be enhanced by adverse events and experiences is referred to as resilience (Mowbray, 2011). Resilience is important on a personal level as employees face an uncertain future and garner inner strength required to respond to an uncertain environment. In most events people build a set of tolerance and resistance and accommodation as we experience them and over time become immune to them. Our responses are generally based on our evaluation of the event, the severity of the newness of the event as our minds strive to accommodate.

Our primary risk and threat is ourselves as we experience distress on a regular basis and try to maintain control of ourselves at the same time. As a result of the conflicts ensuing, we develop mechanisms to manage for sustained well-being. The concept of self-efficacy has been gaining credence as a precursor to health maintenance. (Stretcher, DeVellis, Becker, & Rosenstock, 1986). According to Bandura (1982), self-efficacy affects aspects of behavior and the individual perception of capabilities to manage the task. The amount of effort expended is directly proportionate to the relevance of the task. Self-efficacy impacts, to a great extent, an individual's emotional reactions to stress, distress and (situational) thought patterns. One of the ways self-efficacy is developed is through "vicarious learning" learning that occurs through observation of events and people. Similarly, information and communication can have an influence on individuals – depending upon the credibility of the source.

H2: There will be gender differences in the mental well-being and work engagement of employees.

The hypothesis is rejected as there were no significant differences in the mental well-being of females as compared to the male population. The results in this case showed that mental well-being and employee engagement scores were high in both genders i.e. males and females. Consistent with research, men high in self-esteem engage successfully in future work performance behaviors, whereas women high in self-esteem engage successfully in future social behaviors. (Stein, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1992). It appears that males gain self-esteem from getting ahead whereas females gain self-esteem from getting along. With this perspective it may provide a sense of achievement for women to maintain continuity at the workplace as opposed to success and higher achievements in terms of positions.

Studies indicate that women tend to be more satisfied than their male counterparts within the work environment (Aston, 2009). Women are observed to be happier than men at the workplace (Fredrickson, 2001) and this can be attributed to the greater demands placed on men as primary bread-winners. A great many women experience lower self-worth as a result of perceptions of competence, autonomy and psychological safety and security (World Health Organization, 1998). When considering the approaches women take towards the work environment and the greater emphasis on the home life, it is easy to understand the inability of many women to maintain an appropriate balance between work and personal life. It is due to the multiple responsibilities, the social aspects and cultural expectations from women that their role at work cannot be retained as a primary focus. In light of this, the work environment takes a secondary role. The expectations of being the nurturer at home, the familial pressures of being the care-taker and adult care-giver place women in a position to earn money when required without focusing too much on the daily grind of work. Involvement at the workplace is therefore stymied.

Limitations of Study

There are number of limitations of the study. A number of variables and constructs have been included in the study. However, there are other areas associated with the subject of work engagement and mental well-being that can be included further and could not have been earlier due to time and resource constraints. Considerable research has been conducted on engagement with focus on the relationship between engagement and organizational factors such as leadership, supervisory support and job design. There is an additional requirement to review the sociological perspectives of engagement and well-being as relating to cultural values, structural imperatives and power relations, impact of economic crisis and cross-national differences (Kelliher, Hope-Hailey & Farndale, 2013; Arrowsmith & Parker, 2013). A Qualitative review of the participants by way of Focus Groups and Interviews would yield additional and valuable information for assessment and review of the reasons and exact thought process and understanding of the questionnaire. There is a requirement to gauge employee perceptions of the concepts of well-being and work engagement. Future research would benefit from qualitative study in the cultural context of Pakistan on the subject in order to ascertain there is clear understanding and astute comprehension of the subject matter on both employee engagement and mental well-being.

Conclusion

The research results do not support the two stated hypotheses. Employee work engagement does not impact mental well-being thereby indicating that employees are able to maintain a balance between the two entities i.e. work environment and mental well-being. The organization is a powerful influencer of employee behavior and actions and workplaces that strive to optimize human resource to support employees also promotes programs that are based on quality and geared towards employee well-being. There is a growing concern that levels of mental ill-health and mental well-being in the workplace are insufficiently recognized by employers and therefore inadequate practices are employed to address the ensuing consequences. Within every culture there exists a certain level of bureaucracy which discourages open and effective work cultures to pave the way for further and incremental improvements in mental and physical health. The result is that employees are reluctant to express their feelings, doubts and thoughts regarding their levels of engagement for fear of the bureaucracy, employer lash-back and reprisals.

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