

# **The meaning, antecedents and outcomes of employee engagement: A narrative evidence synthesis**

## **Summary**

The claim that high levels of engagement can enhance organizational performance and individual wellbeing has not previously been tested through a systematic review of the evidence. To bring coherence to the diffuse body of literature on engagement, we conducted a systematic narrative evidence synthesis involving 214 studies that focused on the meaning, antecedents and outcomes of engagement. We identified six distinct conceptualizations of engagement, with the field dominated by the Utrecht Group's 'work engagement' construct and measure, and by the theorization of engagement within the 'job demands-resources' framework. Five groups of factors served as antecedents to engagement: psychological states, job design, leadership, organizational and team factors, and organizational interventions. Engagement was found to be positively associated with individual morale, task performance, extra-role performance and organizational performance, and the evidence was most robust in relation to task performance. However, there was an over-reliance on quantitative, cross-sectional, and self-report studies within the field which limited claims of causality. To address controversies over the commonly used measures and concepts in the field and gaps in the evidence base, we set out an agenda for future research that integrates emerging critical sociological perspectives on engagement with the psychological perspectives that currently dominate the field.

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## **Introduction**

It is almost 25 years since Kahn (1990) published his seminal paper on ‘personal engagement’ with work, arguing that employees choose whether to invest themselves fully and authentically in their role on the basis of their experiences within the working environment. Since that time, interest in engagement has mushroomed, leading to the development of a bewildering multiplicity of definitions, measures, conceptualizations and theories of engagement (Macey and Schneider 2008).<sup>i</sup>

Arguably, engagement has become one of the most significant concepts in the management field in recent years (Crawford et al. 2014) yet, to date, there has been no systematic review that brings together and synthesises the evidence-base relating to engagement. This is concerning in light of the fact that, within the practitioner community, engagement has caught the interest of policymakers and employers keen to find new ways of leveraging high levels of performance. Large numbers of consultancy firms now offer services such as employee engagement surveys, and there are widely-cited case studies purporting to show how raised levels of engagement can lead to organizational profitability and competitiveness. In the absence of a systematic review, it is uncertain whether this advice is appropriate.

To address these issues, the aim of this article is to present the findings of a narrative evidence synthesis that focuses on the following three questions: 1) how has engagement been defined and theorized; 2) what antecedents are associated with engagement, and 3) what evidence is there that engagement is associated with employee morale and performance?

First, we explain the methodological approach adopted for the evidence synthesis. We then outline the findings relating to the meanings and definitions of engagement, and analyse the implications of these. Next, we summarize the theoretical frameworks used to ‘explain’ engagement within the literature. In the following sections, we report on the findings relating to the antecedents and outcomes of engagement. Finally, we reflect on the state of engagement research and indicate directions for future study.

## **Research Methods**

This review used a narrative evidence synthesis method adopting the guidelines established by Briner and Denyer (2010), adhering to the principles of organization, transparency, replicability, quality, credibility and relevance. We followed the five steps outlined by Briner (2011) of: planning; structured search; evaluating material against agreed eligibility criteria; analysis and thematic coding; and reporting. Narrative synthesis is regarded as an effective way to identify the story underpinning a disparate body of evidence by giving reviewers the flexibility to develop themes that bring coherence to that data (Popay et al. 2006; Briner and Denyer 2010). The topic of engagement is one that might be considered as now having reached a sufficient stage of maturity to warrant a narrative review in order to synthesise the current evidence-base and provide a foundation for advancing knowledge in the field (Jones and Gatrell 2014, p. 260).

### ***Data collection***

Using an open search approach, an initial scan of the literature produced 712,550 items from diverse sources. First, we developed an inclusive long string of relevant search terms drawn from different disciplinary fields which was then refined using the CIMO framework (Denyer and Tranfield 2009). This requires scrutiny of the research questions in relation to the *Context*

in which evidence has been gathered; the *Interventions* being evaluated/tested; the *Mechanisms* through which the intervention is expected to create outcomes, and the *Outcomes* themselves in terms of observable effects. Using this framework enabled the production of a short search string that was piloted on three databases, Business Source Complete, International Bibliography for the Social Sciences, and Scopus. At this stage, we confined our search to items written in English and published after 1990, when Kahn's article on engagement was published. The pilot search produced 5,295 items.

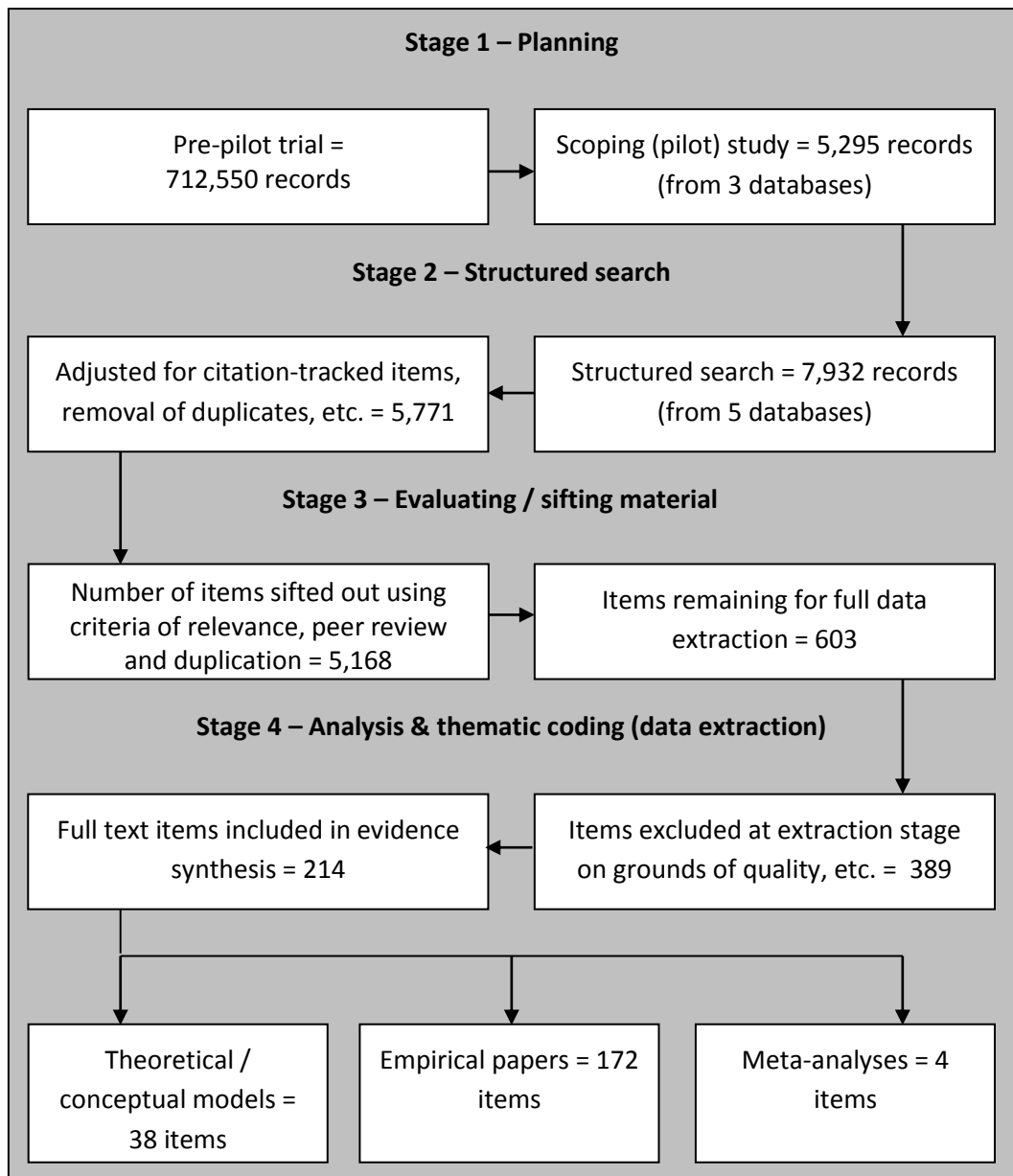
We sought advice from experts, which led to a revision of the search string to 'employee engagement' OR 'staff engagement' OR 'job engagement' OR 'organi\* engagement' OR 'personal engagement' OR 'team engagement' OR 'psychological engagement' OR 'work\* engagement OR medical engagement', and narrowing the search to abstracts only. We included two further databases, Zetoc and Nexis, to minimize publication bias (Patterson et al. 2007). Our search strategy was enhanced by citation tracking, scanning reference lists, endnotes and footnotes for additional materials not identified by the databases, and tracking new publication alerts.

The structured search took place in October 2013, producing a total of 7,932 items of literature from the five databases, which were imported into Refworks. Using the 'close de-duplication' function within Refworks reduced this number to 5,771 items for the sifting stage of the review, along with three research monographs on engagement.

The abstracts were first sifted independently by two members of the research team using a pro forma that set out quality and relevance thresholds, using a bespoke database developed in Excel Professional Plus 2010. A kappa rating was calculated from the results of pilot sifts

using all six reviewers from the team. Only when a score of .75 was achieved, indicating ‘substantial agreement’ (Viera and Garrett 2005: 361) was each member of the team then randomly assigned an equal share of the 5,771 items. Items were included for further analysis when they were published in peer-reviewed journals, in English, dated post-1990, involved the study of employees, or were theoretical items relevant to the definition of engagement. Where there was disagreement between the two reviewers, a third team member was involved. 3,121 items were excluded at this stage on the basis of being non peer-reviewed or not relevant, and a further 2,047 duplicates were removed, along with eight items not in the English language leaving 603 items to be considered for data extraction.

The abstracts of each of these were reviewed again by two members of the project team using quality and relevance criteria agreed in advance in order to minimise selection bias (Briner and Denyer 2010). Of these, 389 were excluded on grounds of *quality* or *relevance*. This left 214 items. The full text version of these items was sourced and downloaded into a shared Dropbox folder. A data extraction form was devised to record the evaluation of items and each item was read in full by one team member, who completed the data extraction form.<sup>ii</sup> The data extraction forms were then checked for potential errors or bias by the lead author responsible for writing up each section of the evidence synthesis. A Prisma - ‘preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses’ - flowchart (Figure 1) summarizes the evidence synthesis process (Liberati et al. 2009).



**Figure 1: PRISMA-style flow of information through Stages 1 – 4 of the evidence synthesis**

### *Data Analysis*

The approach to synthesizing our data mirrors that suggested by Popay et al. (2006: 11-16), who argue that a narrative synthesis should seek to explore the relationships in the extracted data within and between studies. Following Nijmeijer et al. (2014), we first analysed the key design characteristics of each study and the operationalization of the variables involved. Next, based on the research questions, we created factor clusters relating to each aspect of our

synthesis and, within each of these, generated sub-clusters through thematic analysis. Of the 214 included items, 38 were conceptual, 172 contained empirical data, and four were meta-analyses. The meta-analyses were not subject to data extraction but were used as a point of comparison.

Many of the 172 empirical items tested multiple variables, thus 89 were relevant to outcomes (morale n=47; performance n=42) while 155 were relevant to antecedents. Of the 47 studies relevant to morale, 39 used a cross-sectional survey approach; only seven used complex methods. We considered studies to be complex if they included either multiple types of respondents or multiple measurement points, or both. Only one used a qualitative (case study) approach. None of the 42 studies relevant to performance used a qualitative methodology alone, although one did use a mixed methods approach; 21 used complex methods, including seven time-lagged studies, while four used diary studies. Of 155 studies relevant to antecedents, 111 used cross-sectional approaches. Twenty-two studies were longitudinal or time-lagged studies, four were qualitative and one used mixed methods.

The main geographic source of the empirical studies was The Netherlands, from which 25 items were included, followed by USA (n=18), Finland (n=13), UK (n=10), Australia (n=9), Germany (n=9) and Canada (n=8). In total, research was conducted in 35 different countries.

### **Results: definitions and theories of engagement**

A synthesis of the literature showed that definitions could be grouped under six main headings. See Tables S1 and S2 in the supporting documentation for more detail. <sup>iii</sup>

#### ***Definitions: the evidence***

*Personal role engagement.* Kahn (1990) viewed personal role engagement as the individual's cognitive, emotional and physical expression of the authentic self at work. His definition has been operationalized in the form of quantitative personal engagement scales developed by May et al. (2004 n=4), Rich et al. (2010 n=3), Reio and Sanders-Reio (2011 n=1) and Soane et al. (2012 n=3).

*Work task or job engagement.* The second, and dominant, stream of research views engagement as an activated positive state of mind directed towards work tasks. This is founded on the notion of engagement as the opposite of burnout (the 'burnout-antithesis' approach; Shuck 2011). Building on this, the 'Utrecht Group' defined engagement as: 'a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind' and proposed that an engaged employee has a strong sense of vigor towards, dedication to, and absorption in work activities' (Schaufeli et al. 2002: 74). The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli et al. 2002) was found to be the most widely adopted measure (n=148) and has been validated for use in several languages; 42 studies used the full 17-item version; 90 used the 9-item version and the remainder between 5-16 items; one item was a qualitative paper (Bakibinga et al. 2012).

*Multidimensional engagement.* Saks (2006: 602) defined engagement as: 'a distinct and unique construct consisting of cognitive, emotional and behavioral components that are associated with individual role performance', distinguishing between job engagement and organizational engagement. Six papers used this measure; three used both job and organization engagement scales, two used the job scale only and one the organization scale only. Selmer et al. (2013) argued that engagement could be examined at the work group level and proposed a measure of work group engagement. One paper used this measure.



*Engagement as a composite attitudinal and behavioral construct.* The fourth approach views engagement as a composite attitudinal and behavioral construct. We included one measure, although we excluded a number of others for quality reasons, notably lack of construct validity and reliability. Swanberg et al. (2011) adopted the Utrecht definition of engagement but operationalised this through measures of cognitive and emotional engagement as well as behavioral engagement, thereby extending the notion of engagement beyond the strict boundaries of the construct proposed by the Utrecht Group, hence including it under this heading. This measure demonstrated appropriate psychometric properties and therefore two papers were included.

*Engagement as management practice.* Recently, scholars within HRM have begun to consider engagement as a management practice, ‘*doing* engagement’ in contrast to ‘*being* engaged’ (Truss et al. 2014). This is an emergent field of research that has to date comprised qualitative case studies. For instance, Jenkins and Delbridge (2013) argue that strategies for managing employee engagement can take ‘soft’ developmental, or ‘hard’, performance-focused approaches. Contributions within this stream address longstanding debates within the HRM field concerning unitarist and pluralist perspectives on the employment relationship (Arrowsmith and Parker 2013) or theories of organizational communication (Reissner and Pagan 2013). Three studies adopted this perspective, but there is no overarching definition or conceptualization of engagement under this heading.

*Self-engagement with performance.* One measure (n=1) was based on the notion of ‘self-engagement’, defined as the individual’s sense of responsibility for and commitment towards performance (Britt et al. 2005).

### *Definitions: analysis of the evidence*

Our review uncovered six definitions of engagement and nine validated scales. The shift away from Kahn's (1990) original social-psychological construct of 'personal role engagement' is notable. The predominant definition is that of the Utrecht Group, whose multi-dimensional view of state engagement as 'work engagement' was adopted within 86% of studies.

Drawing on role theory (Goffman, 1961) and job design theory (Hackman and Oldman 1980), Kahn (1990, p. 694) originally conceived engagement as 'the harnessing of organization members (preferred) selves to their work roles', and articulated it as a fluctuating experience alternating between full expression (i.e. engagement) and withdrawal (i.e. disengagement) of the self. He utilized a qualitative research design that examined the behavioral manifestations of engagement within two different organizational contexts. However, as Guest (2014) notes, Kahn's (1990) study did not initially generate much follow-on research until over a decade later (i.e. May et al. 2004) when another view on engagement developed and flourished.

This alternative perspective emerged from the work of the Utrecht Group, who defined engagement as 'a more persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behaviour' (Schaufeli et al. 2002, p.74). Although they drew on Kahn's (1990) theorizing, their concept of engagement fundamentally differed with regard to its nature and role as a positive psychological state. In contrast to Kahn (1990) who viewed engagement as a qualitative, behavioral and transitory experience that followed the 'ebbs and flows' of daily activities; the Utrecht Group saw engagement as a more stable and enduring attitudinal frame of mind that could be assessed through

quantitative methods. This shift in focus reflects an important paradigmatic transition that has occurred within the management discipline more generally; that of the ‘psychologisation’ of the employment relationship (Godard 2014).

What can be said about the current knowledge base on engagement in light of this? Although a large number of studies have demonstrated the validity and reliability of the UWES over a wide range of settings (Schaufeli 2014), doubt nevertheless remains about the measure. It has been argued that there is no evidence of discriminant validity of the UWES compared with job satisfaction (Viljevac et al. 2012), and that the three-factor structure of the measure is not robust (Wefald et al. 2012). Goliath-Yarde and Roodt (2011) have suggested that the measure may not be transferable internationally. Seppälä et al. (2009) showed that the 9-item UWES appeared to have more robust construct validity across occupational groups and greater time-invariance than the 17-item version. Wefald et al. (2012: 87) go so far as to state that: ‘the way engagement is typically measured may be inherently flawed ...’. Whilst the majority of studies using the UWES reviewed in this paper have tended to combine the three facets into one higher-order construct, some studies have examined engagement at the facet level and found less consistent and more complex results. These complexities are lent support by a meta-analysis (Cole et al. 2012) which found that of the three facets of the UWES, dedication was most closely related to job satisfaction and commitment. In some cases, the originators of the definition and measure have themselves argued that absorption can be omitted from the measure. Salanova and Schaufeli (2008: 118) observed: ‘mounting evidence suggests that absorption, which is akin to the concept of flow ... should be considered a consequence of work engagement, rather than one of its components ... In contrast, vigor and dedication are considered the core dimensions of engagement’.

Others have questioned the focus of engagement. It has been proposed that engagement may be directed not only towards individual work tasks, it can be conceived as a collective, team-level experience (Salanova et al. 2005; Schaufeli and Salanova 2011). Insufficient studies have been conducted to date to draw any definitive conclusions on this point. It has also been suggested that engagement can be directed towards one's employing organization (Saks 2006). This suggests intriguing possibilities about the status of the engagement construct which may be of particular interest to practitioners. It also parallels developments within the literature on commitment, which similarly suggests that individuals can experience various forms of commitment in relation to a range of areas of working life (Meyer and Allen 1997).

Most of the scales within the perspective of engagement 'as composite' were developed by survey houses and consultancies and were excluded on quality grounds. As Wefald and Downey (2009) note, these measures are proprietary and are not available for external review. This is the perspective that is perhaps most akin to what many practitioners understand as 'employee engagement' since it encompasses a range of positive attitudes towards the organization, including satisfaction with managers, communication, and resources (Swanberg et al. 2011). It remains the case that only a small minority of studies using this approach have been published in peer-reviewed journals and most efforts to operationalize engagement under this heading have failed to demonstrate its construct or discriminant validity (Guest 2014).

'Engagement as management practice' is a new and emerging area of interest (Truss et al. 2013) and, again, one that is of potentially considerable interest. This conceptualization of engagement is distinct from engagement as a psychological state, and lies more squarely within the established field of interest around involvement and participation. This area has so

far yielded a very small number of qualitative studies, yet offers rich potential for future development, bringing together the concerns of practitioners with the longstanding traditions of industrial relations scholars (Townsend et al. 2013).

### ***Theoretical frameworks: the evidence***

A wide range of theoretical frameworks have been used to ‘explain’ engagement. 65 studies (38%) explained engagement in the context of the job demands-resources (JD-R) framework, including the majority of papers that used the UWES. The JD-R framework distinguishes between resources, in the form of either job-related resources or personal resources, and demands. Resources energize employees and foster engagement which, in turn, yields positive outcomes such as high levels of wellbeing and performance (Schaufeli 2014: 26). Job demands require employees to expend additional effort which over time can cause exhaustion and lead to negative outcomes. Thus, the JD-R ‘explains’ engagement on the basis that where employees have high levels of job-related and/or personal resources, then they are more likely to be engaged with their work.

The second most widely used framework was social exchange theory (SET), used in 26 studies. According to SET, relationships between employees and employers are based on norms of reciprocity. Where employees feel that they are being treated well and valued by their employer, then they are more likely to respond by exerting effort on behalf of the employer in the form of raised levels of engagement (Alfes et al. 2013a).

Conservation of Resources theory (COR) is based on the premise that individuals seek to acquire and preserve valued resources, which can be personal, energetic, social or material resources (n=14). Resource gain spirals occur when individuals are able to build on resources

they already have, and resource loss spirals arise for those without access to strong resource pools. According to this view, the provision of resources may be particularly salient in raising engagement levels amongst those who are experiencing high levels of demand, since resources buffer their potentially negative effects (Bakker et al. 2007).

Broaden-and-build theory was used eight times. Fredrickson (2001) argues that engagement is more likely to occur when individuals experience positive rather than negative emotions, since these create the space for a broader range of thought-action repertoires. Activated positive affect is important for stimulating action (Parker and Griffin 2011). Hence, those drawing on broaden-and-build theory argue that individuals who experience positive emotions are able to draw on a wider range of behavioral responses and are more likely to be engaged.

Seven studies referred explicitly to Kahn's (1990) engagement theory, which is based on the premise that engagement is influenced by three antecedent psychological conditions: experienced meaningfulness of work; psychological safety; and experienced availability. Kahn (1990) argues that these three conditions are influenced by the nature of the job, the social environment, personal resources and energy. This perspective draws on job characteristics theory (Hackman and Oldham, 1976) and shows that some aspects of work design such as autonomy, feedback and task significance will generate the psychological conditions necessary for engagement. All the remaining theories or frameworks referred to in the studies were used in five papers or fewer.

However, these findings should be interpreted with some caution; in some cases, the theories were not made explicit in the paper. We coded 21 papers as 'unspecified' where no theory

was mentioned and it was not clear on reading the paper what the author's intention was. In other cases, we have inferred the author's intention based on available information. In many instances, authors referred to a range of different theories; for most of these, we have reported on the main theoretical frameworks only.

### ***Theoretical frameworks: analysis of the evidence***

Our analysis showed that the overriding theoretical framework used to 'explain' engagement as a psychological state is the JD-R (Schaufeli 2014). However, doubt has been cast over its status as a theory. Bargagliotti (2012) argues that the JD-R is a transactional model that cannot explain behavior and motivation in complex or adverse situations such as those dealing with medical emergencies. She states that the JD-R model 'relegates the dedication of nurses, a distinguishing characteristic of the profession, to being a transactional commodity that occurs because someone else dispenses resources' (p. 1416). Further, the evidence that resources boost engagement and demands deplete engagement is by no means clear-cut. Studies have shown that demands can serve to either reduce or increase engagement, or have a neutral effect, suggesting that perhaps challenge and hindrance demands (i.e. demands that constitute a positive challenge versus demands that give rise to constraints) may work in different ways that are not yet understood (Crawford et al., 2010; De Braine and Roodt 2011; Inoue et al. 2013).

The JD-R operates as a linear model that assumes individuals respond in rational ways to a limited range of aspects within their work setting and are driven purely to optimize their situation, but fails to take account of heterogeneous, micro and macro level contextual factors, interpersonal interactions, and emotional or irrational responses. It fails to address issues of power and politics within the workplace, and the question of who controls the

resources and demands experienced by workers (Fineman 2006). Further, the model fails to consider diversity factors. As Banihani et al. (2013) write, engagement may well be a gendered construct, with access to the antecedents of engagement potentially more readily available to men rather than women, and with the display of engagement-related behaviors potentially more integral to the expression of masculinity than femininity within the workplace. Consideration of these factors is beginning to emerge within the writing on engagement ‘as practice’, embedded within theories deriving from industrial relations and industrial sociological perspectives (Jenkins and Delbridge 2013; Keenoy 2014). However, engagement ‘as practice’ is far removed conceptually and empirically from engagement ‘as state’, and a reconciliation of the divergent viewpoints and perspectives of these two strands of research is some way off.

In sum, theorizing on engagement reflects its roots within positive psychology (Fineman 2006). Theories developed to ‘explain’ engagement have largely been set at the level of the individual. Arguably, the introduction of additional theoretical insights from organizational sociological perspectives that reflect considerations of power and politics would further enrich our understanding of engagement.

### **Results: Antecedents of Engagement**<sup>iv</sup>

155 empirical studies included reference to the antecedents of engagement. Synthesis of the results showed that these could be grouped under five main headings.

#### ***Individual psychological states***

Fifty-two studies referred to psychological states, from which we present the key findings below. The cluster of attributes that received most attention was self-efficacy, resilience, and



personal resources, in other words, the positive perceptions that individuals hold of their personal strength and ability, which were found to be positively associated with engagement (n=11) (e.g. Del Libano et al. 2012; Heuven et al. 2006). Several involved complex methods; e.g. Ouweneel et al. (2012) found in a survey at two time points that personal resources at time 1 were associated with engagement levels at time 2. Studies examining the mediating effects of psychological states demonstrated more mixed findings, e.g. Xanthopoulou et al. (2009) suggests that personal resources and engagement may be mutually reinforcing over time.

Six studies found a positive link between positive affect and optimism, or conversely a negative link between negative mood and affect, with engagement (n=6) (e.g. Balducci et al. 2011), although Bledlow et al. (2011) in a diary study proposed on the basis of the affective shift model that negative affect, when followed by positive affect, can lead to engagement. Some researchers found limited evidence of a link between recovery/relaxation experiences or self-care and engagement (n=4, e.g. Kühnel and Sonnentag 2011). Five of these studies involved complex methods.

Three studies in each of the following areas showed a positive association with engagement: psychological empowerment (e.g. Mendes and Stander 2011); meaningfulness, safety and availability (e.g. Chen et al. 2011 in a four-wave survey); job satisfaction (e.g. Anaza and Rutherford 2012).<sup>v</sup> Two studies found a negative link between burnout and engagement (e.g. Andreassen et al. 2007). Single studies have found positive links between the following factors and engagement: promotive psychological ownership; enjoyment of work; proactive personality; situational motivation; moral identity centrality; work centrality; emotion recognition; achievement striving; extraversion; affective commitment; authentic functioning;

core self-evaluation. Although two studies (e.g. Mendes and Stander 2011) found that meaning in work was associated with higher levels of engagement, Heuvel et al.'s (2009) findings contradicted this.

### ***Experienced job design related factors***

65 studies examined the association between aspects of job design and engagement. 26 focused on the link between job resources and engagement within the context of the JD-R (e.g. Bakker et al. 2007; Idris and Dollard 2011). A wide range of job resources have been examined, including supervisory support, colleague support, feedback and autonomy. All studies showed some degree of positive direct or mediated association between job resources and engagement with the exception of Ouweneel et al. (2012), who found no significant association. Seventeen of the studies used complex methods.

15 studies examined the association between job demands and engagement. The results of these studies were inconclusive. Some found a positive association between demands and engagement (e.g. De Braine and Roodt 2011), others found no association (e.g. Gan and Gan 2013), and one found a curvilinear relationship (Sawang 2012). Inoue et al.'s (2013) two-stage study, which found that the association between demands at time 1 and engagement at time 2 was attenuated after adjusting for baseline engagement lends weight to the notion that there is no strong evidence base to suggest that job demands are negatively associated with engagement.

Five studies found an association between autonomy and engagement (e.g. Xanthopoulou et al. 2009), however Buys and Rothmann (2010) found no significant link. Three studies explored the link between job crafting and engagement; all found a positive link in mediated

models (e.g. Bakker et al. 2012). Two studies in each of the following areas found a positive link with engagement: feedback (e.g. Menguc et al. 2013); job control (e.g. Swanberg et al. 2011); structural empowerment (e.g. Spence Laschinger 2010); work-role fit (e.g. Kahn 1990). Positive associations were found between the following and engagement in single studies; opportunities for development; job enrichment; role clarity; job quality; work intensity; schedule satisfaction; feelings of doing the job well; the joy of working; task idiosyncratic deals; job control and active coping. One study found a negative link between role conflict and engagement.

A few studies examined whether different forms of work were associated with higher or lower levels of engagement; Sardeshmukh et al. (2012) found a negative link between teleworking and engagement, partially mediated by job demands and resources whilst Brummelhuis et al. (2012) found a positive link between new ways of working (specifically, flexible working arrangements) and engagement with the link fully mediated by efficient and effective communication. In a study of academics, Vera et al. (2010) showed that academics whose work mainly comprised research experienced the highest levels of engagement, whereas those whose work focused on management were least engaged.

### ***Perceived leadership and management***

Thirty-six studies examined aspects of leadership or management behavior. Generally, these studies concluded that there is a link between more positive forms of leadership and higher levels of engagement amongst employees. For example, eight studies found supervisory support was linked with engagement, including two using complex methods (e.g. Karatepe 2012), although this was not replicated by Menguc et al. (2013).

A positive association between transformational leadership and engagement was found in five studies (e.g. Tims et al. 2011); four found an association between trust in manager/leader and engagement, although all of these studies were cross-sectional (e.g. Rees et al. 2013); and three found a link between authentic leadership and engagement (e.g. Wang and Hsieh 2013). In two studies, a positive association between leader-member exchange and engagement was found (e.g. Cheng et al. 2013, who examined supervisor-subordinate pairs) and a further two found that leader empowering behavior and engagement were associated (e.g. Van Schalkwyk et al. 2010). Single studies found links between the following and engagement: charismatic leadership, ethical leadership, supervisory coaching. Two cross-sectional studies found negative links between negative aspects of leadership such as abusive supervision and engagement (e.g. Sulea et al. 2012).

### ***Individual perceptions of organizational and team factors***

Fifty-three studies covered a wide range of areas at the organizational and unit/team levels. We discuss the key findings from these below. Six studies, including one using complex methods, found perceived organizational support was associated with engagement (Rich et al. 2010). Mixed results were found with regard to the psychological contract; Argawal and Bhargava (2013) found contract breach to be associated with low levels of engagement, Bal et al. (2013) in a survey at two time points found no association, whilst Yeh (2012) found a positive link between relational contracts and engagement but a negative link between transactional contracts and engagement.

Three studies found that organizational identification was associated with engagement (e.g. He et al. 2013). A further three found a positive link between perceptions of HRM practices and engagement (e.g. Alfes et al. 2013a). Two found a positive link between psychosocial

safety climate and engagement (e.g. Hall et al. 2010) and a further two between service climate and engagement (e.g. Barnes and Collier 2013). Single studies reported positive links between engagement and a wide range of factors including: person-organization fit, value congruence, communication, remuneration, organizational trust and voice. Broadly, these factors could all be classified as forms of positive organizational behavior.

Nine studies found an association between aspects of team-level engagement and support, e.g. climate and communication, and individual-level engagement, suggesting that there may be a spill-over of engagement amongst team members (e.g. Bakker et al. 2006; Karatepe 2012). Seven studies found a negative association between negative organizational experiences such as sexual harassment or interpersonal conflict and engagement (e.g. Cagin and Fish 2009).

### ***Organizational interventions or activities***

Nine studies reported on individual responses to organizational interventions, such as training and development programs. Two studies from the ‘engagement as management practice’ perspective highlighted the complexities and ambiguities associated with engagement interventions (Jenkins and Delbridge 2013; Reissner and Pagan 2013). Several studies (n=6) showed a positive link between individuals’ experiences of a range of interventions including new ways of working, forum theatre training and mindfulness training and engagement (e.g. Brummelhuis et al. 2012; Carter et al. 2010), however one other study found no change in engagement levels following a workload intervention exercise (Rickard et al. 2012).

### *Antecedents: analysis of the evidence*

Of the 155 studies that examined the antecedents of engagement, the largest number, 65, focused on the association between aspects of job design and engagement. Within this category, the majority focused on job demands or resources. This is not surprising given the dominance of the JD-R framework in the theorization of engagement. The next most significant categories of antecedents were perceptions of organizational and team factors (53 studies), and psychological states (52). 36 studies reported on the findings of studies relating to leadership and management, whilst only nine examined responses to organizational interventions aimed at raising engagement levels such as training or development programs.

Overall, these studies suggest that positive antecedents, such as job resources, positive psychological states and positive perceptions of leaders and organizations, are associated with higher levels of engagement, whilst negative antecedents such as negative mood, hindrance demands, bullying, or abusive supervision, are associated with lower levels of engagement. Although the majority adopted cross-sectional, self-report measures (n=111), there were a small number of studies using more complex methods that would permit the evaluation of causality including 22 repeated measures studies. The strongest weight of evidence from these complex studies was in the area of job resources, where 17 studies found an association between various forms of resources and engagement. There was also some evidence that leadership and management styles are associated with engagement, for instance the study by Karatepe (2012) which used complex methods, and the study of the link between leader-member exchange and engagement that involved supervisor-subordinate dyads (Cheng et al. 2013).

However, the evidence overall was mixed and some studies did not yield findings that supported expected relationships. For instance, Bal et al.'s (2013) survey at two time points found no link between psychological contract breach and engagement; several studies examining the link between job demands and engagement found that there may be a positive association between the two (e.g. De Braine and Roodt 2011).

In order to compare the impact that the different antecedents had on engagement we computed the effect sizes within each sub category. Specifically, we took the correlation coefficients reported in the studies for each antecedent measure, grouped all antecedent measures per sub category and then computed the average correlation between each sub category and engagement. Results showed that individual psychological states (.35), perceived leadership and management (.34), individual perceptions of organizational and team factors (.33) and job resources (.32) had a similarly strong impact on engagement. Organizational interventions and activities had a slightly weaker impact on engagement (.26). Job demands showed the lowest average correlation with engagement (-.08). One explanation might be that both challenge and hindrance stressors were combined in one category, and research suggests that they might in fact have different effects on individual attitudes (Podsakoff et al., 2007). Our analyses showed very similar results if only antecedent measures from complex studies were included. <sup>vi</sup>

### **Results: Outcomes of Engagement**

We examined the outcomes of engagement under two main headings, performance and morale.

## ***Performance***

Forty-two studies examined the performance outcomes of engagement. Studies fell under two main sub-headings: higher-level performance outcomes, such as organizational or team performance, and individual level outcomes, with the latter comprising three sub-sections: task performance, extra-role performance and counterproductive performance.

### *Higher-level performance outcomes*

The relationship between engagement and higher level performance outcomes was explored 13 times. The majority of reviewed studies showed a positive link between engagement and a variety of performance outcomes, such as team performance, customer loyalty and quality of care. For example, using aggregate data, Salanova et al. (2005) showed that work unit engagement was positively related to service climate, which in turn predicted customer-rated employee performance and, further, customer loyalty. Van Bogaert et al. (2013) showed that, after controlling for other factors, unit-level dedication and absorption (but not vigor) were positively related to nurse-reported quality of care by the interdisciplinary team. They did not find evidence of a relationship between any of the three engagement facets and nurse-reported quality of care at the unit or at the shift levels, respectively.

### *Individual performance outcomes*

*In-role task performance* is related to behaviors that are generally specified by the job description and contribute to the organization's technical core (Borman and Motowidlo 1997), and studies included constructs such as in-role performance, quality of care and service quality. All studies (n=24) that focused on the relationship between engagement and various forms of task performance showed a positive relationship (e.g. Leung et al. 2011; Yeh 2012; Steele et al. 2012). Of these, twelve used a third-party performance rating such as



appraisal records or company performance data (e.g. Bakker et al. 2012; Bakker and Xanthopoulou 2013); for example Yalabik et al. (2013) showed that engagement was positively related to job performance, as measured by performance appraisal ratings, and mediated the relationship between job satisfaction and job performance. These findings reflect the results of Christian et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis which demonstrated a positive relationship between engagement and task performance.

*Extra-role performance* is related to behaviors that support task performance by enhancing and maintaining the social and psychological environment (Borman and Motowidlo 1997). We have included constructs such as citizenship behavior, adaptability and innovative work behavior. Nineteen explored the relationship between engagement and aspects of extra-role performance. Of these, nine found an association between engagement and organizational citizenship behavior (e.g. Rich et al. 2010); seven found a link between engagement and innovative behavior (e.g. Alfes et al. 2013b); several studies found a link between engagement and adaptive service offering (Barnes and Collier 2013) and between engagement and knowledge sharing (Chen et al. 2011). Wong et al.'s (2010) research revealed that engagement was positively related to nurses' voice behavior. Some used complex methods such as supervisor ratings (n=3; e.g. Bakker and Xanthopoulou 2013) or time-lagged research designs (n=2), but the majority used cross-sectional, self-report methods. Nevertheless, these findings reiterate those of Christian et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis.

Two additional cross-sectional studies found a link between engagement and performance using a proxy measure of performance, namely learning goal orientation (Chughtai and Buckley 2009, 2011).

*Counterproductive performance (or deviance behaviors)* is related to behaviors that harm the organization and are an indication of an employee's withdrawal behavior (Robinson and Bennett, 1995). Some studies (n=3) found a negative association between engagement and forms of counterproductive behavior (e.g. Den Hartog and Belschak 2012).

### ***Morale***

Forty-seven studies examined the morale outcomes of engagement under two headings: wellbeing and health perceptions, and work-related attitudes.

*Wellbeing and health perceptions:* Nine studies found a link between engagement and general/psychological health, either through a positive association between engagement and positive health outcomes (e.g. Freney and Fellenz 2013), or through a negative association between engagement and poor health outcomes (e.g. Hallberg and Schaufeli 2006). Some of these (e.g. Shimazu et al. 2012) used complex methods.

Five studies found that engagement was negatively associated with stress/burnout (e.g. Buys and Rothmann 2010). A further five found links between dimensions of engagement as measured by the UWES and dimensions of burnout, showing more mixed results, e.g. Vera et al. (2010) found that vigor and dedication were negatively linked with four dimensions of burnout but that absorption was only associated with two.

Four studies found a link between engagement and life satisfaction (e.g. Shimazu et al. 2012, which used a longitudinal design), although one found that only one of the UWES dimensions (dedication) was associated with life satisfaction (Extremera et al. 2012). A

number of individual studies showed a positive link between engagement and work ability (Airila et al. 2012; Mache et al. 2013); positive affect (Sonnentag et al. 2008); and day-level recovery (Sonnentag et al. 2012). One qualitative investigation found engagement as ‘practice’ pursued for instrumental reasons may be detrimental to morale (Jenkins and Delbridge 2013).

*Work-related attitudes:* 21 studies found a relationship between engagement (as a holistic factor) and turnover intentions as an outcome (e.g. Agarwal et al. 2012; Soane et al. 2012). In addition, three studies examined the relationship between dimensions of engagement and turnover intentions as an outcome, showing mixed results. Mendes and Stander (2011) found that dedication, but not vigor and absorption, was significantly (negatively) associated with turnover intentions, whereas Høigaard et al. (2012) found that absorption, but not vigor and dedication, was significantly (positively) associated with turnover intentions. Wefald et al. (2012) found that, when job satisfaction and organizational commitment were controlled for, neither the UWES nor Britt et al.’s (2006) measure of engagement explained any additional variance in turnover intentions. They conclude that the relationship between engagement and turnover intentions is likely to be mediated by organizational commitment and/or job satisfaction.

Nine studies reported a positive link between engagement (as a holistic factor) and organizational commitment (e.g. Hu and Schaufeli 2011). Wefald et al. (2012) found that the vigor and dedication components (but not absorption) of the UWES and the physical strength dimension of Shirom’s (2003) vigor construct were significantly (positively) associated with organizational commitment. Britt et al.’s (2006) measure of engagement was not significantly associated with organizational commitment.

Several studies (n=8) examined the relationship between engagement (as a holistic factor) and job satisfaction as an outcome (e.g. Biswas and Bhatnager 2013). All of these found that engagement was positively associated with job satisfaction. An important limitation of most of these studies, even those utilizing multilevel/diary methods, is that they examined the relationship between engagement and organizational commitment and job satisfaction cross-sectionally. Hence, based on these studies, no firm conclusions can be made with regards to the temporal order of the variables. A notable exception is the study by Yalabik et al. (2013) which uses a cross-lagged design and suggests that organizational commitment and job satisfaction may act as an antecedent rather than outcomes of engagement. However, Cole et al. (2012) conducted a meta-analysis based on 50 samples and positioned organizational commitment and job satisfaction as outcome variables of engagement. Hence, evidence regarding the causal relationship between engagement and work attitudes is by no means clear cut.

Three further studies examined the relationship between the dimensions of work engagement as measured by the UWES and job satisfaction. These showed mixed results, with unclear associations between the engagement dimensions and satisfaction (Vera et al. 2010; Høigaard et al. 2012).

### ***The outcomes of engagement: review***

We classified performance outcomes as individual, or higher level (e.g. team, unit, organizational). Individual outcomes were considered under the following headings: in-role performance; extra-role performance (e.g. citizenship behavior); and counterproductive

performance (e.g. deviant behaviors). Many studies examined more than one outcome variable.

Studies examining the relationship between engagement and higher-level performance at the unit, team or organizational level supported the notion that engagement is associated with performance; however, most studies used individual perceptions of performance outcomes rather than objective performance data, and only a small number of studies used third-party data such as customer ratings.

At the individual level, some studies looking at the link between engagement and in-role performance outcomes used self-reported performance data which can be subject to error. Twelve studies used third-party performance ratings, such as co-workers, supervisors or customers to assess employees' in-role performance. These studies used multiple informants, and often also other complex methods, such as longitudinal analysis or diary studies. All showed a consistent association between engagement and performance outcomes either directly or as part of a mediated relationship. Thus, we can conclude that there is support for the association between engagement and individual task performance outcomes.

All studies focusing on extra-role performance found a link between engagement and these constructs, including citizenship behavior, innovative work behavior, personal initiative, knowledge sharing, and creativity. However, the majority of these were based on cross-sectional self-report data. Notably, however, one study by Hakanen et al. (2008) conducted over three years and involving 2,555 dentists found a positive link between engagement at time 1 and personal initiative at time 2. A small number of studies found a negative link between engagement and counterproductive behavior.

From the studies focusing on wellbeing and health perceptions, the most consistent finding was a positive association between engagement and life satisfaction. Engagement was consistently found to be negatively associated with burnout, although these studies were also mainly cross-sectional.

The most consistent finding to emerge from the studies on work-related attitudes was that engagement is positively associated with organizational commitment, however most of these studies were cross-sectional. Engagement was found to be positively linked with job satisfaction (where this was treated as an outcome measure) although only one of these studies were longitudinal (e.g., Yalabik et al. 2013). Twenty-four studies found engagement to be negatively associated with turnover intentions and four of these studies showed this association to be a mediated relationship (e.g. by commitment). Most studies were cross-sectional although some used complex methods. It was noted that in those investigations where engagement was broken down into different facets, rather than treated as a higher-order factor, the associations became more complex and tenuous.

In order to compare the relative impact of engagement on each outcome variable, we followed the same procedure as described earlier and computed the average correlation between engagement and each outcome measure. Results showed that engagement was most strongly correlated with job satisfaction (.57) and organizational commitment (.52). There was also a moderate correlation between engagement and turnover intentions (-.38), in-role (.36), extra-role (.36) and counterproductive (-.32) performance. There was also a moderate correlation between engagement and stress/burnout (-.32), whereas the correlations between engagement and general health (.28) and life satisfaction (.22) were slightly weaker. Similar

relationships were found for analyses which included complex studies only, although the correlation between engagement and stress/burnout was weaker (-.21) and no correlation could be computed between engagement and counterproductive performance, as no complex study investigated this relationship.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

### *Discussion*

The aim of this narrative synthesis was to assemble for the first time the evidence to date concerning the definition and theorization of engagement, as well as its antecedents and outcomes in terms of morale and performance. The emerging picture from this analysis is one of complexity in relation to each of these areas.

We found that the way in which engagement has been conceptualized within the literature has diverged from Kahn's original (1990) concept of personal role engagement. Even after excluding studies based on consultancy measures of engagement on quality grounds, such as the Gallup Q12 (Harter et al. 2002), along with studies based on reverse-scoring the MBI (cf Schaufeli and Salanova 2011), as many as six distinct conceptualizations still remained. As Truss et al. (2013: 2657) have remarked, engagement is a contested term that has been susceptible to 'fixing, shrinking, stretching and bending'.

The field nevertheless is dominated by the perspective of the Utrecht Group, whose UWES was used in 86% of included studies. By implication, the evidence-base on the antecedents and consequences of engagement is similarly dominated by this understanding of the engagement construct. Despite its prevalence, and the volume of evidence based on the

UWES, uncertainties remain over the construct validity, reliability and the transferability of various forms of the measure across occupational groups and national contexts (Seppälä et al. 2009; Wefald et al. 2012). This suggests that the evidence relating to engagement should be treated with some degree of caution. The original conceptualization of engagement as personal role engagement (Kahn 1990) has not gained a similar foothold within the literature, and although a few studies have built on this perspective, the evidence base remains limited. This is significant, since as Cole et al. (2012) have argued, personal role engagement may reflect a deeper and more holistic concept than work engagement.

The nascent interest in engagement ‘as management practice’ from within the human resource management and industrial relations perspectives offers a very different view of engagement far removed from its original roots within the positive psychology movement (Jenkins and Delbridge 2013; Keenoy 2014). These studies have thus far offered qualitative insights from a critical perspective into the experience of employees on the receiving end of managers’ efforts to introduce programs aimed at raising levels of engagement. In doing this, they address what Fineman (2006: 277) argues is the failure of positive psychologists to recognize ‘the social, economic and political conditions that contribute to and contain powerlessness in the workplace’. This perspective on engagement as practice highlights the limitations of the unitarist discourse that has characterized engagement studies to date and starts to move the field towards an area of focus that is paradoxically of more interest to managers, namely, the success or otherwise of interventions aimed at raising levels of engagement amongst employees, alongside employees’ subjective experience of these interventions. Only a small number of studies have thus far examined organizational interventions or activities as potential antecedents of engagement, such as specific training and development courses or communication activities. Given the scarcity of studies, their



individualistic nature, methodological limitations, and the range of interventions studied, it is difficult to draw any robust conclusions. The findings of three of these studies (Bishop 2013; Brummelhuis et al. 2012; Carter et al. 2010) suggest that there is considerable potential for such interventions to impact engagement levels, and that there may be creative ways employers can seek to develop and enhance engagement; disappointingly for practitioners, few studies have focused on this aspect.

In raising questions about identity, subjectivity and power in relation to engagement, a critical-theoretical perspective would also implicitly challenge the prevailing theoretical framework within the engagement domain, namely, the JD-R model. Under the JD-R model, engagement becomes a good bestowed by the individual in response to perceived and experienced benefits from the immediate environment. The critical perspective would, however, broaden this out to highlight the power dynamics of the employment relationship as they pertain to engagement, an area that has received scant attention to date.

In this synthesis, to address our research questions we have examined the antecedents of engagement separately from the outcomes, and we have further broken down and analyzed separately the findings relating to each potential outcome and antecedent. However, it should be noted that the majority of the studies have in fact examined a range of antecedents and outcomes, and that in many instances both antecedents and outcomes have been examined within the same study. Engagement itself has been treated as an antecedent, mediator, moderator or outcome, depending on the focus of the study. It is beyond the scope of this synthesis to examine these holistic models in any detail, given their range and complexity. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind when considering the overall findings presented here that a main focus within the literature has been on examining engagement as embedded

within a broad network of factors. Of particular concern is the lack of agreement and precision over where engagement fits within the wider attitudinal conceptual space. Some studies (e.g. Biswas and Bhatnager 2013) position engagement as an antecedent of other work-related attitudinal constructs, notably job satisfaction, organizational (affective) commitment, and job burnout, whereas others position engagement as an outcome of such constructs (e.g. Anaza and Rutherford 2012). Additionally, a small number seem to consider these attitudes as occupying the same overarching conceptual space as engagement and so control for the effects of these attitudes when investigating the association between engagement and other outcomes, such as job performance (e.g. Rich et al. 2010) or turnover intentions (e.g. Wefald et al. 2012). This divergence is perhaps symptomatic of the lack of an agreed definition and conceptualization of engagement, and highlights the need for convergence, as well as alignment between theory and empiricism within the engagement domain. As there are a limited number of longitudinal or time-lagged studies that include other work-related attitudes, it is currently unclear how these constructs are causally related with engagement.

The general conclusion of this synthesis is that there is some evidence from our analysis of effect sizes in both complex and cross-sectional studies that engagement is associated most strongly with the outcomes of job satisfaction and organizational commitment, with a moderate level of correlation between engagement and turnover intentions, in-role, extra-role and counterproductive performance and stress/burnout (negative association), and weaker associations with general health and life satisfaction. However, some have proposed that engagement may have a potential 'dark side' as over-engaged workers may risk becoming burned out, which has not yet been resolved (Schaufeli and Salanova 2011) as insufficient studies have been conducted. Overall, this might suggest that engagement may have a more

direct effect on motivation and performance rather than on health and wellbeing where there is the possibility of a curvilinear relationship, a proposition that would warrant further investigation.

In terms of antecedents, our analysis of average effect sizes in both cross-sectional and complex studies showed that individual psychological states, leadership and management, perceptions of organizational/team factors and job resources had broadly similar associations with engagement, whereas organizational interventions demonstrated a weaker association, and job demands had the weakest average level of correlation.

A number of limitations can be identified within the evidence base. First, many studies are based on cross-sectional data collected at a single time point, which makes it difficult to be sure of the direction of causality. Cross-sectional studies do not take time lags between variables into account as data on the antecedents, engagement and outcomes are collected at the same time point. This can lead to biased estimates of the effects obtained for three reasons (Gollob & Reichardt, 1987). First, the causal relationship between two variables, such as the effect of job resources on levels of engagement, takes time to unfold. Cross-sectional studies suggest however that these effects take place immediately. This is problematic from a logical perspective (Selig & Preacher, 2009). Second, cross-sectional models fail to take into account variables from previous time points, including the effect that a variable can have on itself. For example, an employee's level of engagement today is likely to be influenced by previous levels of engagement. Third, cross-sectional studies do not specify the length of the time interval under study. This is problematic because the magnitude of an effect is likely to be different for different intervals. Effects between variables obtained from cross-sectional studies are thus correlational: they cannot be interpreted as causal relationships, and although

they are related to each other, it is not possible to establish which variable is the cause and which variable is the effect.

There is also a reliance in the field on self-report data, which means that common method bias may be a factor influencing the findings of studies. Common methods bias is a source of measurement error, which undermines the validity of the conclusions that researchers can draw about the relationships between different variables (Podsakoff et al. 2003). For example, if answers to two constructs are reported by the same person and/or via the same medium (such as a questionnaire), the correlations observed between these constructs might, at least partially, be due to a systematic error exerted through the use of the same rater and/or medium. Therefore, studies that use multiple informants or objective data on performance outcomes may be more reliable in terms of pinpointing the real effects of engagement.

Second, due to publishing norms within the social sciences, replication studies are almost non-existent; consequently, many relationships between antecedents, engagement, and outcomes are examined in single studies, and so a cumulative body of evidence has not been assembled to support or refute particular propositions. Third, the majority of research within the engagement field we have reviewed in this paper has focused on engagement as a psychological state and has not examined issues of most interest and relevance to practitioners, such as the impact of initiatives aimed at raising engagement levels. Fourth, the amount of variance in engagement levels that has been found in research studies is frequently very small, even when the variance is statistically significant. Whether these differences in fact make a practical difference in an organizational setting is often unclear.

Finally, engagement has been defined and measured in a variety of ways. Alongside the dominance of the Utrecht approach, a variety of other conceptualizations of engagement have emerged which means that there is a lack of comparability, even in terms of what engagement is, that makes generalization difficult.

### ***Implications for practice***

This review has a number of implications for practice. Given that there is some evidence that higher levels of engagement are associated with positive outcomes for employers and individuals, there is some merit in considering strategies and approaches that would raise engagement levels. Studies on the antecedents of engagement suggest a broad range of relevant factors at the individual, job, team and organizational levels that may affect engagement. These include job designs that allow for autonomy and feedback on performance, and that ensure workers have sufficient and appropriate resources, alongside positive, authentic leadership styles. Given that we found a range of positive psychological states are associated with engagement, employers might also want to consider in particular strategies aimed at enhancing individual resilience and personal resources alongside reducing instances of harmful behaviors, such as bullying and harassment.

### ***Recommendations for future research***

Despite the growing volume of research on engagement, our evidence synthesis has highlighted a number of important gaps in knowledge. Out of 5,771 items identified in our search, only 172 empirical studies met the quality threshold, suggesting that a great deal of what has been written about engagement could be described as incomplete or under-theorized, leaving considerable scope for further development of the field.

First, a significant gap remains in the definition and measurement of engagement, particularly in light of recent observations that the well-established UWES measure of engagement may have important limitations. The discriminant validity of engagement compared with other positive attitudinal states has also been questioned. Further studies within psychology that seek to compare existing measures of engagement with one another, compare the relative significance of engagement and other attitudinal states, and that seek to develop and validate new measures of engagement would help address this point.

There is a need for further longitudinal research that evaluates the comparative salience of a range of different antecedents to engagement; hitherto, studies have focused on a relatively limited range of antecedents and so there is a dearth of research that compares and contrasts the potential importance of a range of antecedents for the engagement levels of individuals. This would enable researchers to develop more nuanced recommendations for practitioners, based on a greater understanding of the relative importance of the wide range of factors identified to date as being associated with engagement.

Further studies that focus on the emergent field of engagement ‘as management practice’ and, in particular, longitudinal studies that examine the impact of initiatives aimed at enhancing engagement levels would also serve to develop the field. Thus far, very few studies have examined engagement interventions, such as training and development programs specifically focused on raising engagement levels, which represents a significant gap in knowledge. It would be useful to gain further insights into what interventions have the most impact and under what conditions.

Studies that apply and contextualize the more generic frameworks around employee engagement to particular organizational settings, including more multi-method, qualitative or ethnographic research that enables deep insights to be generated into the contextual aspects of engagement would be welcome. To date, much of the literature has focused on testing psychological models and there has been less interest in the setting within which the studies take place. However, it may be that there are significant differences between industry sectors, job types or cultural settings that are relevant to understanding engagement.

Very little research within the engagement field has considered issues of diversity and equality. More research that investigates the antecedents and outcomes of engagement, as well as the experience of engagement, from the perspectives of employees from various demographic backgrounds would be welcome, notably in light of Banihani et al.'s (2013) assertion that engagement may be gendered, and the possibility that engagement may vary across age groups.

Further studies that investigate engagement at different levels: individual, work group/team and organizational, would shed additional light on the experience of engagement. Thus far, the vast majority of research has been at the individual level, and has not considered how engagement levels within and across teams may vary, for example.

It would also be useful to know more about the locus of individuals' engagement, for instance, are people engaged with their job, their work team, their organization or their profession? We found that only a small number of studies thus far have been examined job versus organizational engagement, and there is scope to develop this line of research further.

Finally, our evidence synthesis has brought to light some significant variation in the way that engagement has been conceptualized as a management practice as opposed to a psychological state. These conceptualizations are so far apart that they are in effect different phenomena. We would recommend that researchers address this important dichotomy with further studies that clarify the meaning of engagement as a construct within the emergent HRM perspective. Some helpful clarification and consistency of terminology might emerge from this body of work. Building on this, critical investigations that address for instance the power relationships in the practice of engagement or that explore the collective aspects of engagement from an industrial relations viewpoint would add to our understanding of how engagement fits within existing theories of the employment relationship.

### *Limitations*

We conducted a systematic review of the evidence, but there are a number of potentially limiting factors that should be borne in mind. First, we restricted our search to items published in English only. Second, due to the volume of material returned we were obliged to restrict our search terms and so cannot therefore be sure to have captured all studies in areas related to engagement, although our search should have ensured that any studies with the word ‘engagement’ in the abstract or title were captured.

Third, we took the decision to omit from our synthesis any publications that did not meet our quality thresholds in terms of validity and reliability. In consequence, several studies published in peer-reviewed journals that used very broadly-defined scales or scales lacking in construct or face validity to measure engagement were omitted (e.g. Zhu et al. 2009), which included papers referring to the Gallup Q12 measure (Harter et al. 2002). Also omitted were a number of papers that used partial scales to measure engagement, for instance, studies that



were theorized using the Utrecht conceptualization of engagement but which used only one or two of the three scales (e.g. Li et al. 2012; De Beer et al. 2012), and those that measured engagement by reverse-scoring the Maslach Burnout Inventory (e.g. Setti and Argentero 2011). These decisions were taken on the basis of quality, but will have limited the scope of the evidence we considered. Including these additional scales would have widened the range of definitions and conceptualizations of engagement that were included.

Finally, we did not extend the scope of our search to include items relating to involvement and participation, although arguably these bear strong commonalities with engagement ‘as management practice’. We took this decision in part for pragmatic reasons in that the number of items to be evaluated would have been so vast as to be unmanageable, as well as for theoretical reasons, because including these items would have stretched the notion of ‘engagement’ too widely. However, there is scope for future studies to evaluate these two bodies of work together.

### ***Conclusions***

In this synthesis, we have reported on the evidence accumulated in relation to the meaning, antecedents and consequences of engagement. This is the first narrative synthesis to have considered the body of evidence relating to engagement. In conclusion, despite the number of studies, there is in fact still very little about engagement that can be asserted with any degree of certainty; we do not really know what engagement means, how to measure it, what its outcomes are, or what drives up levels of engagement.

Although the Utrecht approach dominates the evidence base, the literature is in fact fractured, with so many different meanings attached to the engagement that it does not make sense at

present to talk of engagement as one single construct. There is a tension between narrowing the definition of engagement so far that it becomes of limited interest and broadening it too far so that it loses its distinctiveness, that has not yet fully been resolved (Schaufeli 2014). The emergent critical perspective highlights the need to consider engagement within a wider organizational and political context (Jenkins and Delbridge 2013; Keenoy 2014). The skeptics' view that engagement adds little or nothing to our understanding of workplace attitudes over and above more established constructs, such as commitment and satisfaction, has not yet been fully disproved (Christian et al. 2011).

What can be said now, though, is that there is a body of evidence which lends some support to the view that high levels of engagement, when viewed as a multi-faceted psychological state, are beneficial for individuals and employers, and that aspects of what might be considered good management and leadership practice may serve to raise engagement levels. In order to be sure that advice given to practitioners is founded on best evidence, there is a significant need for further research on the topic. Despite this somewhat pessimistic conclusion, the topic of employee engagement continues to show significant promise as an area for research and practice. There is much scope for further research that seeks to develop and extend current conceptualizations and theorizations of engagement through investigations that take greater account of the organizational and political contexts within which engagement is enacted and experienced.

While on the one hand, Purcell (2014: 251) recommends that 'it is best just to ignore work engagement' in light of its acontextual and depoliticized account of organizational life, and on the other Keenoy (2014: 214) dismisses the practitioner version of employee engagement as 'a multi-faceted holographic facticity', an alternative and perhaps more ambitious route

forward would be to seek to combine the varying perspectives into an overarching multi-level engagement framework. Such a framework would combine a focus on employee attitudes derived from the psychological viewpoint, organizational employment strategies and policies, and the cultural, structural and contextual factors pertinent to understanding the setting within which engagement is experienced. This would entail the kind of painstaking and time-consuming research combining longitudinal qualitative and quantitative methods that has hitherto been largely absent in the engagement arena, and would raise ontological and epistemological challenges for researchers, but would at the same time enable significant advances in the field to take place.

#### *Overview of developments since the structured search*

A number of studies have been published since we conducted the structured search in October 2013. We repeated the search using the same search string focusing on key journals in May 2015 and identified 28 relevant studies which reveal some development of the field. First, although the UWES measure and conceptualisation of engagement still appear to dominate, two new engagement constructs have emerged: team work engagement (Costa et al., 2014) and collective organizational engagement (Barrick et al., 2015). These focus on how engagement may manifest at team and organizational levels, which is important as it connects with broader debates around the practical utility of engagement. Much work is still needed to validate these constructs; particularly as both exhibit a uni-dimensional structure which jars with prior theorizing on engagement. Second, the JD-R model is still widely applied; however this theory is being more deeply and critically examined (Kane-Frieder et al., 2014). Third, there seems to be a move towards more complex research designs and analyses, which will strengthen the validity of evidence and provide insight into the boundary conditions of engagement. However, the continued lack of qualitative and intervention

studies is of ongoing concern. Despite this, there has been continued evidence that engagement is associated with higher levels of job performance (Bal and de Lange, 2014; Kane-Frieder et al. 2014; Wang et al., 2014) as well as organizational-level performance (Barrick et al. 2015). Other studies have supported the claim that work environmental factors may not have simple linear relationships with engagement, but rather these may be moderated by organizational factors such as organizational politics (Kane-Frieder et al. 2014) and organizational justice (Rayton and Yalabik, 2014; Wang et al. 2014). Lastly, there is increasing evidence that HRM practices and leadership behaviours are important (Bal and de Lange, 2014; Breevaart et al. 2014), although some have a negative and others have a positive impact, and these may exert interaction effects in their influence on engagement (Conway et al. 2015). In sum, these additional studies indicate that engagement research is entering into a more advanced, yet still uncertain stage of theoretical and empirical development.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Page 2: In carrying out this evidence synthesis a large body of practitioner literature was also identified in which engagement is approached from a number of differing perspectives. Although this material reflected the extent of interest in engagement from the practitioner perspective, it did not meet the quality criteria for inclusion in the synthesis. However, separate analysis of this practitioner literature did reveal different interests in engagement, for example engagement with the employing organization, as compared with the more psychological focus identified in the academic literature. Analysis of this separate body of literature led to the production of a number of practitioner guides which can be accessed via: <http://www.nhsemployers.org/case-studies-and-resources/2014/10/staff-engagement-review-of-practitioner-studies>



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<sup>ii</sup> Page 5: Due to the volume of data considered, we are unable to include full tables containing the extracted data in the text or in the supporting information. These are available from the authors on request.

<sup>iii</sup> Page 7: Due to the volume of studies included, we are unable to include reference to each one in the text of the paper or in the supporting information. A full list of all references identified in the structured search is available from the authors on request..

<sup>iv</sup> Page 16: We excluded demographic and personality trait variables from the analysis, as these were not considered relevant as the basis for an organizational intervention aimed at raising engagement levels. However, following Nijmeijer et al. (2014), these were taken into account where appropriate when used as control variables in wider studies.

<sup>v</sup> Page 17: Job satisfaction has also been considered as an outcome of engagement and the findings relating to this are reported in the following section.

<sup>vi</sup> Page 23: Details are available from the authors upon request.