Employee Engagement at a Thai Manufacturing Company
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Abstract:
This paper principally applied Kahn’s research entitled Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work (1990) as a framework in an attempt to discover psychological conditions of engagement that are important to employees at a manufacturing company based in Thailand.

Kahn defined personal engagement as the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances. He also proposed that when the three psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability are present, individuals are likely to be personally engaged in their work roles. The author experimented whether or not the framework holds true in a Thai manufacturing environment.

A quantitative survey was conducted to investigate a correlation to describe the relationship between the three psychological conditions and employee engagement, and between employee engagement and proposed consequences, namely, task performance, organizational citizenship behaviors and withdrawal behaviors.

Keywords: Employee Engagement

1. Introduction
In recent years, there has been increasing attention on the new human capital management construct called Employee Engagement. There were several arguments on the definition of Employee Engagement and numerous proposals on how it contributes to the overall success of organizations (For example Gallup and Towers Perrin). It also resembles previous constructs such as employee satisfaction and organizational commitment. However, previous literatures proposed that engagement is distinguishable from several related constructs. Specifically, although aspects of older constructs that connote affect and feelings of energy are relevant to engagement, those facets of the older constructs connoting satiation and contentment are not.

Albeit there were ambiguities regarding the definition, Kahn’s work (1990) provided insightful explanation and served as a framework to conduct this research. Specifically, this research investigates whether Kahn’s framework holds true in a Thai manufacturing setting. It also examines relationship between engagement and possible consequences, namely, task performance, organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) and withdrawal behaviors.

2. Employee Engagement and the Three Psychological Conditions
Although there are several definitions of employee engagement, Kahn's definition is applied in this research since the definition is most clearly distinguishable from other similar constructs. Kahn (1990) proposed three dimensions of engagement. In particular, he defined engagement as the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances. Alternatively, he defined disengagement as the uncoupling of selves from work roles; in disengagement, people withdraw and defend themselves physically, cognitively, or emotionally during role performances. He also proposed that when the three psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability are present, individuals are likely to be more engaged in their work roles.

During studies conducted at a summer camp and an architectural firm, Kahn generalized three psychological conditions based on his analysis of conditions on each participant’s reported moment of engagement. He suggested that
individuals seem to unconsciously ask themselves three questions in each role situation: (i) How meaningful is it for me to bring myself into this performance? (ii) How safe is it to do so? (iii) How available am I to do so?

Psychological meaningfulness can be viewed as a feeling that one is receiving a return of investments of one’s self in a currency of physical, cognitive or emotional energies. People experienced such meaningfulness when they felt worthwhile, useful, and valuable. In their roles, they felt able to give to others and to the work itself and also able to receive. Kahn proposed that three factors generally influence psychological meaningfulness: task characteristics, role characteristics, and work interactions. 

(Hypothesis 1: Psychological meaningfulness will be positively related to employee engagement.)

Psychological safety occurs when individual is able to show and employ one’s self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career. People felt safe in situations in which they trusted that they would not suffer for their personal engagement. Using descriptive statistics, Kahn suggested four factors that had most direct influence on psychological safety: interpersonal relationships, group and intergroup dynamics, management style and process, and organizational norms.

(Hypothesis 2: Psychological safety will be positively related to employee engagement.)

Psychological availability is the sense of having the physical, emotional, or psychological resources to personally engage at a particular moment given the distractions people experience as members of social systems. Kahn suggested four types of distractions that influenced psychological availability: depletion of physical energy, depletion of emotional energy, individual insecurity, and outside lives.

(Hypothesis 3: Psychological availability will be positively related to employee engagement.)

3. Proposed Outcomes

The driving force behind the increasing attention to employee engagement is that it has positive consequences for organizations. Although he did not include outcomes in his studies in 1990, Kahn (1992) proposed that engagement leads to both individual outcomes (i.e. quality of work and individuals’ own experiences of doing that work), as well as organizational-level outcomes (i.e. organizational growth and productivity)\(^7\). Many consulting companies have suggested positive consequences of engagement such as better retention, lower absenteeism, fewer accidents, theft and breakage, or higher operating efficiency and productivity, superior customer delivery and bottom-line superior profitability (Fleming, 2009). Here three possible outcomes of engagement, namely, task performance, organizational citizenship behaviors and withdrawal behaviors are investigated.

(Hypothesis 4: Employee engagement will be positively related to task performance.)

(Hypothesis 5: Employee engagement will be positively related to organizational citizenship behaviors.)

(Hypothesis 6: Employee engagement will be negatively related to withdrawal behaviors.)

4. Method

Sample The survey was conducted at a manufacturing company based in Thailand. Participants were 203 employees from different departments, accounting for 11.7 percent of the total employees. 65 percent of the participants were responsible for manufacturing functions (operators, engineers, foreman, and first-line supervisors). 43 percent of the respondents were male and 57 percent were female. The average age of participants is 37 years old (SD=8.3), ranging from 22 to 58 years old. The average tenure is 12 years (SD=9.2), ranging from 1 to 35 years.

Procedure The data for this survey was collected directly by the author. Participation was voluntary and participants were informed that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous. Small sessions comprising 5-15 participants were conducted whereby questions and clarifications regarding the questionnaire were facilitated.
After the questionnaires were collected, a brief group interview was conducted in each session to obtain relevant qualitative information regarding current working conditions. However, 9.8 percent of the questionnaires distributed were incomplete; these were excluded from the analysis.

**Measures** Participants rated themselves on each dimension shown in Figure 1. Unless indicated otherwise, all items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale with anchors (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. Giving equal weight, responses to each item were averaged across each dimension to form scale scores.

**Employee Engagement** Participants rated themselves on the eighteen-item engagement scale. An overall engagement scale was created by averaging all items across the three dimensions. Cronbach’s alphas for the physical, emotional and cognitive dimensions were 0.698, 0.781 and 0.746, respectively. **Psychological Meaningfulness** Based on Kahn’s (1990) description, participants rated a twelve-item measure ($\alpha=.795$). **Psychological Safety** Based on Kahn’s work, participants rated a ten-item measure ($\alpha=.842$). **Psychological Availability** Participants rated an eight-item measure derived from Kahn’s work ($\alpha=.704$). **Task Performance** Participants rated a seven-item scale developed by William and Anderson (1991) ($\alpha=.798$). **Organizational Citizenship Behaviors** A sixteen-item measure of OCB published by Lee and Allen (2002) was completed ($\alpha=.883$). **Withdrawal Behaviors** Participants were asked to report on a five-point scale ranging from “never” to “almost always” how often in the past year they have performed eleven of-the-job behaviors ($\alpha=.738$). This measure was developed and validated by Lehman and Simpson (1992).

5. Results

Table I presents the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the study variables. As expected, the three psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability are positively related to engagement. Engagement is significantly positively related to task performance and OCB, and negatively related to withdrawal behaviors. To test the study hypotheses, multiple regression analyses were conducted.

### Table I. Means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and intercorrelations of study variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Overall Engagement</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>(0.892)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Psychological Meaningfulness</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>.569*</td>
<td>(0.795)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Psychological Safety</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>.560**</td>
<td>.529**</td>
<td>(0.842)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Psychological Availability</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>.510***</td>
<td>.402**</td>
<td>.513**</td>
<td>(0.704)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Task Performance</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>.613***</td>
<td>.507***</td>
<td>.409***</td>
<td>.434***</td>
<td>(0.798)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 OCB</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>.687****</td>
<td>.601***</td>
<td>.539***</td>
<td>.425***</td>
<td>.684***</td>
<td>(0.883)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Withdrawal Behaviors</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>.513***</td>
<td>.398***</td>
<td>.356***</td>
<td>.324***</td>
<td>.359***</td>
<td>.370**</td>
<td>(0.738)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Antecedents of engagement** Multiple regression analysis was conducted in which engagement measure was simultaneously regressed on the three psychological conditions. As shown in Table II, the results indicate that the three psychological conditions explained a significant amount of the variance in overall engagement ($R^2=.46, p<0.05$). With respect to the study hypotheses, meaningfulness (.33, $p<0.05$), safety (.25, $p<0.05$) and availability (.27, $p<0.05$) were all significant predictors of engagement. These results provide support for H1, H2 and H3.

**Consequences of Engagement** Multiple regression analyses were conducted in which each of the proposed consequences was regressed on overall engagement. As shown in Table III, the engagement measure explained a
significant amount of variance in task performance ($R^2=.45, p<0.05$), OCB ($R^2=.469, p<0.05$) and withdrawal behaviors ($R^2=.259, p<0.05$). While engagement significantly positively predicts task performance (.673) and OCB (.687), a withdrawal behavior is negatively predicted (-.513). These results provide support for H4, H5 and H6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Overall Engagement</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Meaningfulness</td>
<td>0.33**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Safety</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Availability</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F$</td>
<td>58.72**</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Notes: **p<0.05; and values in table are standardized Beta coefficients

Table II. Multiple regression analysis predicting employee engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Task Perf</th>
<th>OCB</th>
<th>Withdraw</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall Engagement</td>
<td>0.673**</td>
<td>0.687**</td>
<td>-0.513**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R$ Square</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F$</td>
<td>166.6**</td>
<td>179.497**</td>
<td>71.717**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: **p<0.05; and values in table are standardized Beta coefficients

Table III. Multiple regression analyses for engagement predicting consequences

Discussion

In recent years there have been increasing interests in employee engagement especially among practitioners. However, there are limited empirical evidences to support the claim of the numerous merits of engagement. The lack of such evidences lead many to consider this emerging area as just another management fad. This study empirically investigated, in a manufacturing context in Thailand, antecedents and consequences of engagement.

The framework used in this study is based upon Kahn’s (1990) work whose analyses were inferred from interviews of participants at a summer camp and an architectural company. This study was conducted at a manufacturing company based in Thailand. The participants in this study were predominantly operators working in manufacturing lines. Notwithstanding the differences in task nature with that of Kahn’s work, the results suggest that there is a significant positive relationship between the three psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability and overall level of engagement. Furthermore, the results of the analyses imply that higher level of engagement relates positively to desirable consequences, namely, task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors. Lastly, albeit relatively lower proportion of variation explained by the relationship, the results proposed that engagement is negatively related to undesirable consequence, namely, withdrawal behaviors. According to participant interviews, one of the withdrawal behaviors which was rated comparatively highly (closer to “almost always”) by participants, i.e. chatted with coworkers about non-work topic, help create environment that foster psychological meaningfulness (“Being around my coworkers makes me feel worthwhile”) and psychological safety (“Organization environment provides flexibility and consistency that allows me to try without fear of the consequences”). Indeed, multiple levels of influences – individual, personal, group, intergroup and organizational – shape engagement. It is the responsibility of the organization to ensure that favorable conditions exist so that individuals bring and employ their selves physically, emotionally and cognitively.
