

A Contextual Account for Worker Engagement and Burnout

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Abstract

Worker engagement is an emergent area of organisational psychology and is thought to contribute to worker well being as well as organisational productivity. Previous research has demonstrated that worker burnout has more to do with the workplace environment than the characteristics of individual workers. It was therefore extrapolated that the same would apply to worker engagement. The current research sought to expand previous findings and tease out some commonalities in respondent experiences of engagement and burnout in the workplace.

The workplace context for respondent experience was defined by the Areas of Worklife Survey (AWS) which includes the areas of workload, control, reward, community, fairness and values. It was thought that matches or mismatches on the AWS would provide a sense of respondents' understandings of their psychological contract. Further information about the workplace was provided by responses in regard to the factors of management trustworthiness and procedural justice. A model of projected relationships of the variables predicted that favourable responses on those variables describing work context would be predictive of worker engagement, as defined by the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) and unfavourable responses would predict worker burnout, as defined by the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI). It was also predicted that management trustworthiness, procedural justice and fairness (AWS) measures would demonstrate a great deal of overlap.

The research plan involved three stages. Firstly, as most previous research had been conducted within larger organisational settings, small group interviews were conducted for people working within small and micro business settings. The second stage of the research included two phases of the same workplace survey, a pen and paper edition that surveyed teachers working in independent schools; and an online version that surveyed people representing 28 different occupational groups. Telephone interviews with 20 respondents to the survey comprised the third stage of the research.

Data analysis found that the interviews from small and micro business fitted AWS parameters well, with participants indicating that their businesses operated within very fine lines in terms of economics and staffing, yet they were rewarded in terms of control, community, and a sense of achievement. The inclusion of small and micro business categories within the subsequent survey instrument found that there were no significant differences between categories of business in regard to any of the study variables.

Statistical analyses of the data included a K-means cluster analysis of a subgroup of the combined survey respondents. This identified five groups of survey respondents based on their levels of response to burnout and engagement. The groups were: The Empowered Group; the Under Pressure Group; The Unengaged Group; The Burnout Experience 1 Group and The Severe Burnout Group. As well as demonstrating distinctive profiles in regard to the burnout and engagement measures, subsequent analyses involving the workplace context variables provided support for the research model. A three factor confirmatory analysis of the management trustworthiness, procedural justice and fairness (AWS) variables that confirmed these measures covered considerable common ground.

In addition, path analyses found that the AWS variables worked as predictors for engagement and burnout for three of the cluster groups, but other factors must be sought for an explanation of engagement in The Under Pressure Group and the Unengaged Group. In addition, The Unengaged Group, members of which reported ambivalence on the UWES and were not experiencing burnout, was found to consist of two subgroups: one of which reported matches on the AWS variables and the other reported mismatches. Data from participant interviews were also organised within the cluster groups. These supported the previous findings within this research and provided a great deal of insight into particular patterns of participant response, leading to refinement of the research model.

The current research found that AWS variables are important predictors of burnout and engagement and emphasises the substantial role played by management in promoting employee well being. The original contribution made by this research lay in the definition and detailed description of a middle group which represented 30% of respondents. Some of these people reported experiencing disillusionment with their chosen career paths. Others of this group were experiencing some discomfort within their work environments that had not translated into a burnout experience for them. This would indicate that further research might investigate the experiences of those that fall between the two extremes of burnout and engagement in order to better differentiate these variables in the interest of providing organisations with skills for promoting the engagement of employees.