

The Relationship between Task Characteristics and Employee Engagement

ROWENA GLORIANA GEORGE, VICTORIA JONATHAN*, FLORIANNA LENDAI MICHAEL

Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: jvictoria@unimas.my

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to identify the relationship between task characteristics (variety of skills, task identity, task significance, autonomy, feedback) and employee engagement. The study was conducted in a healthcare service in Sabah, Malaysia. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data by using convenience sampling. A total of 78 respondents participated in the study. Data was analyzed using Spearman Correlation. The results revealed a significant and positive relationship between task characteristics (variety of skills, task identity, task significance, autonomy, feedback) and employee engagement in the studied organization. This has important implications to employers. It is recommended that managers, human resource development (HRD) practitioners and supervisors provide employees with more challenging tasks, autonomy and feedback from time to time. Moreover, work designs should include how the tasks may improve employee identity and significance.

Keywords: employee engagement, task characteristics, skills variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, feedback

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INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement is vital for the success of an organization. Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) described an engaged employee as characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption. Based on the 2018 Trends in Global Employee Engagement Report by Aon Hewitt (2018), although Malaysia recorded an increasing percentage of employee engagement level (63%), it is still lower compared to other neighboring countries like Indonesia (76%) and the Philippines (71%).

Highly engaged employees are passionate and deeply connected to their work (Robbins & Coulter, 2012). They show proactive behavior (Salanova & Schaufeli, 2008), increased satisfaction, commitment, organizational citizenship behavior (Saks, 2006) and encourage effectiveness (Luthans & Peterson, 2002) as well as team performance (Torrente, Salanova, Llorens & Schaufeli, 2012). The lack of engagement may cause burnout among employees and increase the intention for them to leave the organization. Robbins and Coulter (2012) described a disengaged employee may come to work but lacks the energy and passion in completing his or her work. Employee disengagement may be caused by many factors, including emotional, mental and physical work demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Since employee engagement is important to organizational performance, it is crucial to identify ways to enhance engagement levels among employees.

Understanding task characteristics that are available for the employees is necessary because it is one of the strategies to improve employee engagement (Farndale & Murer, 2015). Task characteristics include skills variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Hackman and Oldham (1975) define task characteristics as follows: skills variety is the degree to which the job requires a variety of activities and involves many different skills and talent; task identity refers to the extent a job has a beginning and an end with a tangible outcome for the worker; task significance refers to the perception on the importance of a worker's job, autonomy relates to the extent the job encourages the worker to have freedom and independence and feedback refers to the extent the job activities provide the worker with direct and clear information about his or her performance. Although previous studies have explored the direct relationship between work characteristics and other work outcomes (Mat Ali, *et al.*, 2014; Ahmad Zawawi & Mohd Nasurdin, 2017), studies that examine the role of task characteristics and employee engagement is still limited.

Moreover, the workplace is now diversified with different age groups working together. According to a study of 2019 Millennial Manager Workplace Survey by Akumina Inc, millennials will make up 75% of the entire US workforce by 2030 (Akumina, 2019). In a study by Gallup Organization, 60% millennials are shown to be open to the prospect of changing jobs and only around 29% of millennials show engagement levels at work, while 16% are actively disengaged while 55% of millennials are not engaged at the workplace (Gallup Organization, 2016). Since this generation of workers contribute to the workforce and will increasingly dominate the workplace, new strategies and approach to engage them needs to be considered.

Furthermore, this study was conducted in a healthcare setting. The engagement of healthcare employees is important as they are the ones having direct interaction with customers or patients. Hence, employee engagement in the healthcare service is essential because it is associated with the satisfaction and safety of patients as well as to retain skilled and talented employees (Ganesan, Azli & Fageeh 2017). Additionally, Rad and Moraes (2009) suggested that advancements in medical technology and increasing demands for sophisticated patient-care delivery methods required healthcare employees to be highly skilled while still being engaged in their work.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine the relationship of task characteristics and employee engagement. This study may contribute to our understanding of antecedents of employee engagement in a local healthcare context. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of the study. The framework is based on Hackman and Oldham (1975).

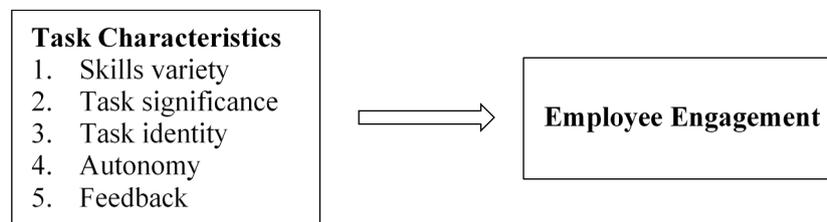


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the application of Hackman and Oldham’s task characteristics model to employee engagement

MATERIALS & METHODS

Population and Sampling

A quantitative method using survey questionnaire was conducted for this study. The population was the employees in one healthcare service located in Sabah. There were 298 employees, including those in the clinical (i.e. emergency unit, pharmacy unit, pathology unit) and non-clinical sections (i.e. medical record unit, administration unit). A formula derived by Luck, Taylor, and Robin (1987) was used to calculate the minimum sample size, which was 54 respondents. Since there was time constraints on the part of the participants, a convenience sampling approach was used to carry out the study. A total of 78 questionnaires were collected and analyzed.

Instrument

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. Section A consisted of demographic questions. Section B contained 17 questions measuring employee engagement dimensions: vigor (6 items), dedication (6 items) and absorption (5 items). The measurement items were adopted from Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, and Bakker (2002). Task characteristics items were adopted from Hackman and Oldham (1975), Morgeson and Humphrey (2006), and Oliveira (2015). There were 31 items consisting of skills variety (7 items), task identity (6 items), task significance (6 items), autonomy (6 items) and feedback (6 items). The Cronbach alpha value for each variable is shown in Table 1. Based on the results, all variables exceeded 0.7, indicating reliability for the measures used.

The questionnaire used 5-Likert Scale, ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Table 1. Summary of research instrument

Measures	Total Items	Source	Cronbach Alpha, α
Employee Engagement	17	Schaufeli, <i>et al.</i> (2002)	0.879
Task Characteristics			
• Skill Variety (7)	31	Hackman and Oldham (1975);	0.910
• Task Identity (6)		Morgeson and Humphrey (2006);	0.708
• Task Significance (6)		Oliveira (2015)	0.895
• Autonomy (6)			0.928
• Feedback (6)			0.850

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Demographic information of respondents

The total respondents for the study were 78. Findings showed that most of the respondents in the study were female (64%). The majority was in the age group of more than 46 years old (32%), and married (76%). Most of the respondents (33%) were nurses while the administrative group represented only 13% of the respondents. The respondents were generally experienced, with a majority (35%) having more than 21 years of working experience.

Table 2 shows the value of means, standard deviations and correlations among the variables in the study. Since the data was not normally distributed, Spearman correlation test was performed. The test showed that task characteristics were significantly correlated with employee engagement.

Table 2. Mean, Standard Deviation and Spearman Correlation Test between task characteristics and employee engagement (N=78).

Section	Mean	SD	r_s	p
Skills variety	4.0	0.32	0.53	0.00
Task identity	4.0	0.36	0.49	0.00
Task significance	4.15	0.42	0.44	0.00
Autonomy	3.97	0.35	0.43	0.00
Feedback	3.98	0.34	0.25	0.03
Employee engagement	3.91	0.32	-	-

The results show that skills variety ($r_s = 0.53$, $p < 0.05$), task identity ($r_s = 0.49$, $p < 0.05$), task significance ($r_s = 0.44$, $p < 0.05$), autonomy ($r_s = 0.43$, $p < 0.05$) and feedback ($r_s = 0.25$, $p < 0.05$) were positively and significantly related to employee engagement. This finding is consistent with previous studies by Mohd Nadhir and Puteh (2017), Alzyoud, Othman and Mohd Isa (2015) and Bakker and Demerouti (2008). When an employer considers the motivational aspect of work design for their employees, the employees may respond by being more engaged in their work. Consequently, the Job Characteristics Theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1975) postulated that employees may be more invested in their work when their employers provide them with more freedom and choice in carrying out their tasks.

In the skills variety dimension, the result shows that when skills variety increases, the level of employee engagement also increases. The ability and opportunity for employees to use different skills at the workplace may reduce boredom, thus, increase their engagement. The findings were consistent with several research findings. According to Kim, Han and Park (2019) a job that involves the use of a variety of skills will provide an employee with a sense of challenge in their work, therefore, increasing their motivation, effort and involvement in the tasks

at hand. Similarly, Grant (2008) described skills variety emphasized the utilization and opportunities to learn, thus, enhancing employees' engagement.

In terms of task identity, employees who were given the opportunity to start, manage and complete a particular task by themselves would be more motivated, hence, feel a higher level of engagement. In a study of 95 workers in a telecommunication sector in Malaysia, Bon and Shire (2017) found that task identity intrinsically motivated employees to achieve work goals, thus, encouraged employees to be more engaged. When employees feel that the work that they do provides them with an identity, they feel that their work is more meaningful and with a purpose, hence employees are more motivated to stay with the task and accomplish it (Sonnentag, 2017).

For task significance, different tasks are perceived to have different levels of significance. For instance, the job of a nurse may be perceived to have different significant level and impact to that of a bus driver. If an employee feels that the tasks are unnecessary, it may lead to low task meaningfulness and low motivation (Semmer *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, when the employees who feel that their work is meaningful and has impact on others, they will feel more responsible to complete their work. As such, task significance provides intrinsic motivation that increases the employee's level of engagement, and feeling of meaningfulness towards their job (Peccei, 2013). The level of task significance is able to enhance the employees to be more dedicated for example, in putting in more effort to work on a task or to stay focus for longer periods on a task give. The employees' efforts at work will reflect their engagement level (Suzuki, Tamesue, Asahi & Ishikawa, 2015).

For the dimension on autonomy, the results showed a significant and positive relationship between autonomy and employee engagement, which indicates that a higher autonomy level at work will increase employee engagement. In this context, autonomy provided the employees with opportunities to make their own decision about how to do their work, decide the order to complete their work, and decide the schedule of their work. The findings are consistent with studies conducted by several researchers (Krishnan, *et al.*, 2015; Yong, Suhaimi, Abdullah, Rahman & Nik Mat, 2013; Crawford, Lepine, & Rich., 2010). Autonomy provides employee with the freedom and independence to participate in the organization's decision making process (Yong *et al.*, 2013), hence, may provide the employee with a feeling of being appreciated since the organization considers their viewpoints.

In terms of feedback dimension, the finding indicated a positive significant relationship with employee engagement. Feedback on employees' performance is important in order for them to know that they are doing well or otherwise. Essentially, when employees are being provided with feedback on specific work or task, the engagement level was found to be higher (Breevaart, Bakker & Demerouti, 2014). The study's finding was consistent with results from Alzyoud, *et al.* (2015) and Mohd Nadhir and Puteh (2017). According to Alzyoud *et al.*, (2015), performance feedback received by the employee will enhance the work environment and influences the level of employee contribution.

IMPLICATIONS

This research has shown the influence of task characteristics towards engagement of employees. There are a few implications that could be derived from the results of the study. Firstly, employee perception of their task characteristics is important to encourage employee engagement at work. A positive perception of task characteristics (i.e. skills variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback) lead to employees' engagement towards their work. Therefore, the employer may need to consider designing jobs that incorporate these task characteristics to promote further engagement of their employees, for example, giving more challenging tasks and providing more autonomy. Secondly, since feedback is important in engaging employees, employers or human resource development (HRD) practitioners may provide training in communication to enhance feedback skills among managers, supervisors and employees. Managers and supervisors should provide consistent and timely feedback so that employees are aware of their performance. When employees feel that management is paying attention to their work, they are likely to be more motivated and engaged.

CONCLUSION

This study showed that there is a significant relationship between task characteristics (variety of skills, task identity, task significance, autonomy, feedback) and employee engagement in a healthcare service in Sabah. Employee engagement is important to ensure a sustainable and successful performance of the individual employee and ultimately the organization. Therefore, it is important for managers, HRD practitioners and supervisors to provide challenging tasks, autonomy and feedback to their employees from time to time. Furthermore, work designs should include how the tasks may enhance employee identity and how employees' work impact others.

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