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Job and work attitudes, engagement and employee performance: Where does psychological well-being fit in?

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# Job and work attitudes, engagement and employee performance

## Where does psychological well-being fit in?

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This article aims to test the hypothesis that employee productivity levels will be better predicted by a combination of positive job and work attitudes (employee engagement) and psychological well-being than by positive job and work attitudes alone.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Survey data using psychometrically sound measures of the key constructs were collected for a sample of over 9,000 people across 12 organisations.

**Findings** – Multiple regression analyses reveal that psychological well-being has incremental value over and above that of positive job and work attitudes in predicting self-reported levels of performance.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study design involves cross sectional self-report data and as such firm conclusions about causality cannot be drawn.

**Practical implications** – The results suggest that if employers focus only on job and work attitudes and ignore employee psychological well-being, they will limit the benefits that can be obtained through initiatives such as programmes designed to improve employee engagement.

**Originality/value** – The study provides evidence that two previously separate constructs are both important in predicting measures of employee productivity.

**Keywords** Wellbeing, Engagement, Employee performance, Job and work attitudes, Personnel psychology, Employees productivity

**Paper type** Research paper

### Background and objectives

Harrison *et al.* (2006) point out that job attitudes and job performance are two of the most enduring concepts in organisational research. The concept of employee engagement in particular has been generating a lot of interest in both research and practice in recent times (e.g. Macey and Schneider, 2009; Macleod and Brady, 2008; Bakker *et al.*, 2008). The research evidence linking employee engagement with performance and other important organisational outcomes has generated a widespread belief amongst senior executives and HR practitioners that improving and sustaining



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high levels of employee engagement is good for business (Attridge, 2009). This article explores the extent to which improved business outcomes might be achieved if the construct of engagement is expanded to also include employee psychological well-being.

It is interesting that despite this widespread interest in engagement, there is actually very little firm agreement on what exactly is meant by the term and it is clearly the case that different practitioners make use of a variety of different items and scales to measure what they refer to as engagement. One view of engagement, taken by some specialists, involves placing more emphasis on how the employee feels when he or she is completely engaged. This kind of approach sees the engaged employee as someone who is immersed in his or her work – sometimes even experiencing a state referred to as “Flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003), a state that involves an intense period of concentration on what one is doing, to the extent that time distorts and seems to pass more quickly and one’s awareness of self is minimal or even lost completely. Experiencing flow is an intrinsically rewarding experience. The view of engagement that builds on the idea of flow sees engagement as a pervasive and persistent state, characterised by vigor: (work is experienced as stimulating and energetic and something to which employees really want to devote time and effort); dedication (work is a significant and meaningful pursuit); and absorption (work is engrossing and something on which the worker fully concentrates). This approach sees work engagement as “... a positive, fulfilling, work-related *state of mind* that is characterised by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (our italics, Schafeli *et al.*, 2002, p. 74). Taking another perspective, Macey and Schneider (2009) propose a very broad view of engagement, which sees engagement as an overarching umbrella term containing different types of engagement, including trait engagement (i.e. engagement as the expression of individual’s personality traits), work involvement and organisational citizenship. This perspective is much more inclusive and broader than the view of engagement as a psychological state (flow).

The perspectives on engagement described above are interesting but do not align particularly well with the view of engagement held by senior managers in organisations. Robinson *et al.* (2004, page ix), define engagement as:

A positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context, and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organization [...]

With its emphasis on business context, performance and benefits to the organisation, this approach suggests a “business outcomes” perspective on engagement, in which employee engagement incorporates – and emphasises – constructs that are most closely connected with the relevant business outcomes. This approach is much better aligned with the perspective taken by senior managers and by practitioners and researchers (e.g. Macleod and Brady, 2008) who promote the business benefits of employee engagement. Robinson *et al.* (2004) also note that this formulation of engagement contains aspects of two established psychological constructs: organisational citizenship (Organ and Paine, 1999) and commitment (Meyer, 1997), although they also note that engagement is a broader construct and is not entirely synonymous with either. Items in engagement surveys taking this perspective would be expected to focus on “positive” employee behavior and attitudes and cover the

established psychological concepts of commitment, citizenship and attachment. Harrison *et al.* (2006), in an approach that is similar propose a unified attitude-engagement model, in which broadly positive employee attitudes are associated with better performance. Their focus is on broad job and work attitudes such as job satisfaction and commitment. Using meta-analysis techniques they accumulate the results from several earlier studies to provide support for their model in which broad positive job and work attitudes are related to performance at work. The approaches of Robinson *et al.* (2004) and Harrison *et al.* (2006) are broadly similar and both focus on the kind of positive employee attitudes that chief executives of organisations are keen to see developed in their workforces. Senior managers are attracted to this view of engagement because of research evidence linking these attitudes with better performance and productivity (e.g. Harter *et al.*, 2002; Towers Perrin, 2007). This perspective on employee engagement places it within the context of existing constructs used within organisational psychology (e.g. job satisfaction and commitment), rather than suggesting that employee engagement is an entirely new construct that has never been measured before. Typically, questionnaires used to measure this type of employee engagement use items that focus on commitment, and other positive attitudes such as job satisfaction and attachment. This is the perspective on engagement that is taken in the current article – i.e. we use a measure of positive job and work attitudes to provide an indicator of employee engagement.

#### *Psychological well-being*

Some of the perspectives on engagement and employee attitudes noted above mention psychological well-being explicitly and also sometimes make use of items that focus on psychological well-being, either directly or indirectly. For example, Bakker (2009) notes that engaged employees often experience positive emotions and experience better psychological and physical health. Such mentions of psychological well-being in relation to positive work attitudes and engagement raise the question of the extent to which there are specific relationships between job and work attitudes and psychological well-being and the extent to which psychological well-being may be associated with performance, engagement and related job and work attitudes.

Beyond the obvious material benefits, the long-term benefit of work to individuals is closely linked to their psychological well-being. There is clear evidence that people with higher levels of psychological well-being at work are healthier (both mentally and physically), have happier lives and live longer (Cartwright and Cooper, 2008). There is also evidence (e.g. Wright and Cropanzano, 2000) that they are more productive at work (see below for further details). Although items related to psychological well-being are often included in questionnaires to assess employee engagement or related job and work attitudes, psychological well-being is not positioned as a key component (e.g. Harter *et al.*, 2002; Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006; Macleod and Brady, 2008). Robertson and Cooper (2010) have discussed the potential consequences of neglecting psychological well-being in conceptualising and measuring employee engagement and point out that a narrow focus on positive attitudes such as employee commitment, organisational citizenship and employee attachment, although important for the leadership of the organisation, may be of less importance to employees. Such a narrow focus risks losing the gains associated with higher levels of psychological well-being, for both the organisation and employees themselves. The research reported below explores the

issues from an empirical perspective and examines the relationships between positive job and work attitudes, psychological well-being and self-reported productivity in a large sample of UK employees. The research builds on the perspective introduced by Harrison *et al.* (2006), which sees positive job and work attitudes as a broad construct related to job satisfaction and commitment. In the research reported below, the measurement of positive job and work attitudes also includes additional items related to aspects of employee engagement, specifically, organisational citizenship and attachment. The rationale for including both organisational citizenship and attachment is based on the earlier discussion of the concept of engagement. In this respect our approach differs from the approach of Harrison *et al.* (2006) who used organisational citizenship (contextual behaviour) as a dependent (behavioural) variable, rather than an aspect of job and work attitudes. In the study reported below, the broad construct of positive job and work attitudes included items focused on job satisfaction, organisational citizenship, organisation commitment and attachment. It is important to note that although this approach does not attempt to tap the aspects of employee engagement embodied in the research of Schafeli *et al.* (2002) that prioritises the state of mind that employees experience as they work. Other aspects of engagement, such as trait engagement, reflected in the perspective of Macey and Schneider (2009) are also not incorporated. This does not reflect a view that these alternative approaches to employee engagement are unimportant or wrong, rather, it is to sustain concentration on the core factors of interest in the current study, namely job and work attitudes, rather than psychological state or dispositional factors such as trait engagement. The core purpose of the study was to examine the extent to which psychological well-being may be distinguished from positive job and work attitudes (engagement) and the extent to which psychological well-being explains variance in productivity, over and above that which is explained by engagement.

#### *Psychological well-being and performance*

Wright and Cropanzano (2000) report field studies that demonstrate positive relationships between levels of psychological well-being and job performance. As well as demonstrating that people with higher levels of psychological well-being perform better at work than those with lower psychological well-being, the results from Wright and Cropanzano (2000) also show that well-being is a stronger predictor of job performance than job satisfaction (one of the core constructs used by Harrison *et al.* (2006), in their concept of positive employee attitudes). Cropanzano and Wright (1999) have also reported a longitudinal examination of the relationship between well-being and performance over a five-year period, providing some support for the view that psychological well-being might be causally related to performance. Donald *et al.* (2005) in a study of 16,000 UK employees found that almost 25 per cent of the variance in self-reported levels of employee productivity was predicted by a combination of psychological well-being, the perceived “commitment of the organisation to the employee” and “resources and communication”. Their research did not report on the separate contributions of psychological well-being, compared with the other factors. Harter *et al.* (2002) reported a meta-analysis for data from nearly 8,000 separate business units in 36 companies. This research is particularly relevant for the current study as it illustrates the close – and sometimes confusing – links between psychological well-being and employee engagement – and the need, as attempted in

the current study, to disentangle the separate contributions of psychological well-being and job and work attitudes. Describing the database and results, Harter *et al.* (2003) present the study as an illustration of the “well-being” approach. In a different article, using the same database, Harter *et al.* (2002), state that the survey that they used provides a measure of engagement-satisfaction. In practice the items in the survey focus predominantly on engagement-related factors, drawn from most of the perspectives on engagement reviewed above, but the questionnaire also includes well-being related items. The results show statistically significant relationships between scores on the survey and business unit level outcomes, including customer satisfaction, productivity, profitability, employee turnover and sickness/absence levels.

### Method

The core hypothesis tested in this article is that employee productivity levels will be better predicted by a combination of positive job and work attitudes (engagement) and psychological well-being than by positive job and work attitudes alone.

### Sample

This study used data collected from well-being audits using a cross-sectional survey design. The main sample consisted of 9,930 individuals of which 58 per cent were male (1.3 per cent did not report their gender). Individuals were all of working age and 57.3 per cent were aged between 25 and 44 years. 72.2 per cent of individuals were married or living with a partner and 32.3 per cent reported being educated to degree level or higher. Data were collected from 12 separate UK organisations (both public and private sector). These organisations represented a range of industries:

- police forces;
- utilities;
- manufacturing;
- higher education;
- a local council; and
- the financial services.

All participants completed the questionnaire materials voluntarily and anonymously as part of a well-being and engagement survey in their organisation.

### Measures

Psychological well-being was assessed with a standardised 11-item psychological health scale (Faragher *et al.*, 2004), containing items focused on the frequency of psychological symptoms, such as irritability or feeling unable to cope. Respondents were asked to report on the extent to which, over the last three months, they have experienced symptoms or changes in behaviour ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ; sample item: “Feeling unable to cope”). In the subsequent analysis the cores for this scale were reversed, so that a high score represents positive psychological well-being.

Productivity was measured with a single item: “Over the last three months, roughly how productive have you felt in your job”, with response options in bands of 10 per cent up to 100 per cent.

The broad construct of engagement was assessed with a five-item scale that included items focused on specific positive job and work attitudes: job satisfaction, organisational citizenship, organisation commitment and attachment ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ; sample item: "If necessary I am prepared to put myself out for this organisation, e.g. working long hours and/or unsociable hours").

*Analyses*

Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations for the study variables are shown in Table I.

As Table I shows there are positive correlations between all of the study variables. The relationship between psychological well-being and productivity is stronger than the relationship between positive job and work attitudes and productivity. To assess the unique contribution of psychological well-being to productivity a multiple regression analysis was conducted, with productivity as the dependent variable and positive job and work attitudes (entered first into the equation) and psychological well-being (entered second) as the independent variables. Table II shows the results of this analysis.

The results in Table II provide support for the core hypothesis tested in this study, by showing that productivity is predicted better by a combination of positive psychological well-being and positive job and work attitudes than by positive job and work attitudes alone.

**Conclusions and discussion**

This study adds to our understanding of the issues involved by separating out the effects of psychological well-being and positive job and work attitudes on productivity. In previous research the distinctive contribution of these two components has not been examined separately. As noted in the introduction to this article there are several different conceptions of employee engagement but the one that generally seems most important to senior managers in organisations takes the positive job and work attitudes perspective that has been explored in this article. The findings have

	Mean	SD	Positive job and work attitudes	Psychological well-being
Productivity (%)	87.1	11.5	-0.20*	0.39*
Positive job and work attitudes	20.1	3.3	-	-0.35*
Psychological well-being	22.0	7.1	-	-

Notes:  $n = 9,930$ ; \*  $p < 0.001$

**Table I.**  
Means, SDs and intercorrelations between study variables

Variable	R	R-squared	Proportion of variance explained (%)	Increase in R-squared
Positive job and work attitudes	0.20	0.04	4	0.04*
Psychological well-being	0.41	0.17	17	0.13*

Note: \*  $p < 0.001$

**Table II.**  
Results of multiple regression analysis with productivity as the dependent variable

important practical implications, since they suggest that if employers focus only on job and work attitudes and ignore employee psychological well-being they will limit the benefits that can be obtained through initiatives such as programmes designed to improve employee engagement. Employee engagement has become a very important construct for both practitioners and researchers.

From a theoretical point of view the findings are also of interest, since they support the idea that psychological well-being and positive job and work attitudes, although related ( $r = 0.20$ ), are distinctive constructs and show different relationships with productivity.

The results presented here are limited in a number of ways. The data used for analysis were cross-sectional and self-report. Cross-sectional data do not enable causal relationships to be established and all this study has been able to show is covariance between the study variables. Because the study relies exclusively on self-report data, such covariance may also be inflated by common method variance. Evidence from other areas of study suggests a high correlation between self-report measures of performance and other objective measures (Hurst *et al.*, 1996); nevertheless, it will be important to conduct longitudinal studies with independent measures of the outcome variables, such as performance or productivity, before the findings of the current study can be confirmed as reliable.

Other possible limitations of the current study concern the use of a single item to measure productivity and a relatively small number of items to measure positive job and work attitudes. Given the large sample size and the reliability of the positive job and work attitudes scale the authors feel that these limitations are unlikely to have had a significant impact on the validity of the findings.

The role of psychological well-being in causing, rather than simply predicting variance in productivity is also worthy of further exploration. Individuals whose psychological well-being is higher appear to behave differently and display better psychological resources – they are more optimistic, more resilient in the face of setbacks and have a stronger belief in their own ability to cope with things (Avey *et al.*, 2010). Indeed there is a substantial amount of research evidence showing that higher levels of psychological well-being are associated with a range of positive life and career outcomes – and behavioural differences (Lyubomirsky *et al.*, 2005). It seems quite plausible that these kind of behavioural differences are part of the causal mechanism that links improvements in well-being with improvements in individual performance and hence organisational effectiveness. Research focused specifically on the causal mechanisms that link employee psychological well-being with beneficial organisational outcomes such as performance would be also useful. As research reviewed earlier (e.g. Harter *et al.*, 2003) reveals, good levels of positive psychological well-being in a workforce have not only been linked to employee performance but to a much wider range of organisational outcomes such as customer satisfaction and employee turnover. Understanding the causal processes that link psychological well-being with these outcomes (e.g. evaluating the extent to which the more positive behaviour of employees with high levels of well-being is the primary causal factor) will provide important additional information of practical and theoretical interest.



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