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**Engaged in What? So What? A Role-
Based Perspective for the Future of
Employee Engagement**

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Engaged in What? So What?

A Role-Based Perspective for the Future of Employee Engagement

Theresa M. Welbourne, Ph.D.

Employee engagement is a topic that has evolved considerably. As it has increased in popularity, the quest to define what it is has continued. For example, Storey, Ulrich, Welbourne & Wright (2009), in their chapter on employee engagement, discuss the various groups that provide definitions of the topic. They start out talking about the definitions proposed by various corporations (e.g. Caterpillar, Dell) then move to the approaches used by consulting firms (e.g. Corporate Leadership Council, Gallup), and next suggest a few definitions provided by academics (e.g. Kahn, 1990; Shaw, 2005). The conclusion, reached by many other authors working in the area, is that engagement describes a process or a set of outcomes vs. a clear and agreed upon construct.

At a recent Conference Board meeting on employee engagement (Los Angeles, November, 2010, Senior Communications Program), the audience was asked how their organizations defined employee engagement. At the end of the discussion, one had to ask the question: "what is it not?" The answers ranged from traditional academic areas of work (e.g. job satisfaction, job involvement, commitment, organization citizenship) to emotional descriptors (e.g. when employees love the company), to statements about well being and fairness (e.g. people bring their 'whole selves' to work) and lastly to company-specific programs (e.g. inspiration, innovation, creativity, caring for the community).

In the quest to explore what employee engagement might be, authors also have attempted to break employee engagement up into various parts, such as psychological state engagement, behavioral engagement, and trait engagement (Macey & Schneider, 2008). In some cases, they agree to simply give up with the definitive approach to what employee engagement is and study it because the topic is very popular and does appear to be associated with good outcomes (MacLeod and Clarke, 2010). In a few rare cases the topic of employee engagement comes under criticism. For example, a Forbes writer (Luisa Kroll) wrote a short piece in September, 2005 that quotes Randall MacDonald of IBM saying "Soon we'll be talking about marrying all those employees to whom we're engaged." Ed Frauenheim, a writer for Workforce (2009) wrote an article titled "A skeptical view of engagement," where he cites professionals who warn about the "one-size fits all" approaches to employee engagement.

However, it is very difficult to find anything negative in print about employee engagement because it sounds so good. Employee engagement speaks to something most social scientists, employees and managers truly believe, and that is the fact that when employees go "above and beyond" and are not robots just doing a simple, repetitive job, then organizations do better. Who can argue with that?

There are volumes of literature and research on employee commitment, empowerment, motivation, organization citizenship research, job satisfaction work, and more that point to the importance of employees in driving performance. This quest is what the fields of organization behavior, organization development, human resource management, and more are all about.

Thus, the point made in this chapter is that employee engagement is an effort worth pursuing . It puts a name on something we know matters to people, society and business. However, in this chapter the suggestion will be made that employee engagement is not a construct at all. It is a field of study, and it may very well be an industry. Thus, instead of focusing any more attention on trying to make employee engagement into a scientific construct, unique from what has been validated and studied using theory and research for many years, this chapter suggests moving beyond the definition and focusing on outcomes. This can be the future of employee engagement. Said another way, consider the "engaged in what" question.

Could employee engagement be an industry?

The beauty of employee engagement, one could say then, is that it can be everything to everybody. Saks (2006: 601) notes that "most of what has been written about employee engagement can be found in practitioner journals where it has its basis in practice rather than theory and empirical research." However, with the thousands and thousands of articles, blogs, and magazine pieces on this topic, it is obvious that what the topic lacks in rigor it makes up for in popularity.

In a sense, employee engagement has been part of the academic community because the components of employee engagement or what the business leaders, consultants and interested parties are talking about has been studied in detail by the academic world for many years. Below are examples of what authors writing about employee engagement refer to or reference when they speak of engagement (the table below is developed to give the reader a sense of the types of theories and bodies of work discussed when employee engagement definitions are attempted; it is not an exhaustive list):

Table 1. The words of employee engagement

Authors	Theories or other literature cited when discussing definitions of employee engagement
Macey & Schneider (2008)	Involvement, commitment, attachment, mood, citizenship behavior, effort, prosocial behavior, disposition, loyalty, productivity, ownership, job satisfaction, and at some point they point out that it could be "some combination of the above"
Saks (2006)	Organizational commitment, organizational citizenship, emotional and intellectual commitment, discretionary effort, attention, absorption, antithesis of burnout, energy, involvement, efficacy, cynicism, exhaustion, state of mind, vigor, dedication, absorption
Ferrer (2005)	Job satisfaction, enthusiasm, motivation for work, positive attitude, feeling involved and valued, organization commitment

Authors	Theories or other literature cited when discussing definitions of employee engagement
Report to the UK government by David MacLeod and Nita Clarke (2010)	Commitment, energy, potential, creativity, personal attachment to work, positive attitude, authentic values, trust, fairness, mutual respect, discretionary effort, job satisfaction
The Conference Board report on Employee Engagement (2006)	Cognitive commitment, emotional attachment, connection, discretionary effort, emotional drivers (pride, relationships with manager), rational drivers (pay and benefits), satisfaction. Focus on drivers of engagement, which include trust and integrity, nature of the job, line of sight between individual and company performance, career growth, pride, coworker and team relationships, employee development, and relationship with one's manager.
Kular, Gatenby, Rees, Soane, and Truss (2008)	Role performance, intellectual and emotional commitment, discretionary effort, passion for work, job involvement, flow, organization citizenship behaviors

Table 1 is not meant to be all inclusive or even to introduce a new definition of employee engagement. It was designed to illustrate how very broad and all inclusive this thing called employee engagement has become. The lack of definition and evidence that employee engagement really is not new has not stopped the motion forward in this work. The 152 page report on employee engagement prepared by David MacLeod and Nita Clarke (2010) provide some insights into why employee engagement may be better labeled an industry, and why it likely will continue in that form for many years to come. On page 8, the authors note the following:

"Early on in the review, when we spoke to David Guest, Professor of Organizational Psychology and Human Resource Management at King's College London, he pointed out that much of the discussion on engagement tends to get muddled as to whether it is an attitude, a behavior or an outcome or, indeed, all three. He went on to suggest that ...'the concept of employee engagement needs to be more clearly defined [...] or it needs to be abandoned.' We have decided, however, that there is too much momentum and indeed excellent work being done under the banner of employee engagement to abandon the term."

When discussing the research that provides the compelling business case, the authors then go on to state that (page 13):

"there is no single study that has provided beyond doubt that engagement explains higher performance, or improving engagement causes improved productivity and performance...taken together (the cases) offer a very compelling case."

There are some very highly publicized outcomes of employee engagement. Studies from firms such as Gallup (2006) cite data with 23,910 business units, while Towers-Perrin ISR in the same year produced a report with data from 664,000 employees. These studies show that firms in the top scoring quartiles in the employee engagement survey have higher performance than organizations in the lower performing quartile on their surveys. These big statistics are then supplemented with case studies showing primarily how doing an employee survey and then taking action on the data makes the workplace better and then leads to measurable business outcomes.

The firm-level studies have tended to focus on employee survey data. The questions are different from study to study; however, they show relationships between survey scores and measures of firm performance. These studies suggest that employee engagement, regardless of what one agrees to use as a definition, is associated with higher performance. The well published findings have led to growing interest in not only improving employee engagement to lead to higher performance but also in doing employee surveys as the catalyst to the process.

Assumptions about employee engagement survey scores

When scores go up, employees are engaged. When scores go down, employees are disengaged. Having higher scores is better. Being engaged is the preferable state to being disengaged. It seems that the goal of employee engagement is to figure out what it is about employees that drives performance and then once the secret is uncovered, employers can take steps to improve bottom-line performance. To date, a lot of work has focused on employees surveys, which are dependent on some sort of definition of employee engagement. However, we continue to be in state where there is lack of consensus about the term employee engagement.

Newman and Harrison (2008) suggest that employee engagement indeed is nothing new. The title of their article starts out with "Been there, bottled that," and then they go on to argue that employee engagement should be considered a higher order construct, or an overall mega job attitude (they provide a helpful table that links engagement survey questions to existing constructs). One could say that this "mega construct" approach could lead the way to believing employee engagement really can be whatever you want it to be because odds are good that the survey questions being used are close to some component of the ideal mega employee engagement construct. Even though appealing, this approach may be problematic.

Does raising scores on an any employee engagement survey question really lead to improved firm performance? Although there are many research reports published on engagement, none have provided conclusive evidence of this link. There are questions of causality, lack of adequate control variables, and the rather irritating problem of not knowing what employee engagement really is that continue to plague interpretations of the findings.

In addition, what if all the disaster cases are unpublished? There are, for example, cases of firms winning the "most engaged company" award and declaring poor performance very soon after receiving these awards (e.g. see discussion started by Paul Kearns on www.energizeengage.com). In the

behavioral sciences, research proceeds from simple to complex, showing that mediator and moderator variables are important in understanding the effects of attitudes on performance. To date, very little work has been done including more complex modeling of the employee engagement research. This means that there may be some conditions under which the employee engagement treatment that is being given does not equally apply to all employees.

From a pure onlooker perspective, given the popularity of employee engagement, one may wonder why the economy has not picked up sooner. The lack of rising revenues alone may give us one reason to ponder the possibility that maybe employee engagement, with its lack of definition, is not the magic answer to improved performance. Maybe there is something more, and the future of employee engagement should be focused on that line of work.

This chapter spells out a point of view that focuses the answer in a different direction. Employee engagement, whatever it is, can only be helpful to a company if it leads to behaviors that the organization needs in order to execute its strategy and to be successful. Thus, this suggests that there are likely some types of employee engagement that are not ideal, thus, making the employee engagement process more complex than it would be if we were talking about simply raising scores on a mega construct survey.

Maybe the quest is off target

Perhaps the answer lies in something other than employee engagement. If we accept that employee engagement is indeed an industry or a very large endeavor (not just a simple construct), and that the "idea" of employee engagement is to find the thing about employees that improves firm performance, then we can get past worrying about what employee engagement is and redirect effort to the outcomes organizations are trying to drive with these employee-based interventions. With that goal in mind, there appear to be two things missing from the discussions of employee engagement. They are both related to the target of engagement or the "engaged in what" question.

1. Engaged in what behaviors? Employees can be engaged in baking cookies all day, but if you are not a bakery that sells lots of cookies, this particular activity may not drive business success. There seems to be consensus that employee engagement leads to "above and beyond" behaviors, and in many cases this is defined as organizational citizenship behaviors. However, that's a fairly simple answer to what we are seeing is a complex phenomenon.
2. What do employees get in exchange for being more engaged? To date, the discussions appear to be somewhat one way in nature. Employees need to be engaged rather than disengaged; they need to go above and beyond, and they need to expend discretionary effort, but what do they get in return?

Redirect the conversation to role-based performance

Rather than continue the discussion about being engaged or disengaged, the next section aims to redirect the conversation to the outcomes of employee engagement. However, the focus is on employee behavior vs. firm-level outcomes. In order to further streamline the behaviors studied a role-based perspective is applied. By using roles at work to understand outcomes, researchers and business executives can access a lens that is generalizable across industries, cultures, and people. Examining roles is not new; in fact, many of the employee engagement researchers refer to Kahn (1990) as providing some of the earliest work on employee engagement, and in his early research, Kahn frames engagement using role theory. Although the use of roles in learning about employee engagement is not a recent phenomenon, what is uniquely explored in this chapter is the focus on five work-related roles simultaneously in the study employee engagement. The reason we focus on more than one role at a time is because to do otherwise limits understanding of the consequences of engagement as it is practiced. It is quite possible that the employee engagement intervention has a positive effect on one role while also creating a negative effect on other role-based behaviors.

For example, let's take an example described in many practitioner articles. In this case, employee engagement leads to "above and beyond" behaviors and for the sake of this discussion we specifically define "above and beyond" as organizational citizenship behavior (doing things good for the company that are not part of the core job). Does an employee reduce the time devoted to the core job in order to find the hours needed for the "above and beyond" work? When engagement is defined as volunteering for outside work activities (an example of citizenship), there is a commitment to time that must be considered. And if the employee is doing the core job work and citizenship behaviors, what about spending time in other roles at work? Does doing citizenship behaviors have a negative impact on innovation? What happens to the employee's time needed for career development and for helping teams? The premise behind the roles lens is that employees have a limited amount of time, and language to specify what employers want employees to be engaged in doing is critical for any employee-related initiative to work.

Jessica Pryce-Jones (2010) wrote a short piece called "Protect your energy at work" where she helps the reader understand that there is a limited amount of energy that people have to use at work. The roles terminology provides a way for managers to have conversations with employees about what roles they should be engaged in. If done well, the roles lens also will help employers help employees balance their time on the right activities, not just more actions.

The roles-based research used for this chapter identifies five roles that are important at work (Welbourne, Johnson & Erez, 1998). Short descriptions of each follow:

1. Core functional job holder role (think of this as the core functional work that is in the job description or associated with one's professional occupation).
2. Entrepreneur or innovator role (improving process, coming up with new ideas, helping others implement innovations).

3. Team member role (participating in teams, working with others in different jobs).
4. Career role (learning, engaging in activities to improve skills and knowledge).
5. Organizational member role – (citizenship role or doing things that are good for the Company).

What is new and unique about applying the role-based work noted above to the topic of employee engagement is that all five roles are considered simultaneously. When looking at all of the roles at the same time, one can see that interventions can have positive impacts on behavior in one role while having negative impacts on other roles. Thus, tradeoffs are visible, and they are not evident when one role is studied in isolation. Unfortunately, most of the research done to date in the area of employee engagement has focused on one role at the expense of understanding the impact on the whole person or at least the multiple roles people engage in at work.

Linking engagement with role-based outcomes

Most of the employee engagement research to date has been focused on the predictors of employee engagement, with different definitions of employee engagement being used in almost every study. However, a number of consultant-based studies link employee engagement survey scores to overall firm performance (e.g. studies done by Gallup, Towers Watson, Mercer and other consultants). These data provide inspiration that employee engagement processes change employee behavior and then lead to organizational outcomes; however, the specific process by which these human behaviors happen is not studied.

To get a sense of how much work is devoted to defining engagement vs. understanding the outcomes, take a few literature reviews as examples. Robertson-Smith and Markwick (2009) prepared a report for the Institute of Employment Studies on employee engagement, and four of their 61 pages are devoted to the outcomes of employee engagement. In this section, they cite firm level outcomes (e.g. profitability, successful organizational change) and a number of employee-centered results (e.g. retention, loyalty, productivity, advocacy of the organization). None of the studies cited included outcomes that would be in multiple roles and then most research examining individual-level outcomes do not then go on to focus on the overall impact of those same employee-centered consequences with firm performance. The studies hint at the outcomes; however, the models and research linking employee engagement to firm performance are incomplete. Another example is a literature review by Kular, Gatenby, Rees, Soane, and Truss (2008) They have a section on the antecedents and consequences of employee engagement (pages 6-9).

A review of the research done to date shows that most of these limited studies focus on two of the roles in the role-based performance work. The main area of work seems to be addressing the core job role and the organizational member role (e.g. citizenship behavior). Although this chapter is not

intended to provide a detailed analysis of the role-based outcomes, a brief read of any of the literature reviews available will acquaint readers with the domain of work in this area.

The two most popular roles studied in the employee engagement literature appear to be the job role and the organization member role. For example, Saks (2006) examined predictors of job satisfaction and intention to quit, both of which we would classify under the core job role. The Saks research also encompassed organizational commitment and citizenship behaviors, which represent the organization member role. Rich, Lepine & Crawford (2010) published a study that examined engagement's effects on task performance (core job role) and citizenship behavior (organization member role). Harter, Schmidt and Hayes (2002) conducted a meta analysis of employee satisfaction and engagement and produced results for two job-related dependent variables, productivity and turnover. Sonnentag (2003) examined the relationship between recovery and engagement and then engagement and behaviors that come under the career or learner role. Carmeli, Waldman & Rupp(2009) examine vigor (a measure of engagement of energy) and core job related outcomes (ratings of job performance).

In terms of roles other than the core job role and the organizational member role, there is less research and mentions of the consequences of engagement on these outcomes. One reads references to practices such as Google's popular model of giving employees 20% of their time for innovation; however, no one (that we know) has studied the impact of engagement at Google on core job, innovation, team, career and organizational member-based behaviors. Systematic study of all five roles is non-existent at this point in time.

Employee engagement literature and role-based performance

The contribution of the role-based work points to one other important concern. Can organizations increase job and organization role-based performance, for example, and not affect other aspects of work? Can leaders expect employees to do more of the non-core job roles and still keep doing more of the core job role? For example, think about your own work. How easy is it to continue to come into your place of work and deliver on the core-job aspects while at the same time be a good citizen and do things for the company that are not part of your core job? And on top of these duties, can you spend time on innovative ideas, helping other teams, advancing your own knowledge and career, and taking on a few non-work related roles (e.g. husband, wife, father, church leader, community member, etc.)?

Are today's organizations asking employees to be super people who go above and beyond in everything? The notion is not sound. However, the employee engagement literature has not dealt with "engaged in what;" therefore, to date, the positive of employee engagement is featured without looking, as much, as the potential negative consequences.

The core job alone may be resulting in burnout and exhaustion

One of the other key contributions of the role-based work has been to diagnose the amount of time it takes to just do the core job role. We are finding in many of our research sites that the mere mention

of employee engagement gets middle managers up in arms. They are being asked to do more than one core job due to layoffs, and then adding the task of engaging their employees is one more burden.

If organizations really want citizenship behaviors, innovation, and other non-core job role behaviors, then they have to figure out how to support employees engaging in those behaviors. This work is needed, but it is not being done in most organizations. What we are calling for is deliberate attention to what employees should be engaged in so that policies, systems, leaders, managers and reward systems can align the rest of the organization around the role-based behaviors.

What's missing is an examination of all role-based behaviors simultaneously and links to strategy

By limiting conversations to just one or two roles at a time, as has been done to date in most of the employee engagement literature, performance is not ideally linked to business strategy. It's highly inappropriate to assume that all businesses at all times benefit from "above and beyond" organizational citizenship behaviors or that others always benefit from innovation. There may be times when employees should simply focus on their core job and not worry about the "above and beyond." In fact, there are cases when employees get so enamored with the citizenship behaviors that this activity takes time away from the job and causes negative performance outcomes for themselves and their peers.

Business strategies demand different types of roles; various departments require unique weightings of role-based work, and lastly, seasonality, task demands and more all impact what roles employees should be engaged in to drive success.

Lessons learned from role-based research:

- The non-core job roles drive competitive advantage and long-term firm performance .
- Engaging in non-core job roles takes time away from the core job.
- In many firms, regardless of what is being communicated, pay increases and promotions are based on the core job role only.
- Using the language of the roles helps managers and employees focus on what's important to drive business strategy because the roles are more concrete than concepts like "above and beyond" behaviors.
- Role-based discussions need to occur regularly because things change, and the importance of roles are altered seasonally and as business needs are altered.
- Employees want to engage in the non-core job roles, but not everyone really wants to do all of them equally.
- The non-core job roles help build strong and positive relational capital within and outside the firm (e.g. when working on teams, you get to know more people; when developing innovations, employees cross over to other departments to learn).
- The non-core job roles create challenge for employees (challenge builds positive and strong relational capital).

Core and Non-Core Roles and Firm Performance

Firm-specific competitive advantage is not gained through employees just doing only the core job (Barney, 1990). If employees spend time in only the core job, then a competitor can easily replicate what they are doing and move the work to a country where people can be trained to do the same activities for less money.

A firm's long-term competitive advantage is built with the non-core job roles. Innovating and supporting new idea development and deployment (innovator role); teams working together in unique ways, creating synergy that is not easily copied (team member roles); employees supporting the company in ways that bring in more business, being fans of the firm and spreading the word about new products (organizational member role); and continually learning so that they can improve their performance and the work of others (career or learner role) are the activities that bring firm-specific competitive advantage. This is because non-core job roles cannot be easily copied. The key to driving success, then, is knowing which non-core job roles are important for what groups of employees at what time – in order to drive business strategy and goals.

What does the employee get when they are engaged in new roles?

Reading through the mass of models, definitions and studies on employee engagement, one is struck by the lack of equity in the concept. The talk is all about employees; however, the only one appearing to get anything out of the newfound interest in employees doing more is the employer. There is no explicit contract associated with the "above and beyond" work that employees are being asked to do. Perhaps this is why we continue to see statistics from national polls showing lower job satisfaction and employee engagement levels.

This lack of connection between rewards and non-core job role behavior may be due to the fact that employers don't know what they are really getting when they start an employee engagement program. If the definition is unclear, and outcomes also are not specified, then employers are going to be hesitant to set up any type of new employment relationship based on employees being more engaged.

However, given that the origins of the role-based model have its roots in identity theory, role theory and the compensation literature, then perhaps the roles-based model can be useful in thinking through the "so what" question that is also part of employee engagement. If employees engage, then "so what" or what do they receive in return? At the organizational level, performance management systems need to change so that employees who take time away from the core job to spend on important non-core job roles are not punished. Rewards for success in non-core job roles need to be developed, implemented and communicated. Unfortunately, in many organizations, employees are expected to become "engaged" and spend more time and energy in the non-core roles at the expense of their own job performance and with no recognition or rewards.

One-more role: The non-work role

Lastly, let's not forget that there is life beyond work. This is a topic becoming more important in the employee engagement research as studies find employees, trying to do perhaps all roles and more, are experiencing burnout, health problems, disengagement and what Macey, Schneider, Barbera and Young (2009) call the dark-side of engagement. On page 137 of their book, they state: "too much of an engagement culture can also have bad consequences; including burnout, disengagement, and other negative and psychological behavioral outcomes." This caution is echoed by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz (2003), where they discuss ways to manage and replenish energy at work.

From an organization's perspective, it is very difficult to know what non-work roles people are engaged in and how they are affecting their energy levels at work. Therefore, organizations must strive to do what they can at work. What this chapter is calling for is a move to deliberate discussions about what employers need and want employees to be engaged in at work, what sacrifices, if any, employees are expected to make and then to help employees manage their own work and non-work roles in a way that does not lead to burnout and total disengagement from the organization.

There's an old saying: "you manage what you measure." One would think that the tremendous influx of employee engagement and the survey frenzy that has come with it would be good for employees. However, with all the positive talk about engagement, the research is inconclusive. It is very difficult to make adequate conclusions when the key construct in question may not even be a construct, when the performance part of the equation is in doubt, and when perhaps the combination of lack of definition and unfocused performance discussions puts employees sadly in the middle.

Conclusion

This chapter began by stating that employee engagement is an industry, not a construct. The evidence seems to point to employee engagement evolving into a term that represents overall people management at work. This is not necessarily a negative outcome of the employee engagement work; however, it has the potential to lead to much confusion in the minds of everyone working on employee engagement initiatives.

The suggestion to focus on "engaged in what" with the roles-based work as a solution to start building models and clarifying the work offers a solution for moving forward or for the future of employee engagement. The roles proposed were validated and have been used in several studies to date; therefore, they present a reasonable start toward a more complete model. In my own research, I have linked competencies to the roles and developed 360 tools using the roles. They are robust and easy to apply within businesses.

However, they may not be the complete solution for every organization. There may be roles that are critical and that are not included in this list. For some firms, they may prefer to go directly to their business strategy to answer the "engaged in what" question. Other organizations may want to focus

on competencies. Regardless of what solution is best, the aim of this chapter is to challenge the current state of the work in the employee engagement industry to move forward.

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