

Work engagement and job performance: the moderating role of perceived organizational support

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Título: Compromiso con el trabajo y rendimiento en el trabajo: el papel moderador del apoyo organizacional percibido.

Resumen: La presente investigación tuvo el objetivo de examinar si la relación entre compromiso con el trabajo y el rendimiento en los objetivos de las tareas está moderada por el apoyo perceptivo de la organización (APO). En base a la literatura existente, el apoyo percibido de la organización se hipotetiza que fortalece la asociación positiva entre el compromiso laboral de los empleados y su rendimiento en los objetivos de las tareas. Las hipótesis fueron comprobadas en una muestra de 1049 empleados. Los resultados del análisis de regresión jerárquico muestran que: (1) el compromiso en el trabajo está positivamente relacionado con el rendimiento en los objetivos de las tareas, y (2) la relación entre compromiso en el trabajo y el rendimiento en los objetivos de las tareas está moderado por el APO, de modo que la relación positiva es más significativa cuando el APO es mayor. Al final se discuten las implicaciones teóricas y prácticas, y las sugerencias para futuras investigaciones.

Palabras clave: compromiso con el trabajo; rendimiento en el trabajo; apoyo percibido de la organización; rendimiento objetivo en la tarea.

Abstract: The present research was aim to examine whether the relationship between work engagement and objective task performance is moderated by perceived organizational support (POS). Based on the existing literature, perceived organizational support is hypothesized to strengthen the positive association between employees' work engagement and their objective task performance. The hypotheses were tested on a sample of 1049 employees. Results of hierarchical regression analysis show that: (1) work engagement is positively related to objective task performance, and (2) the relationship between work engagement and objective task performance is moderated by POS, such that the positive relationship is more significant when POS higher than lower. In the end, theoretical and practical implications, and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Key words: work engagement; job performance; perceived organizational support; objective task performance.

Introduction

Work engagement is essential for organizations because it contributes to the bottom line (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010; Macey & Schneider, 2008). Work engagement has been found to be positively associated with job performance rated by supervisors (Bakker & Bal, 2010; Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008), financial results (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009), and client satisfaction (Salanova, Agut, & Peiró, 2005). However, on the other hand, the association between work engagement and employees' output may depend on personal and situational factors. Previous literature has shown that individual-level personality traits (e.g., conscientiousness, Demerouti, 2006) affect the link between work engagement and job performance. However, there is no existing study examining the role of situational factors. The current research aims to fill this gap by focusing on the influence of an important situational factor, perceived organizational support, in the relationship between work engagement and job performance.

The present study contributes to the existing literature in the following ways. First, along with the view that personality such as conscientiousness will transform engagement into high-quality performance, we examine POS playing the moderate role because it influences the employees' felt obligation. This is the first research to investigate the boundary condition of the relationship between work engagement and

job performance from job characteristics perspective. Second, previous studies on work engagement and job performance mostly relied on subjective ratings of raters (e.g., supervisors, peers, self, etc.) on employees' performance (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011). However, studies have demonstrated that performance rating made by raters such as self, peers and supervisors are often show high leniency bias (Murphy & Cleveland, 1991). Namely, raters report undeservedly favorable performance scores of the rates. The current research adopted employees' objective performance outcome as the indicator of job performance, which will provide more accurate estimation of the relation between work engagement and job performance. The hypothesized model is presented in Figure 1.

Theoretical background and Hypotheses

Work engagement and job performance

Work engagement is an active, positive work-related state that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeliet al., 2006). Vigor refers to high levels of energy and resilience in work. Dedication is characterized by strong involvement in one's work as well as a sense of significance and enthusiasm. Absorption is a state of being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work. Hence, engaged employees are usually equipped with high levels of energy and enthusiastically involved in their work. Moreover, they are often fully immersed in their work so that time flies (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004).

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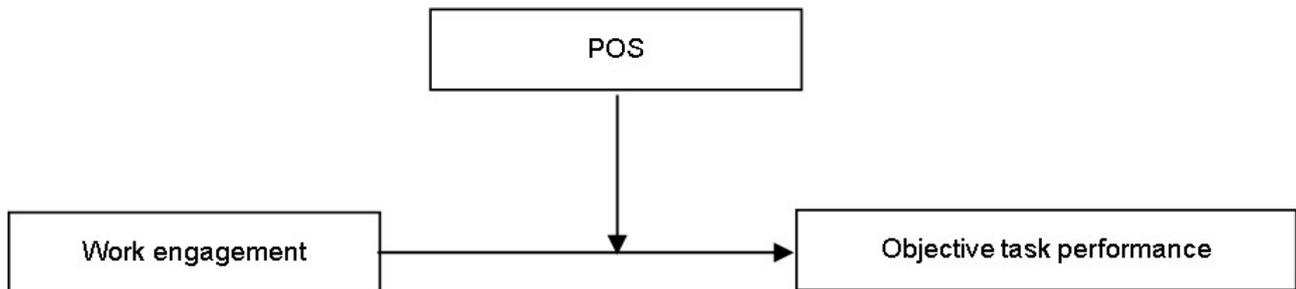


Figure 1. Theoretical Model.

Task performance refers to in-role performance and refers to those officially required outcomes and behaviors that directly serve the goals of the organization (Motowidlo & Van Scotter, 1994). Among other things, task performance includes meeting company objectives and effective sales presentations (Behrman & Perreault, 1982). The definition of task performance emphasizes the instrumentality of performance for organizational goals.

Work engagement is beneficial for both employees and organizations because engaged employees are expected to show better job performance (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010). Better performance among engaged workers, in comparison to non-engaged workers, is accounted by engaged employees' positive emotions, such as happiness, joy, and enthusiasm (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). According to the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), positive emotions including joy, interest and contentment all share the capacity to broaden people's momentary thought – action repertoires and build their personal resources (physical, intellectual, social and psychological resources) through widening the array of thoughts and actions that come to mind. Joy broadens resources by creating the urge to play and being creative. Interest fosters the desire to explore new world, assimilate new information and experience, and grow. Engaged employees often experience positive emotions (Schaufeli & Van Rhenen, 2006). Happy people are more sensitive to opportunities at work, more outgoing and helpful to others, and more confident and optimistic (Cropanzano & Wright, 2001). For example, Bakker and Bal (2010) showed that engaged teachers received higher ratings from their supervisors on in-role performance, indicating that engaged employees perform well and are willing to go the extra mile. Salanova et al. (2005) conducted a study among personnel working in Spanish restaurants and hotels in which 342 employees provided information about organizational resources, engagement, and service climate and 1140 customers evaluated employees' performance and reported their own customer loyalty. This research showed that organizational resources and work engagement predicted service climate, which in turn predicted employee performance and customer loyalty. Moreover, Xanthopoulou et al. (2009) conducted a diary study among employees working in a Greek fast food restaurant, and found that day-levels of work engagement were predictive of objective daily financial

returns. Thus, we hypothesize that engaged individuals will perform well:

Hypothesis 1: Work engagement is positively related to objective task performance.

The role of POS in the relation between work engagement and job performance

Within the work context, task performance is defined as the officially required outcomes and behaviors that directly serve the goals of the organization (Motowidlo & Van Scotter, 1994). To achieve good job performance, employees may have to keep flow or high engagement in activities. However, high engagement does not certainly lead to good job performance. When people are not goal oriented and hardworking, their work engagement (Bakker, Demerouti & ten Brummelhuis, 2011) and flow experience (Demerouti, 2006) did not increase in-role performance because they are engaged in other things rather than the work tasks serving the goals of the organization. Specially, Demerouti (2006) found conscientiousness will positively moderate the relationship flow with colleagues rated task performance and contextual performance, and Bakker, Demerouti and ten Brummelhuis (2011) also found work engagement is positively related to task performance and contextual performance for employees who score high on conscientiousness. They argue workers who high in conscientiousness will direct their effort toward achieving their crucial work tasks.

In the current research, we suggest that situational factors would also affect the relationship between work engagement and job performance. Based on the existing literature, we propose that POS may determine the extent of the association between engagement and performance. POS reflects the type of support that develops through employees' interactions with organizational agents such as supervisors and also reflects employees' beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization they work for values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Kahn, 1990). POS can produce a feeling of obligation to care about the organization's welfare and to help the organization reach goals based on the reciprocity norm (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001). Rousseau (1995) indicated that repeated favorable treatment received from the organizations

increase employees' felt obligation to help the organization to achieve its goal. Meyer and Allen (1991) suggested that favorable treatment by the organization increases the employees' perceived duty. Ko, Price, and Mueller (1997) found that workers' perceptions of having been well treated were positively related to the experienced obligation. Thus, it wouldn't be surprising that among employees high in POS, work engagement may contribute more to job performance, in comparison to those low in POS. Therefore, the current research tested the hypotheses that POS would moderate the relationship between work engagement and job performance, such that work engagement would be positively associated with job performance among employees high in POS, but not among employees low in POS.

Hypothesis 2: Work engagement of those employees who perceived higher organizational support (high POS) is more positively related to their objective task performance than those who perceive lower organizational support (low POS).

Method

Participants and procedure

The study was conducted among 1094 customer service employees in a large state-owned telecom company located in the South China. Through working with the line managers and the human resources department, we invited the employees to fill out an online questionnaire (published on a secured website) during work time, in a silent, separate meeting room. The management sent out a newsletter as well as an email which informed employees that the questionnaire was available to fill out. In total, 1049 employees completed the questionnaire online. The research sample included 340 males (31.1%) and 754 females (68.9%). Their mean age is 28.69 years ($SD = 4.45$), and the mean organizational tenure is 5.27 year ($SD = 4.0$).

Measures

The instruments administered in Chinese in our study were originally developed in English. To ensure semantic equivalence, we utilized "translation-back translation" procedures (Brislin, 1970). Two proficient bilingual researchers were invited to conduct the translation and comment on any ambiguously worded item. Certain adjustment was made, according to their comments.

Work engagement was assessed with the nine-item version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli et al. 2006) which measures work engagement in three aspects: vigor, dedication, absorption. Example items are: "At my job I feel strong and vigorous" (vigor), "I am enthusiastic about my job" (dedication), and "I am immersed in my work" (ab-

sorption). All items were scored on a seven-point rating scale ranging from 0 ('never') to 6 ('always'). Consistent with previous studies (Mathieu, Tannenbaum, and Salas, 1992), we calculated a composite score of the three aspects to indicate the levels of work engagement ($\alpha = .94$).

Task performance of each employee was operationalized as a comprehensive objective assessment score, and the data was collected from the HR department. The score consisted of (1) customer satisfaction score which were rated by the customer ranging from 0 to 100. (2) quality scores which were assessed by an independent department on overall caller experience and the conversations ranging from 0 to 100. (3) total problem resolution rating ranging from 0 to 100 percent, which was the percentage of time the problem had been completely resolved according to the customers, and (4) total calls per month. All the four scores are calculated in a single score range from 0 to 100 with a formula by HR department.

POS was assessed with the five-item Approval/Recognition/Influence subscale of the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (Eisenberger, et al., 1990). Previous studies have provided evidence of the reliability and validity of the scale (Eisenberger, et al., 1990; Shore & Wayne, 1993). Example items are: "Completing my work done on time gets me greater approval from my immediate supervisor." All items were scored on a five-point rating scale ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 5 ('strongly agree') ($\alpha = .89$).

Results

Measurement model

Prior to hypotheses testing, we explored whether the all scale variables of our hypothesized model with scale items tapping the latent variables could be distinguished empirically. The measurement models including the variables work engagement and POS fit well to the data. $\chi^2(1094) = 1423.47$, $\chi^2/df = 1.30$, RMSEA = .04, CFI = .92, GFI = 0.90, TLI = .91. All items had significant loadings (all above .45) on the intended factors ($p < .001$).

Hypothesis Testing

Table 1 displays the mean scores, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables. Of all socio-demographical variables, tenure is significantly related to POS and objective job performance respectively. Therefore, we controlled for tenure in all subsequent analyses. As can be seen in Table 1, POS and work engagement were positively correlated to objective task performance.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities for study variables.

| Variables | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|----------|------------|-------|
| 1.Gender | | | | | | | |
| 2.Age | 28.69 | 4.45 | .15** | | | | |
| 3.Tenure | 5.27 | 4.00 | .26** | .82** | | | |
| 4.Work Engagement | 3.77 | 1.15 | .01 | .06* | .03(.94) | | |
| 5.POS | 3.91 | 0.79 | -.04 | -.07* | -.09** | .48**(.89) | |
| 6.Objective Task performance | 65.54 | 15.97 | .04 | .07 | .10* | .16** | .12** |

Note. N=1094; * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Hypothesis 1 suggests that work engagement is positively related objective task performance. Results of regression analyses are displayed in Table 2. Since earlier research indicated POS was related to the job performance, it is necessary to control the effect of POS as well as demographics. Regressing work engagement on objective task performance

showed that work engagement was positively related to objective task performance ($\beta=0.12, p < .01$) even taking into account gender, age, tenure and POS. Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Table 2. Results of Regression work engagement and POS on objective task Performance.

| Variable | | | | Objective task performance | | | | | |
|-------------------------|-----|-----|--------------|----------------------------|-----|--------------|-----|-----|--------------|
| | B | SE | ΔR^2 | B | SE | ΔR^2 | B | SE | ΔR^2 |
| Step1: demographics | | | .01 | | | | | | |
| Gender | .03 | .09 | | .03 | .09 | | .03 | .09 | |
| Age | .00 | .02 | | .00 | .02 | | .00 | .02 | |
| Tenure | .03 | .02 | | .03 | .02 | | .03 | .02 | |
| Step2: | | | | | | 0.02** | | | |
| Work Engagement | | | | .13** | .04 | | .12 | .05 | |
| POS | | | | .06 | .04 | | .07 | .04 | |
| Step3: WE×POS | | | | | | | .07 | .03 | .01** |
| Total R ² | | | | | | | | | .04** |
| Adjusted R ² | | | | | | | | | .03** |

Note. N=1094, WE=Work Engagement; * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

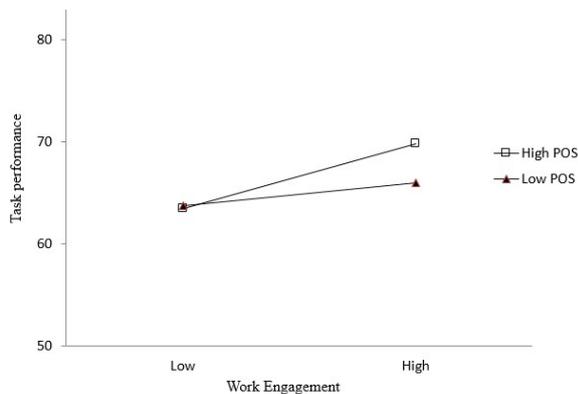


Figure 2. Two-way interaction between work engagement and POS in predicting objective task performance.

Hypothesis 2 states that POS will boost the positive effect of work engagement on objective task performance. To test the hypothesis that POS would moderate the positive association between work engagement and task performance, we conducted another regression analysis. As Table 2 displays, the interaction between work engagement and POS significantly predicted objective task performance. Inspection of the graphical display of the interactions (see Figures 1) indicates that the POS boosts the effects of work engagement on objective task performance. The simple slope

of the regression of objective task performance to work engagement for employees with one standard deviation above the average on POS was significant (simple slope= 0.19, $t [1094] = 1.96, p < .05$). For employees with one standard deviation below the average, the relationship between work engagement and objective task performance was not significant (simple slope=0.05, $p > .05$). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is fully supported.

Discussion

The primary aim of the present study was to investigate whether POS qualifies the positive relationship between work engagement and objective task performance. The results clearly show that: (1) the work engagement positively related to objective task performance; (2) the POS moderates the link between engagement and objective performance. Engagement only facilitated objective task performance when employees scored high (vs. low) on POS. In what follows, we will discuss the main contributions of the study.

Theory contribution

The first contribution of present study is supporting the theory that work engagement is positive related to job performance. Researchers have argued that engagement, as an affect-motivational state, should lead to high levels of job performance (e.g., Kahn, 1990; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). A meta-analysis by Christian, Garza, & Slaughter (2011) indicated the meta-analytical correlations between work engagement and task performance is 0.36, but earlier research has usually relied on subjective assessments of job performance. Especially, Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli (2009) found the relationship between work engagement and objective financial returns was modest. So, the results of previous studies of positive relation between work engagement and job performance may be doubted because of common-method variance problems. Therefore, to qualify the linkage of engagement-performance, the more studies are needed to test the relationship between work engagement and objective task performance. Present study indicates work engagement is a positive predictor of task performance even objective indicators are used. Our findings provided direct evidence that link between work engagement and job performance indeed exists, and support the argument that work engagement is positively related to job performance (Bakker & Bal, 2010; Bakker & Xanthopoulou, 2009; Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008; Salanova et al., 2005; Xanthopoulou et al., 2009).

The second contribution is the results proved the situational variables such as POS is a key moderator of work engagement and job performance and offers an additional explanation as to when work engagement is positively related to job performance, especially objective task performance. We argue the underlying process is the individuals who perceived high organizational support will also perceived high duty or obligation to help organization to achieve the goals for the reciprocity norm. Namely, when they perceived high organizational support, they will direct their engagement to the crucial task rather than other irrelevant behaviors (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Ko, Price, & Mueller, 1997; Kinnunen, Feldt, & Anne Ma'kikangas, 2008).

According to Kahn (1990), work engagement may provide a more comprehensive explanation for job performance effects than is provided by the mechanisms that emphasize narrower aspects of the employee's self, such as job involvement, job satisfaction. Does mean work engagement can be a unique predictor of job performance? However, the moderator of the relationship between work engagement and job performance has received limited research attention. Until now, there is only one research (Bakker, Demerouti & ten Brummelhuis, 2012) demonstrated that work engagement per se is a necessary but not sufficient condition for enhanced performance for the first time, and found that personality trait such as conscientious is a key boundary condition to help individuals to direct them transform their

vigor, dedication, and absorption into high-quality performance. Present study indicated that POS positively moderated the relationship between work engagement and job performance. This means situational variables are beneficial to strengthen the relationship between work engagement and job performance as well as personality trait.

Furthermore, a review by Rhoades and Eisenberger (2001) showed POS related to outcomes favorable to employees and organizations such as job satisfaction, positive mood, affective commitment, and lessened withdrawal behavior. However, the researches address the relationship POS with work engagement is rare. So, present study can also enhanced the knowledge of the role of POS in organizational behavior.

Practical implications

Our findings also have potential implications for practice. First, We have illustrated that engagement might indeed help employers to improve or maintain their competitive advantage. The results show that engagement has significant relations with objective task performance, this means engaged workforce will likely perform their tasks more efficiently and effectively. Thus, organizations can profit by stimulating work engagement among their employees by creating engagement-evoking working environments. Specially, previous studies have consistently shown that job resources such as autonomy, social support from colleagues and skill variety facilitate work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Bakker & Leiter, 2010). So, encouraging employees make decisions of the own job role and organization redesign the job task may be useful for increasing employees' engagement.

Second, our findings suggest that work engagement is more beneficial for objective employee performance for employees who perceived high organizational support. This means the organizations should help the employees to direct their engagement to the crucial task rather than just foster their engagement. According to the organizational support theory, it is useful for increasing the POS of employees that organizations care, approve, and respect the contribution of the employees, and fulfill employees' socioemotional needs, leading workers to incorporate organizational membership and role status into their social identity. Furthermore, organizations and managers should also strengthen employees' beliefs that the organization recognizes and rewards increased performance (i.e., performance-reward expectancies).

Limitations and future directions

The main limitation is that the study adopted a cross-sectional design which precludes conclusions about causal relationships between the variables. Therefore, the present findings are tentative until replicated in studies with longitudinal designs. Note, however that as we were interested in whether POS qualifies the relationship between work en-

agement and performance, causality was not really our main focus. One suggestion for future studies is to extend the possible job characteristics that affect the work engagement

–performance, such as job demands. Furthermore, we encourage researchers to replicate this study on the weekly engagement or daily engagement.

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(Article received: 02-10-2015; revised: 22-03-2016; accepted: 18-04-2016)