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*Human Resource Development Review* 2009 8: 300 originally published online 13

August 2009

DOI: 10.1177/1534484309338171

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# Beyond Engagement: Toward a Framework and Operational Definition for Employee Work Passion

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*The purpose of this article is to respond to the lack of consistency in the academic and practitioner literature regarding the construct of employee engagement and to offer a platform for the research and use of a refined construct called employee work passion. This article analyzes the differences between the concepts of engagement of the two groups of writers and proposes a new definition and framework based on social cognitive theory. Three recommendations are made for human resource development researchers and practitioners who seek to improve both the data and the strategies used in constructing engagement or work passion surveys. Engagement or passion surveys should (a) specifically and convincingly assess the affective components of the appraisal process, (b) differentiate descriptive cognitions and intentions, and (c) separate and corroborate intentions from behaviors.*

**Keywords:** *employee work passion; engagement; workplace commitment*

In the past decade, a great deal has been written on the concept of employee engagement, and within the past 3 years, controversy has become evident (Christian & Slaughter, 2007; Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006; Little & Little, 2006; Macy & Schneider, 2008; Newman & Harrison, 2008; Saks, 2008). It is

Human Resource Development Review Vol. 8, No. 3 September 2009 300-326

DOI: 10.1177/1534484309338171

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natural in the evolution of ideas within a field of investigation to have confusion and differences of opinion arise concerning concepts, constructs, antecedents, and modifiers as researchers begin to work out common, verifiable ideas. Consider, for example, the debate regarding the definition of values (Rohan, 2000) or the construct of burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). In both of these cases, adjustments and conceptual differences occurred that have fueled debate and spurred research progress.

In this instance, two groups have been exploring employee engagement. Both commercial consulting firms and the academic community have been writing on and researching this topic. Each group has unique needs and points of view on the topic and which, in this case, are leading to vigorous debate.

We agree with Smith (2006) and Torraco (2005) when they assert that there is a wide gap between research and practice and that the gap is widening. It is not just that there are differences of opinion among authors concerning the concepts of engagement but that practitioners and researchers are quite a distance apart on this topic as well. This article (a) describes the roots of this controversy, (b) proposes a more specific definition and underlying model of employee engagement and passion, (c) and makes a number of specific recommendations to academic researchers, consultant researchers, and human resource development (HRD) professionals to increase its effective applied use.

The importance of this controversy for HRD professionals can easily be felt in this era of economic downturn and limited resources. HRD professionals must be even more frugal and wise with their decisions as they seek to recruit, foster, and retain qualified and motivated personnel. There is very little room for the use of vague or contradictory concepts that give no conceptual understanding or practical application. If the concept of employee engagement or passion is to be uniquely useful to HRD professionals, research must provide theoretically supported constructs for how it can be measured, fostered, and related to organizational outcomes. If the concepts are ill formed, with no clear model of antecedents and consequences, it becomes almost improbable for any lasting systemic organizational change to occur.

## Two Schools of Thought

The commercial engagement concept was originally espoused by the Gallup Organization. Buckingham and Coffman (1999) reported that Gallup spent a great deal of effort refining a set of survey questions (the Gallup Workplace Audit) that connected employee engagement to productivity, profitability, employee retention, and customer service. Additional academic works were published by Gallup in subsequent years (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2003). Several other commercial firms have begun to research and write about the concept of engagement, including Development Dimensions International (Wellins, Bernthal, &

Phelps, 2005), the Australian Institute of Management (Sardo, 2006), the members of the American Society for Training and Development (2008), the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore (Aggarwal, Datta, & Bhargava, 2007), and the Institute for Employment Studies (Robinson, Perryman, & Hayday, 2004).

Several authors within the academic community have written on the topic of employee engagement. It appears that Kahn (1990) was the first to coin the term *engagement* as he described how people can “use varying degrees of their selves, physically, cognitively, and emotionally in work role performances” (p. 692). Other academic researchers have written on the topic of engagement through the different conceptual approaches of well-being, burnout, and job involvement. Literature on well-being (Salanova, Agut, & Peiro, 2005; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Sonnentag, 2003) identified engagement as a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Literature on burnout (Bakker, Emmerik, & Euwema, 2006; Maslach et al., 2001; Maslach & Leiter, 2008) identified engagement as the antipode to the negative state of burnout. Engagement was further characterized as an energetic state of involvement with personally fulfilling activities to enhance one’s sense of professional efficacy. Following the logic espoused by Kahn (1990, 1992), researchers with a job-involvement focus (Avery, McKay, & Wilson, 2007; May, Gibson, & Harter, 2004; Rothbard, 2001) described engagement as how people employ and expend themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally, during role performance.

Recently, scholars (Christian & Slaughter, 2007; Little & Little, 2006; Macy & Schneider, 2008; Newman & Harrison, 2008; Saks, 2006, 2008) have noted inconsistencies and overlaps among various proponents of employee engagement. Not only is there a lack of clarity between consulting firms and the academic community, but there are also inconsistencies within the academic community in regard to the term *engagement* (Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006; Harrison, Newman, & Roth, 2006).

To debate the purpose and points of view of these two groups is not the purpose of this article. Yet the resulting literatures spawned by these two groups do present problems for the informed reader or future user of these concepts. Because the authors of this article come from both groups we can sense the dilemma that each group may experience.

The commercial consulting firms need defensible intellectual property, commercial-friendly ideas, and short questionnaires with definite remedies that will lead to effective measures in applied results. These needs can often produce thinly linked theoretical ideas, unpublished methodologies, undocumented constructs, unsubstantiated correlations, and inflated promises.

The academic community needs rigorous research in the examination of constructs, credit but not necessarily ownership of various theoretical frameworks, and historically verifiable strategies in the understanding and application

of ideas. These needs can often lead to research-heavy methodologies and slow, methodical, economically insensitive approaches to real-world business problems that are often seen as not worth a corporation's time, effort, or money.

## Purpose

The purpose of this article is to respond to the lack of consistency in the academic and practitioner literature regarding the construct of employee engagement and offer a platform to support future research and use of a refined construct: employee work passion. During review of the relevant research concerning engagement, the term *engagement* will be used to show the historical base of the construct. But once the review has been covered, we will use the term *work passion* to delineate a megafactor incorporating many aspects of past research yet advocating a more differentiated construct.

To support this purpose, we present four steps. The first step is to review the recent engagement studies and critiques that shaped various engagement definitions and accompanying divergent points of view. The second step is to offer a specific operational definition of a work passion construct, including the delineation of activities to measure the construct and its subconstructs. The third step is to put forward an organizing framework of interrelated constructs to explain and predict the phenomenon of employee work passion. The fourth step, in keeping with Smith's (2006) and Torraco's (2005) call for greater relevance, is to offer three recommendations to HRD researchers and practitioners, as well as academic researchers, who seek to improve both the data and strategies gained from engagement or work commitment surveys.

To put forward an operational construct of employee work passion that will be significant to researchers and practitioners resulting in verifiable statements concerning what is true or not true, it must be well defined, measurable, and testable (Kerlinger & Lee, 1999; Schmidt & Klimoski, 1991). An operational definition must assign meaning to the construct by specifying the activities or operations necessary for it to be measured (Kerlinger & Lee, 1999). A construct and its latent characteristics are dependent on an interrelated set of concepts, definitions, and assumptions. Because the aim of science is explanation, understanding, prediction, and/or control, the construct usually involves some set of interrelated concepts that present a systematic view that usually leads to a framework, theory, or model (Kerlinger & Lee, 1999).

The proposed framework and definition of *employee work passion* will allow HRD practitioners to be more precise about the constructs, antecedents, and modifiers pertaining to the research in this area. A conceptually specific framework can reduce the redundancy, confusion, and misinterpretation currently surrounding employee engagement assessments offered by consulting firms and offer a more effective assimilation and interpretation of the employee engagement literature. It would also allow for more precise metrics and interpretation, which are so desperately needed for HRD practitioners to justify

costs, reduce turnover, increase retention, and decide on training methodologies, which might shape leadership policies and practices.

## Review of Recent Engagement Research

Although it might be said that there are as many definitions of *engagement* as there are commercial and academic writers, we have chosen four definitions from the two groups as a way to illustrate the variety of conceptual differences a reader might encounter when examining the writings on engagement. As will be seen, there is quite a bit of diversity in the scope and focus of the examples presented.

### A Variety of Definitions of Engagement

Table 1 presents examples of employee engagement definitions expressed in literature originating from the commercial consulting firms and academic studies. The commercial firms tended to use the term *engagement* juxtaposed with terms such as *organizational commitment*, *values*, and *vision*, whereas the academic community tended to use the term *engagement* juxtaposed with terms such as *job*, *role*, and *expression of self in role*.

Historically, the academic community has used the term *engagement* in conjunction with the concepts of job involvement or job commitment rather than organizational commitment (Brown, 1996; Christian, & Slaughter, 2007; Saks, 2006). Whether academic researchers approached the definition of engagement from the perspective of burnout, job involvement, or well-being, most discussions (e.g., Avery et al., 2007; Bakker et al., 2006; Kahn, 1990, 1992; Maslach et al., 2001; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; May et al., 2004; Rothbard, 2001) were limited to the focus of improving job-related issues.

Practitioners (Harter et al., 2002; Harter et al., 2003; Masson, Royal, Agnew, & Fine, 2008; Robinson et al., 2004; Sardo, 2006; Wellins et al., 2005) have written more about corporate strategy or imperatives to develop employee engagement as a mechanism for creating greater productivity and a competitive edge. It is amid these divergent viewpoints that we begin to examine the concept of engagement.

The constructs of job involvement and organizational commitment are often contained in the definitions of employee engagement and that is precisely why some researchers (Little & Little, 2006; Newman & Harrison, 2008; Saks, 2008) have indicated that established concepts such as job commitment and organizational commitment are bleeding into the construct of employee engagement. As the concept of employee engagement receives more notoriety, future researchers must be careful to understand the distinction between the various constructs of engagement and the existing areas of research on constructs such as job satisfaction, job involvement, and organizational commitment (Dalal, Brummel, Wee, & Thomas, 2008; Hallberg &

**TABLE 1: Example Definitions of Employee Passion From Practitioner and Academic Literature**

<i>Practitioner</i>	<i>Academic</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “individual’s involvement and satisfaction as well as enthusiasm for work” (Harter, Schmidt, &amp; Hayes, 2002, p. 269)</li> <li>• “extent to which people enjoy and believe in what they do and feel valued for doing it” (Wellins, Bernthal, &amp; Phelps, 2005, p. 2)</li> <li>• “extent to which employees commit to something or someone in their organization and how hard they work and how long they stay as a result of that commitment” (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004, p. 3)</li> <li>• “a positive attitude held by the employee toward the organization and its values. An engaged employee is aware of the business context, works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organization. The organization must work to nurture, maintain and grow engagement, which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee” (Robinson, Perryman, &amp; Hayday, 2004, p. 3)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “extent to which employees feel able to express their preferred selves in their work role” (Avery, McKay, &amp; Wilson, 2007, p. 1543)</li> <li>• “a positive fulfilling work related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption” (Schaufeli, Bakker, &amp; Salanova, 2006, p. 702)</li> <li>• “engagement in role refers to one’s psychological presence in or focused on role activities and may be an important ingredient for effective role performance” (Rothbard, 2001, p. 656)</li> <li>• “an energetic state of involvement, personally fulfilling activities that enhance one’s sense of personal efficacy” (Maslach &amp; Leiter, 2008, p. 498)</li> </ul>

Schaufeli, 2006; Little & Little, 2006; Macy & Schneider, 2008; Newman & Harrison, 2008; Saks, 2008).

### **Viewpoints of Employee Engagement**

An analysis of studies published in EBSCO from 2000 to 2008 with the word *engagement* in the title or in the keyword search revealed that those who studied employee engagement advocated one of four views toward employee engagement:

1. Engagement should and does stand alone as an independent variable from organizational commitment or job commitment (Christian & Slaughter, 2007; Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006; Maslach et al., 2001; Meyer & Gagne, 2008; Sachau, 2007). This view takes the position, explicitly or implicitly, that work engagement contributes to the field of positive work psychology

beyond the already existing constructs of organizational commitment or job commitment.

2. Engagement is primarily connected to job involvement (Avery et al., 2007; Bakker et al., 2006; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; May et al., 2004; Rothbard, 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli et al., 2006). This view emphasizes the concept of well-being and meaningfulness as a condition for engagement.
3. Engagement overlaps and bleeds into already established constructs such as organizational commitment, job commitment, or job involvement and therefore has very little merit (Harrison et al., 2006; Little & Little, 2006; Saks, 2006, 2008). This view maintains that the continued use of imprecise definitions and the repackaging of other constructs may compromise the older, more developed constructs.
4. Engagement contains both already established concepts of job commitment and organizational commitment and may be a larger multidimensional aggregate factor (Dalal et al., 2008; Macy & Schneider, 2008; Newman & Harrison, 2008). This view advocates employee engagement as a megaconstruct that could incorporate organizational commitment and job involvement (as well as other constructs) and so may hold greater empirical utility for predicting individual work behavior.

### State of the Art of Engagement Research

Three studies (Christian & Slaughter, 2007; Little & Little, 2006; Macy & Schneider, 2008) surveyed the state of the art of engagement research and writings. The premier issue of *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* provided additional insights with reactions by several authors to Macy and Schneider's study (Dalal et al., 2008; Meyer & Gagne, 2008; Newman & Harrison, 2008; Pugh & Dietz, 2008; Saks, 2008).

Little and Little (2006) expressed four concerns with practitioner constructs of engagement. They questioned whether the construct was (a) individual or group oriented, (b) attitudinal or behaviorally oriented, (c) distinct from already existing constructs, and (d) measured adequately by the practitioner community. In our analysis of Little and Little, we found no inclusion of engagement studies other than those from commercial writers, which limits its usefulness in shedding light on some of the questions they raised.

Christian and Slaughter's work (2006) presented a meta-analytic review of the job involvement literature and the engagement dimensions of vigor, dedication, and absorption. Christian and Slaughter's meta-analytic review focused on only those academic studies stemming from Kahn's (1990) original definition that examined the individual's ability "to employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). They presented intercorrelations between engagement dimensions and burnout dimensions found in various studies using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) as a research tool (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002). This meta-analysis did not discuss the concept of engagement from any other perspective, other than job involvement studies.



Macy and Schneider's (2008) work was one of the most substantial critiques and most sympathetic in establishing employee engagement as a separate construct from job involvement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Macy and Schneider organized much of the past research into three categories: trait engagement, state engagement, and behavioral engagement. They defined *trait engagement* as "the inclination or orientation to experience the world from a particular vantage point" and said that trait engagement "gets reflected in psychological (or state) engagement" (Macy & Schneider, 2008, p. 5). They conceptualized psychological engagement as an antecedent of behavioral engagement.

Providing commentaries to Macy and Schneider's (2008) work, respondents (Dalal et al., 2008; Meyer & Gagne, 2008; Newman & Harrison, 2008; Pugh & Dietz, 2008; Saks, 2008) focused their conclusions on the behavioral aspects of engagement and conceptualized state engagement as an antecedent to behavioral engagement. These commentaries often had different points of view on the conclusions reached by Macy and Schneider.

The state of the art of engagement research now seems rife with a myriad of definitions, concepts, and latent ideas. Some studies on engagement had a narrow focus, such as employee burnout, whereas some had a very broad focus, such as the employee being "fully present in the workplace" (Kahn, 1992, p. 322). A reader may encounter the concept of engagement as the anti-pode of burnout or asked to conceptualize the concept of engagement as the relationship an employee might have with his or her organization. Greater care and thought are required if the term *engagement* is to have a common relevance to both the academic and commercial fields.

## Observations From Literature

We believe that there are some clear commonalities that can be noted across the commercial and academic literature, which could lead to the use of a more specific and measurable set of constructs and methodologies. We offer three observations that lead to specific recommendations for further research on this topic. The three observations, which will be presented in the following order, are as follows: (a) the engagement literature manifested common conceptual components, (b) the engagement literature lacked a common conceptual framework, and (c) the definition of engagement is a multidimensional construct.

### Common Conceptual Components

The first general observation drawn from our analysis of the engagement studies is that three common conceptual components emerge in all of the definitions of engagement, regardless of whether the term *engagement* is a separate construct or is what Newman and Harrison (2008) referred to as "old wine in new bottles" (p. 31). Those components are cognition, affect, and

behavior. We are convinced that any definition of engagement must incorporate all three.

*Cognition.* Researchers and practitioners alike used terms such as *beliefs, values, intellectual commitment, or cognition* to define engagement. Numerous writers saw the question of engagement as partly a cognition or belief-state of psychological identification. Employee engagement is often seen as a cognitive judgment about the need-satisfying abilities of the job or the organization (Harter et al., 2002; James & James, 1989; Kahn, 1990, 1992; Macy & Schneider, 2008; May et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2004; Rothbard, 2001; Saks, 2006, 2008; Wellins et al., 2005).

*Affect.* The terms *enthusiasm, satisfaction, absorption, affect, emotion, and positive state of mind* were used to describe the affective component of employee engagement (Kahn, 1990; Harter et al., 2002; Langelaan, Bakker, van Doornen, & Schaufeli, 2006; Macy & Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2006, 2008; Little & Little, 2006; Rothbard, 2001; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007; Schmit & Allscheid, 1995). The Gallup study equated engagement with the “individual’s involvement and *satisfaction* with as well as *enthusiasm* for work” (Harter et al., 2002, p. 269, italics added). Whether the author was a practitioner or academician, the literature indicated that an aspect of heart, emotion, or feeling was part of the definition of engagement.

*Behavior.* The final component is behavioral, and this seems to be where the similarities are less apparent. The behavioral components of engagement have often been associated with words such as *discretionary effort* (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004; Wellins et al., 2005), *satisfaction* (Harter et al., 2002; Salanova et al., 2005; Wellins et al., 2005), *profitability* (Harter et al., 2002; Wellins et al., 2005), *organizational citizenship behavior* (Fischer & Smith, 2006), *retention* (Sardo, 2006; Wellins et al., 2005), *role expansion, prosocial behavior, or proactive behavior* (Sonntag, 2003), and *individual health or well-being* (Andreassen, Ursin, & Eriksen, 2007; Harter et al., 2002; Salanova, Llorens, Cifre, Martinez, & Schaufeli, 2003).

### **Lack of an Organizing Explanatory Framework**

Our second observation is that there seems to be no common model put forward to explain or account for the formation of an individual’s sense of engagement. Nor is there any common agreement on a framework to delineate what is an antecedent and/or a consequence to the concept of engagement. Without a common organizing framework, definitions vary widely and so does the instrumentation (e.g., Gallup Workplace Audit, Harter et al., 2002; Maslach Burnout Inventory, Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, Schaufeli et al., 2002) used to measure the associated constructs.

We argue that the labels of *state, trait, and behavioral engagement* established by Macy and Schneider (2008) are probably better referred to simply as

*engagement* and that engagement is likely to have some trait-like and some state-like components. We respect the comprehensiveness of the Macy and Schneider review but agree with other authors (Dalal et al., 2008; Newman & Harrison, 2008; Saks, 2008) that the divisions of trait, state, and behavioral engagement are somewhat blurring the issues. The issues are (a) how to delineate what is an antecedent and what is a consequence and (b) what should be included in a definition of employee engagement. There is a whole set of research studies that examined personal characteristics or trait characteristics such as Type A behavior (Hallberg, Johansson, & Schaufeli, 2007), self-efficacy (Luthans & Peterson, 2002; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998), personality dimensions (Judge, Bono, & Locke, 2000; Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002; Langelaan et al., 2006), and identity (Britt, 2003) and their relationships to engagement—and seems to have been confused with aspects of engagement. We believe that by advocating a category called *trait engagement*, those factors that are essentially antecedents become needlessly associated with, and maybe even incorporated into, a concept of engagement. Instead, we advocate using an appraisal paradigm as we explore and clarify the question of what is an antecedent, or a consequence, versus what is a definition of engagement.

### **Multidimensional Construct**

A third general observation we make is that most commercial researchers and writers have linked the concept of employee engagement with the concept of organizational commitment, whereas a majority of academic researchers and authors have linked employee engagement with job requirements and job commitment. Although it has been argued otherwise (Morrow, 1983), it has been argued more frequently that the concept of job involvement or job commitment is different from the concept of organizational commitment (Brown, 1996; Harrison et al., 2006; Saks, 2006).

It is not so much a question of whether the constructs of job involvement and organizational commitment are separate but rather how these constructs interact to explain the variance in the construct of employee engagement. We agree with others (Harrison et al., 2006; Newman & Harrison, 2008; Saks, 2008) that it may be reasonable and prudent to examine how job satisfaction and organizational commitment influence a larger megafactor that we call employee work passion.

### **An Operational Definition of Employee Work Passion**

We believe that the three components of cognition, affect, and intention must be incorporated into any useful definition of employee passion, commitment, or satisfaction. This can be done by using the appraisal construct and the

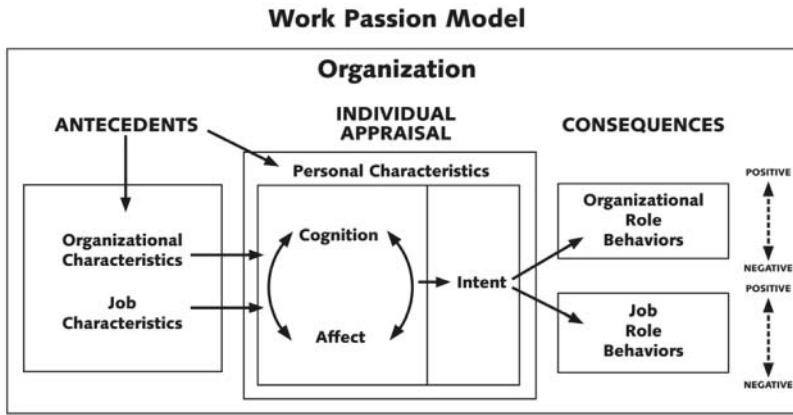


FIGURE 1: Work Passion Model

elements of cognition, affect, and intention. We believe a strong operational definition of employee work passion is as follows: *employee work passion is an individual's persistent, emotionally positive, meaning-based, state of well-being stemming from reoccurring cognitive and affective appraisals of various job and organizational situations that results in consistent, constructive work intentions and behaviors.*

This definition is represented by Figure 1. As can be observed, several conceptual relationships can be explained by incorporating the concept of appraisal into a larger construct of employee work passion. The passion or affective aspect of work is accounted for. Likewise, the cognitive or logical judgment aspects and a linkage of both to the meaning-based intentions and/or behaviors that might result once the appraisal is made, are incorporated. Because intentions are meaning based it would allow for persistent, values-motivated behavior, which is the basis for organizational citizenship behavior, discretionary effort, and excellent performance over time.

A latent aspect of this definition is that appraisals are an ongoing occurrence; they result from an ongoing appraisal process. The use of the term *situation* implies an ongoing historical relationship, with each situation building on previous ones and thus creating a mosaic of experience and meaning. It also implies that different variables may come into play at different times, depending on the characteristics of the organization or the job and the perceived changes that the appraiser may experience.

This model also takes into account how the individual's personal characteristics or attributes may factor into the perceptions and intentions that result. As we have stated earlier, personal characteristics can be factors such as individual beliefs, values, and past history with their job or organization. This

appraisal paradigm would present a platform for studies that examine how these personal characteristics influence cognitive conclusions and affective inferences.

A final latent aspect contained in this definition is that intentions and behaviors resulting from this meaning-based positive state of mind are constructive and are in contribution to the organization. These constructive behaviors may include high productivity and organizational citizenship, discretionary effort, and a long-term commitment to stay with an organization (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Yee-ng, 2001; Fischer & Smith, 2006; George, 1991; Joo & McLean, 2006; Koys, 2001; LePine, Erez, & Johnson, 2002; Thomas & Robinson, 2007).

As the diagram would imply, it is also possible that the results of an individual's appraisal might be negative, both in affect and intention. Destructive or "bad" behavior could also be the result (Griffin & Lopez, 2005; Bies & Tripp, 1995), depending on employee standards for fairness (Harter et al., 2002; Harter et al., 2003; Thomas & Robinson, 2007), appraiser capacity for moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Bandura, Caprara, & Zsolnai, 2000), and selected attributes of the appraiser, such as trait cynicism (Detert, Trevino, & Sweitzer, 2008). The capacity for destructive behavior is not included in the definition of work passion, but nonconstructive behavior can be a by-product of a negative appraisal of what is going on in the organization.

## Need for Differentiation

Because the word *engagement* has already been established in academic studies of burnout, job involvement, and well-being, we advocate the term *work passion*. We believe that a clean break from the term *engagement* must occur for several reasons. The first reason is that it is too well associated in the academic literature with burnout and job involvement. The second reason is that it is too well connected to the commercial studies of organizational commitment. The third reason is that the word *engagement* is neither strong enough nor descriptive enough to be associated with the affective, cognitive, and intention and/or behavior components found in social cognitive theory and the appraisal literature.

Following employee engagement literature (Dalal et al., 2008; Macy & Schneider, 2008; Newman & Harrison, 2008), we recognize that employee work passion must be associated with *both* job and organizational factors. However, the constructs job commitment or involvement and organizational commitment have already been established. They refer to job or organizational factors that may influence employee commitment. Job commitment is specific to a related role (Judge et al., 2000; Judge & Ilies, 2004; Meyer, Becker, & Vandenberghe, 2004). Organizational commitment refers to an individual's attachment to the organization (Eby, 1999; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al.,

2004). The word *commitment* has evolved to take different forms and to be directed toward different foci (Meyer et al., 2004). To connect job and organizational commitment to employee passion, we incorporate the term *work*.

The term *work* occurs in the context of an organization but is not necessarily always associated with, or influenced by, just one role or one specific job. Because work occurs in the context of an organization, it seems reasonable to consider that both the job and organizational factors could influence the concept of employee work passion. The question has not yet really been examined but preliminary studies (Brown, 1996; Meyer et al., 2004) seem to confirm the connection of both job and organizational factors with a larger question of employee commitment.

Although initial reactions to the term *passion* may evoke visions of irrationality and inappropriateness for the workplace, an examination of an early definition (Descartes, 1649/1972) reveals that it characterizes strong emotions with inherent positive behavioral tendencies, as long as reason underlies the behavior. Recently, Vallerand (2008) defined passion as “a strong inclination toward an activity that people like, find important, and in which they invest time and energy” (p. 1). Vallerand also posited that there are two types of passion, each one connected to different outcomes and experiences. These two types of passion are labeled harmonious and obsessive. Harmonious passion results in more adaptive outcomes, whereas obsessive passion does not (Vallerand, 2008). Vallerand’s definition of harmonious passion is congruent with the heart of our definition of employee work passion, which provides for cognitive and affective appraisals leading to positive intents and behaviors. Although the term *passion* has received little attention in psychology (Vallerand et al., 2003), the term *passion* is very congruent with social cognition theory (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997) and the appraisal construct presented here.

## A Framework of Social Cognitive Theory

What is missing in the research and discussion of employee engagement (and to some degree the organizational commitment and job commitment literature) is an integrative framework to understand the relationships between some of the concepts and variables found in engagement literature. We agree with Meyer and Gagne (2008) that a strong unifying perspective is needed, which frames the causality or formulation (the why’s and how’s) of employee engagement. Because employee engagement or work passion is fundamentally based on human perceptions, there must be some common framework that can be applied to understand both the similarities and differences found in existing literature. We believe that the general perspective can be found in social cognitive theory.

Social cognitive theory holds that human behavior is agentic in nature. People can exercise influence over what they do and what they experience

(Bandura, 1986, 1997; Bandura et al., 1996; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002). Although human behavior is determined by many interacting factors, individuals, based on their understanding of what is within their power to do and beliefs about their own capabilities, try to generate courses of action to suit given purposes (Bandura, 1997). In the social cognitive view, humans are neither driven by inner forces nor automatically shaped and controlled by external stimuli (Bandura, 1986). Rather, human functioning is explained in terms of a model of triadic causality in which behavior, cognitive, and other personal characteristics or attributes and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants of each other (Bandura, 1986).

Most cognitive theorists treat behaviors as if they can be chosen according to expectations about future outcomes or future reinforcements. The capacity for choice is based on five basic human capabilities: (a) symbolizing capability, (b) forethought capability, (c) vicarious capability, (d) self-regulation capability, and (e) self-reflective capability (Bandura, 1986).

Choice making requires an appraisal of the situation. An appraisal of the situation requires mental activity involving judgment, discrimination, and choice of activity based largely on past experience (Lazarus, 1984).

### **The Appraisal Construct**

The primary purpose of human appraisal is to understand how events and experience will or do impact the well-being of the appraiser. Humans are meaning-oriented, meaning-creating creatures that constantly evaluate events from the perspective of their well-being and react emotionally to some of those evaluations (Lazarus, 1982, 1984, 1991b). Individuals make appraisals of various experiences on a cognitive and on an affective level.

Sense of well-being is both cognitive and affective meaning based. Cognitive and affective activity can occur simultaneously, yet complex appraisals involve affective inferences and cognitive conclusions (Lazarus, 1982, 1984; Parkinson, 1997, 2007). In nearly all instances, feeling is not free of thought nor thought free of feeling; therefore, emotional aspects of experience can often affect a sense of well-being (Lazarus, 1982, 1984; Zajonc, 1980).

As can be seen, we are using two terms, *cognitive conclusions* and *affective inferences*, with very specific and different meanings. When initially processing situational information, people can reach affective inferences without explicitly registering corresponding cognitive meaning to the experience (Parkinson, 2007). In other words, affective meaning can be immediately inherent in emotionally laden transactions without lengthy or sequential processing (Lazarus, 1982, 1984). Affective meaning may come early in an experience, even before an individual knows what the object or event is, but this early presence of affect does not prove that affect is independent from the final cognitive conclusions (Lazarus, 1984). We have separated the terms *affective inference* and *cognitive conclusions* because there is evidence to suggest that



higher order emotions, such as anger, are a combination of cognitive conclusions as well as the basic affective inferences (Kuppens, Van Mechelen, Smits, & DeBoeck, 2003; Smith & Kirby, 2004).

The process of human appraisal involves three major elements: (a) the personal characteristics or attributes of the individual appraiser (i.e., affective and cognitive dimensions), (b) the attributes of the object(s) being appraised, and (c) the meaning (i.e., intents) the individual derives from the appraisal (Tzeng, 1975). Characteristics or attributes of the appraiser that influence the perceptions of what is being appraised include beliefs, expectations, past history with the object being appraised, motives, and commitments, all of which influence attention and appraisal at the very onset (Lazarus, 1982).

Studies such as Schaufeli and Salanova (2007, efficacy and engagement), Hallberg et al. (2007, personality and engagement), Fischer and Smith (2006, values and work behavior), Ilies, Scott, and Judge (2006, personality and organizational citizenship behavior), Langelaan et al. (2006, burnout and engagement), Britt (2003, identity and engagement), and Judge et al. (2000, 2002, personality and satisfaction) are helpful for understanding how the characteristics or attributes of the appraiser can affect the meaning derived from the experience appraised. These studies do little to directly shed light on what is meant by passion or engagement. These studies essentially are studies of the antecedents that influence the affective and cognitive perceptions of what is being appraised. We realize that any legitimate, relevant antecedents to the concept of engagement will influence the cognitions of what is appraised and, according to social cognition theory, will also influence intentions or resultant behaviors.

The attributes of what is being appraised are contingent on the object or experience that is being appraised. What is appraised shapes the possible meanings to be derived. For the purposes of this article, organizational aspects and job aspects have been thought to influence work passion. Organizational aspects of what might be appraised could be pay or nonmonetary remuneration, growth, fairness, or organizational policies. Job aspects that might be appraised could be autonomy, available resources for which to accomplish the job, or the clarity of job expectations.

There are two phases of an appraisal. The first phase of an appraisal is concerned with issues of whether the situation or experience has relevance for personal well-being. Individuals ask themselves, "Does the situation affect me personally?" or "Will I win or lose, now or in the future, and in what way?" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 32).

The second phase of appraisal involves an understanding of what the coping options could be and what is the likelihood that the options might be effective. Individuals ask themselves, "What, if anything, can be done about it?" and "Why is one option better than another?" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 35). Without the appraisal process, individuals cannot grasp the significance or meaning of what is happening in adaptation encounters with the environment. Nor can individuals choose among alternative values and courses of



action (Lazarus, 1991b). The importance of the second phase of the appraisal process involves the generation of intent or motivation to shape the future for the “agentic” individual.

The concept of meaning and the resultant intentions to behave are direct consequences of the appraisal. The attribution of meaning refers to a stored mental representations or schema (i.e., conclusions that are products of learning and experience) used to interpret or make sense of experience (James & James, 1989; Shamir, 1991). Initially, these schemas are descriptive. They are cognitive conclusions and affective inferences that help focus and form the individual’s perceptions of the environment or experience. Eventually, this information proceeds beyond description to a *valuation* of the environment’s attributes (James & James, 1989).

In the investigation of customer satisfaction, researchers (James & James, 1989; Oliver, 1980, 1993; Gotlieb, Grewal, & Brown, 1994; Schmit & Allscheid, 1995; Susskind, Kacmar, & Borchgrevink, 2003; Szymanski & Henard, 2001) have used the work of Bagozzi (1992) and Lazarus (1993, 1984) and the cognitive–affective–intention connection to more fully understand the concept of appraisal and its relationship to customer satisfaction. We advocate that the same approach be used in employee work passion or engagement studies.

## Implications for Research

Our operational definition of employee work passion implies certain fundamental ideas about how work passion occurs. It also includes certain measures that must be in place to verify certain relationships within the definition. A picture of how work passion develops and what antecedents are present becomes clearer by embedding the appraisal concept into the work passion construct. The model, therefore, implies certain research methodology considerations.

If a construct is to be validated, separate measures are needed to delineate, explain, and confirm various aspects of the construct (Breckler, 1984). The three components of cognition, affect, and intention are hypothetical, unobservable constructs and therefore no single measure can be assumed to encompass the full nature of work passion. By taking a multiple measures approach, the antecedents, modifiers, and outcomes of work passion will be more fully understood.

### Affective Aspect of Appraisal

Despite the fact that the construct of affect is becoming more frequently investigated as researchers (Bono, Folds, Vinson, & Muros, 2007; Eby, 1999; Judge & Ilies, 2004; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al., 2004; Ryan, Schmidt, & Johnson, 1996; Schleicher, Watt, & Greguras, 2004) seek to understand its

effect on organizational or job commitment, in most of the research on employee passion or engagement, affect is seldom measured or confirmed. This assertion is especially true for commercial studies. We believe that an individual's affect needs to be assessed instead of just inferred from statements of descriptions of work conditions or intentions. Affect is often inferred through the measurement of descriptions of work conditions (i.e., I have a good relationship with my boss) or expressed intention (i.e., I plan to work for this organization as long as I can).

Methodologies for measuring an affective component have been used frequently and effectively in the job attitude literature for the past two decades (Thoresen, Kaplan, Barsky, Warren, & de Chermont, 2003). The measurement of affect has also been important in the understanding of organizational commitment or climate studies (Carr, Schmidt, Ford, & DeShon, 2003; Tai, Chen, & Liu, 2007). Thoresen's meta-analysis examined 205 studies using the same methodology to measure affect in regard to job-related attitudes of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and burnout. These studies used the Positive and Negative Affect Scales (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The PANAS may warrant inclusion in future studies seeking to measure employee work passion.

Too frequently, cognition has been the only focal point of the engagement construct through measurement methodologies and the reliance on rater conclusions from cognitive statements. A methodological approach that emphasizes affect through the use of either semantic differentials or adjective pairings would reduce the dependence on cognition findings and increase the probability that the measurement of affective meaning is being assessed in the construct of employee work passion. The use of methodologies advocated by Barrett and Russell (1998), Carver (2001), Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1975), or Watson et al. (1988) would be fruitful approaches to use when grappling with problems of the affective measurement of work passion and would be a departure from the cognitive emphasis shown in most engagement studies up to now.

### **Valuation Cognitions Versus Intention Cognitions**

Researchers (James & James, 1989; Schmit & Allscheid, 1995) have been using Lazarus's (1991a, 1991b, 1991c) or Bagozzi's (1992) work to explain the sequential relationships between an individual's perceptions of the organization (i.e., a descriptive or valuation cognition), the appraiser's satisfaction (i.e., an affective inference), and the appraiser's actions (i.e., intentions and/or behavior). What has not been done is to make a distinction between intention and those perceptions and/or cognitions that spark or generate intention.

When researchers and practitioners such as Harter et al. (2002), Wellins et al. (2005), and Sardo (2006) examined the concept of engagement, they did so through the use of a series of questions and/or items that required a cognitive

conclusion. Questions such as “I know what is expected of me at work” (Harter et al., 2002, p. 269), “My job provides me with opportunities to grow” (Wellins et al., 2005, p. 28), and “I work for a great company” (Sardo, 2006, p. 7) are valuation cognitions or conclusions. These items require respondents to make judgments about the conditions or interactions in their work experience. These items, appropriately, have different focal points such as expectations, opportunities, and a great company.

The appraisal process moves from an initial judgment of description to a higher order judgment or valuation of the environment’s attributes (James & James, 1989; Lazarus, 1984). In comparison with descriptive meaning, valuation meaning is more internally oriented and requires additional information processing to judge how much the individual *values* or *prizes* what is perceived in the environmental attributes (James & James, 1989).

Returning to the three items described above, “How do I know what the expectations are?” “What opportunities do I have to grow?” “What do I mean by great company?” it can be seen that many other judgment considerations are necessary to answer survey questions with response possibilities ranging from 1 (*small extent*) to 5 (*large extent*). The weighing of the survey question, asking *to what extent*, requires higher order cognition and less affective inference. The appraisal is higher order in that valuation is the process of using the individual’s values or standards to estimate the *value or worth* of the attributes found in environment (James & James, 1989; Lazarus, 1982, 1984). These mental representations or schema of the higher order appraisal are primarily cognitive conclusions (James & James, 1989; Lazarus, 1984).

The respondent’s appraisal is triggered in the form of survey questions, which are focused on descriptions of conditions found in the organization or in the job setting. For example, “I know what is expected of me at work” requires a descriptive cognitive valuation of a circumstance. The cognitive conclusion is ultimately based on the trigger question. The cognitive conclusion or survey answer should not be seen as a statement of engagement. Nor should it be seen as a statement of intention. The respondent’s survey answer should be seen only as a descriptive conclusion of what is.

Commercial engagement studies often use the results of these descriptive conclusions, which are conclusions concerning the conditions under which people work to *infer* the construct or a state of engagement (Macy & Schneider, 2008). This type of logic is neither accurate nor sufficient to define the concept of engagement. It is, however, reasonable to assume that positive answers to the above three questions might *influence intentions and behaviors* if intentions and/or behaviors were also measured and then verified through appropriate correlations.

Specifically, intentions are often not conceptually or methodologically acknowledged as such. We advocate that in the research methodology for the exploration of work passion, intentional statements be clearly specified and separated from the descriptive cognitive statements of the conditions, policies,

and procedures of the work and organizational setting. By *separated*, we mean conceptually separated yet methodologically randomly interspersed in the questionnaire.

An example of an intention question or item might be, "I intend to work for this company as long as I can" or "I plan to positively recommend this company to all my friends." These types of intention items could then be correlated against certain cognitive conclusions the respondent has made concerning various job and organizational characteristics. Some substantial relationships might be attributed to these job and organizational characteristics based on the correlational variance with a group of intention items such as described above.

### **Intentions Versus Behaviors**

The distinction between intention and behavior has been established in psychological (Bagozzi, 1992; Bagozzi & Yi, 1989; Bazerman, Tenbrunsel, & Wade-Benzoni, 1998; Heckhausen & Beckmann, 1990; Johnson, Chang, & Lord, 2006; Renn, Allen, Fedor, & Davis, 2005) and organizational research (Koyes, 2001; Wright & Bonett, 2007). In organizational research, distinct differences between intention to leave and turnover behavior have been established (Steel & Ovalle, 1984; Tett & Meyer, 1993).

A meta-analysis conducted by Steel and Ovalle (1984) demonstrated that intentions were more predictive of turnover behavior than overall job satisfaction, satisfaction with the work itself, or organizational commitment. A subsequent meta-analysis (Tett & Meyer, 1993) showed that (a) satisfaction and commitment each contributed independently to the prediction of intention cognitions, (b) intention cognitions were predicted more strongly by satisfaction than by commitment, and (c) intention cognitions mediated nearly all the attitudinal linkages with turnover. The results of these meta-analyses demonstrate the power of intention items and acknowledge that researchers realize intention and behavior are separate. This research also lends support to the idea that work passion is a megaconstruct, which is influenced by both job satisfaction and organizational commitment. What has not yet been researched is the connection between cognitive conclusions, affective inferences, and intention and/or behavior as it applies to the concept of engagement or work passion.

We maintain that the primary ingredient in the concept of work passion is intention, because there is strong evidence to suggest that the degree to which intentions are well formed shapes the way affect influences behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Bagozzi & Yi, 1989). When intentions are well formed, they can completely mediate the effects of affect on behavior. When intentions are poorly formed, the mediating role of intentions is reduced and affect has stronger and more direct effect on behavior (Bagozzi & Yi, 1989). This connection is especially important if an individual's affective inference is negative toward an aspect of organizational life, yet his or her intention cognitions logically

mandate that the individual cooperate for economic reasons. It is crucial that a strong well-conceived set of intention items be developed to understand the relationship between cognition, affect, and intentions and their impact on the state of mind that leads to or results in work passion.

Last, the intention–behavior connection could be advanced by making explicit the idea that behaviors are external to the appraisal process yet are a verification of the significance of the intention dimension of appraisal. Behavior is a needed predictive validity step for the affect–cognition–intention appraisal process. To replicate a study such as that done by George (1991) and incorporate the connection between affect, intention, and behavior might verify the basic definition we advocate. Affect may not be a sufficient determinant of intentions, and intentions may not be a sufficient impetus for action without strong cognition as well as affect at its origin.

## **Implications for Practice**

Comprehensively addressing employee work passion within the bounds of corporate America requires that HRD professionals apply the theoretical components of employee work passion to the needs of each organization they inform. Despite the idiosyncratic nature of organizations, three general implications are ubiquitously applicable. First, practitioners must adopt an underlying model to “move the needle” or increase employee work passion. Second, practitioners must consider the triad of cognition, affect, and intention. Third, practitioners must recognize the systemic nature of employee work passion initiatives.

### **Underlying Model**

A strong definition and underlying model is the foundation on which any work passion system intervention should be built. If change is possible, it must come from understanding the chain of events that bring about employee conclusions, positive or negative, concerning organizational experiences. If a proposed definition does not at least hint at how an individual formulates a sense of passion, then the definition in no way informs, educates, or enlightens the HRD professional as to what can be done to improve or support the employee–organization relationship. In practice, choosing among alternative interventions to “move the needle” can be ineffective when practitioners have little knowledge of the underlying model in use.

### **Triad of Cognition, Affect, and Intention**

Our model asserts that to fully address employee work passion, HRD professionals must consider the triad of cognition, affect, and intention. When measuring employee work passion, professionals must specifically and separately

assess (a) affect, (b) cognition, and (c) intention. This triad must also be considered when designing interventions to increase employee passion. Practitioners must consider strategies that directly influence affect and cognition and indirectly influence intention. If practitioners are to obtain employee cooperation that results in replicable differences in tangible outcomes, they must consider how employees think about their work experience as well as what they feel about their work. Practitioners should try to focus organizational strategies such as training, information dissemination, and managerial directives toward changing employee judgments of organizational and job factors, not intentions. For employee intentions to become more positive, employee judgments concerning organizational and job factors must become more positive.

### **Systemic Nature of Employee Work Passion**

Moving the needle in a positive direction is symbolic of desirable employee conclusions and intentions. Our model of employee work passion asserts that work passion stems from reoccurring cognitive and affective appraisals of various job and organizational situations. Although some organizational and job factors that influence employee work passion may be less systemic (i.e., relationship with boss, relationship with colleagues), we expect that organizational (e.g., fairness, career growth, recognition) and job (e.g., autonomy, role clarity, job resources) issues both sit at the heart of employee affective inferences and cognitive conclusions and are largely systemic in nature.

To change perceptions of organizational and job factors requires modifications of processes and procedures, which make related interventions systemic in nature. Systemic change takes a great deal of resources, focus, and leadership tolerance, which may not always be available in the face of today's economic pressures. HRD practitioners must recognize that an employee passion initiative is systemic and therefore requires a long-term investment to gain a well-earned outcome.

### **Summary**

Our observations from a review of the employee engagement literature were as follows: (a) there was a common conceptual set of components used by both commercial and academic researchers, (b) there was no clear common framework to explain antecedents or consequences, and (c) there was convincing evidence to suggest engagement was a multidimensional construct. Using a social cognitive theory of appraisal, three research implications were put forward. It is advocated that (a) there should be an assessment of the affective aspect of appraisal to fully understand the concept of work passion, (b) researchers should differentiate valuation cognitions from intention cognitions to fully understand the concept of work passion, and (c) researchers should differentiate

intentions from behavior to substantiate the affect–cognition–intention connections. Many important questions might be generated and researched if the concepts of affect, cognition, and intention can be incorporated into an operational definition of work passion.

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