

## **Below the Salary Line: Employee Engagement of Non-Salaried Employees**

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*This exploratory empirical phenomenological study looks at employee engagement using Kahn (1990) and Maslow's (1970) motivational theories to understand the experience of non-salaried employees. This study finds four themes that seem to affect employee engagement: work environment, employee's supervisor, individual characteristics of the employee, and opportunities for learning. Discussion of impact and contribution to the HRD field are discussed.*

Keywords: Engagement, Satisfaction, Productivity

In the United States, 146 million people go to work every day (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). Employees desire positive feelings about their work experience (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2002) going beyond traditional definitions of job satisfaction, "an individual's attitude towards their work" (Brayfield & Rothe, 1951), and instead takes the more global perspective of employee engagement. Employee engagement is defined as an employee's "involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work" (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002, p. 269). Employee engagement is derived from "work that stretches a person without defeating him; work that provides clear goals, unambiguous feedback, and a sense of control" (Emmott, 2006, p. 35). Engagement occurs when employees know what to expect, have the resources to complete their work, participate in opportunities for growth and feedback, and feel that they contribute significantly to the organization (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). When employees are engaged, they are emotionally connected to others and cognitively vigilant to the direction of the team (2002).

For many organizations, the difference between disengaged and engaged employees is the difference between success and failure (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2002). An estimated 71% of the global workforce goes to work disengaged (Crabtree, 2004). This engagement gap is costly for employers. Showing up for work consistently is one of the first ways an employee can exemplify engagement. "Engaged employees average 27% less absenteeism than [employees] who are...disengaged" (Wagner & Harter, 2006, p. xiii). Engaged employees affect the customer experience as well. Employees who are more engaged in their work score 12% higher on customer satisfaction-rating scales (2006). In the case of productivity, "business units in the top quartile on employee engagement averaged \$80,000 to \$120,000 higher revenues or sales...per month" (p. 14).

### **Research Questions and Purpose Statement**

Engaged employees are happier employees, produce increased profit, exhibit high levels of creativity, experience less absenteeism, have fewer on-the-job accidents, and positively affect business unit level outcomes (Harter & Wagner, 2006). Despite the benefits of having highly engaged employees, "there is a surprising dearth of research on employee engagement" (Saks, 2006, p. 600). Current trends in hiring more independent, non-salaried employees (Beck, 2003) as well as the depleting talent shortage across the globe (Frank, Finnegan, & Taylor, 2004) have demanded a new look at the employability and sustainability of this growing workforce population. A non-salaried employee is defined as independent, contract labor paid by the hour (Beck, 2003). As non-salaried employees shape the emerging workforce landscape, companies and Human Resource Development (HRD) professionals across the globe should know how to cultivate positive employer-employee relationships as well as how to retain this important cross section of the workforce (Beck, 2003). Little research has investigated the experience of being engaged from the employee perspective and little is known about how non-salaried employees experience engagement or how engagement affects their experience and performance at work.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how non-salaried employees describe the experience of being engaged at work. Three in depth interviews are used to explore emergent themes about how participants experience engagement. The phenomenon of interest is engagement at work of non-salaried employees. Through this research, we do not pretend to reach generalizable conclusions about employee engagement, rather, we hope to open reflection and dialogue, grounded in preliminary data, that gives voice to non-salaried employees who are often not looked at in the traditional employee engagement literature. The research questions are: (a) how do non-salaried employees describe the experience of being engaged at work and (b) what factors contribute to the feeling of engagement? We delimit this study to the specific purpose of exploring the experience of three non-salaried workers and their experience with the phenomenon of interest. First, a conceptual framework of employee

engagement is presented. Second, the method of data collection and analysis is explained. Lastly, the findings of factors that contribute to the creation of employee engagement are described.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Kahn's (1990) seminal grounded theory of employee engagement and disengagement posited that engagement is the concurrent expression of one's preferred self and the promotion of connections to others. Disengagement is the withdrawal of one's self and of one's preferred behaviors, promoting a lack of connectedness, emotional absence, and passive behavior. The choice to express or withdraw one's authentic self is the emotional, social, and physical act of employee engagement. Humans become drawn into their work, physically and emotionally, in ways that display how they experience work. "Self expression underlies what researchers refer to as creativity, the use of personal voice, emotional expression, authenticity, non-defensive communication, playfulness, and ethical behavior" (Kahn, 1990, p. 700). Workers chose to "express and employ their [authentic] selves...or withdraw and defend their [authentic] selves" at work (Kahn, 1990, p. 692).

Constructs important to understanding engagement and disengagement at work are meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Meaningfulness is defined as the positive "sense of return on investments of self in role performance" (Kahn, 1990, p. 705). Safety is defined as the ability to show one's self "without fear or negative consequences to self image, status, or career (Kahn, 1990, p. 705). Availability is defined as the "sense of possessing the physical, emotional, and psychological resources necessary" for the completion of work (Kahn, 1990, p. 705). Employee engagement or employee disengagement develops to the degree that these psychological constructs can be fulfilled (Kahn, 1990). Herzberg's two-factor theory parallels Kahn's engagement theory by proposing autonomy in being, recognition of self and work, and meaningful understanding as factors that increase an employee's intrinsic willingness to engage in work (Latham & Ernst, 2006). Intrinsic factors (i.e. importance of contribution, personal growth), rather than extrinsic factors (i.e. compensation, company image) actually motivate employees to be engaged in their work. The identification and satisfaction of individual needs was recognized as important components to engaging employees in Kahn (1990) and Herzberg's (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) theories; however, an understanding of individual needs are never fully explored or linked in conceptualization. Maslow's (1970) theory of motivation provides a straightforward conceptual framework for understanding basic human needs and gives context to the conceptualization of employee engagement and disengagement. Additionally, Porter's work in understanding "low level jobs" (Latham & Ernst, 2006, p. 182) confirms the necessity for understanding human needs as it relates to engagement at work as conceptualized in Maslow's (1970) motivation theory. The importance of Maslow's motivation theory in relation to employee engagement is the conceptualization of each of the basic needs. Structurally, needs are first arranged in order of potency (Reeve, 2001). Second, the more foundational and critical to survival the need, the sooner it appears in the hierarchy (2001). Third, needs are filled sequentially from lowest to highest, thus establishing a hierarchy of needs grouped into two categories, survival and growth. These needs, individually listed as physiological, safety, belonging and love, esteem, and self-actualization needs are the basic needs of human beings (1970). The esteem need is defined as the "desire for a stable, firmly based, usually high evaluation of [the self], for self-respect, or self-esteem, and for the esteem of others" (Maslow, 1970, p. 45). Self-actualization is defined as the completion of activity that intensely satisfies (Maslow, 1970). The drive to self-actualization parallels the concept of employee engagement as used in Kahn's (1990) work by conceptualizing the drive to ultimate self fulfillment, a deep need for internal, emotional satisfaction that all humans long for; employees long "to become everything one is capable of becoming" (Maslow, 1998, p. 3).

## **Method**

Phenomenology seeks to understand the experience of individuals (Creswell, 2003), beginning with silence (Psathas, 1973) and ending with interpretation (Biklen & Bogdan, 2007). In this case, the meaning that participants give to events that predate or coexist with the sense of being engaged as well as with the activities they perform at work is the phenomenology under study. All employees interviewed for this study worked for a multinational service corporation ranked by Forbes magazine as one "America's Most Admired Companies." The Director of Operations for the company agreed to be the key informant for the study. A key informant is someone with whom researchers have an especially good rapport with and is particularly helpful, insightful, and articulate in providing data (Biklen & Bogdan, 2007). One of the researchers and the key informant are both service providers at the same institution and had developed a previously existing professional relationship before any research had begun. This existing relationship made it possible to interview participants using corporate facilities and work time to perform research.

The first participant was a male working in his current position for three months; we will identify this participant as John throughout the duration of this research. The second participant was a female working in her current position for 10 years; we will identify this participant as Ashley. The third participant was a female working in her current position for 3 years; we will identify this participant as Sarah. This study was implemented in Miami-Dade County, Florida, where 60.6% of the population is Hispanic (US Census Bureau, 2004). Coincidentally, the three participants willing to give interviews were Hispanic. While this homogenous factor can be considered a limitation of the study, we make no claim that our conclusions are generalizable to the larger Hispanic population in Miami-Dade County, the global workforce, or that we reached saturation.

Data was collected through face-to-face, in-depth interviews lasting an average of 1 hour and 17 minutes. A 30 question conversational guide was used to help the interviewer focus on the agreed research topic. A conversational guide is a structured set of questions that gives direction to the starting points of conversation (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The guide included questions about expectations at work, general feelings about work, resources at work, the use of skills and/ or talents at work, supervision, co-workers, and general questions about an employee's satisfaction level. Interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy independently by each researcher.

Transcripts were read and coded by each researcher twice. During the first round of readings, one researcher identified 26 patterns and the second researcher identified 21. During analysis, a journal was used to record observations and reflections about emergent patterns and experiences of the researchers. A second round of readings was completed with the researchers together using a spreadsheet to compile patterns capturing the participants' experience of engagement at work. After the second reading, the initial patterns identified in the first round were collapsed into four emergent themes. Emergent themes were presented to three different groups for peer review. The first group was comprised of graduate students studying qualitative research at an accredited, large, public, urban University. The second group, a writing for publication class, was comprised of graduate students studying writing. The third group included professionals in HRD, professors, and graduate students studying education at a writing club. Feedback was received at all three venues and has been incorporated into this paper.

### **Influencing Themes of Employee Engagement**

Four emergent themes identified through the analysis of data are, (a) work environment, (b) supervisor, (c) characteristics of the employee, and (d) opportunity for learning.

*Work Environment.* A work environment is defined as the physical and emotional characteristics of the workspace, including relationships with colleagues and typical job functions. How someone feels about the environmental climate where they work effects their level of engagement (Brown & Leigh, 1996). Cooperation, support, trust, and partnerships were ways participants described their idea of an engaging environment. Early in our interview, John recalled a disengaging experience in a previous job, describing that work experience as a cutthroat, aggressive environment. When asked about how this type of environment affected his motivation, John shared the following about his experience. "It's awful, because I took work home with me. I take it all up here, so I mean, if it's bad at work, you take it home with you." When probed deeper, John disclosed further and compared his previous work environment to his current work environment. "I worked in some places where you get along with the person, but it is still work, you know. It's I like you, but don't mess up, cause... you know, you'll get fired. It's not like that here".

The varying experience of safety from one environment to another affected John's experience of work. A fear of being fired was the sole motivating factor in the first job described. John could not move beyond the fear that he could lose his job with the next mistake. As John describes his current position, you could hear the relief in his voice. Safety needs, such as feeling protected, being free from fear, having a feeling of order, and knowing ones limits are potent needs for human beings (Maslow, 1970) and are essential to the foundation of motivational theory as operationalized in Brown and Leigh (1996). Employees cannot disregard the need to feel safe at work; without fulfilling this need, they can become paralyzed mentally. An employee may show up for work physically, but mentally and emotionally they are not present. Feeling safe also contributes to the developing feeling that one is a part of something bigger, such as a family unit.

*Supervisor.* A supervisor is defined as any person who is charged with the direct management of an employee. Frontline supervisors do much of the engagement work. "The root of employee disengagement is [often] poor management" (Gopal 2003). Employees see their companies from the same perspective they see their supervisors (Galford & Drapeau 2003). In our interviews, each participant's supervisor came up as a motivating force for being engaged or disengaged at work. John shared about how he sees his current supervisor and how this view is either a motivating or de-motivating force for him. Being new to the industry, John needed a developmental leader who could help him learn about the business. "[Supervisors are] the ones that evaluate me, they're the ones that, you

know, demand that I do a good job...I feel like they both have been unbelievable, so far. They have been good. Probably the best bosses that I've had". John chose the words to describe the experience with his supervisor carefully. The mention of "evaluation", "demand", and an "unbelievable" supervisor may not traditionally be paired together. For John, this current supervisory style allows for a feeling of safety, high expectations, and an ability to grow. The feeling of having a great supervisor, maybe the "best bosses" he has ever had, have an impact on his experience of work. When asked how this supervisor behaviorally portrayed their style, he shared that he had seen his supervisors "roll up their sleeves" to lend a hand when lines got long or teams were short staffed for the day. "[As an employee] we don't mind getting our hands dirty, ... I guess they see that, cause I know, I've seen it, like I saw today [one of our supervisor's] was working at [a restaurant] because they're short staffed. That's awesome". The experience of seeing his supervisor work behind the counter with staff gave confidence to John and reinforced a positive supervisory relationship, even though they were not directly involved with the scenario. John went on to share that throughout his experiences, he had never worked with a supervisor so willing to lead by example.

*Characteristics of the Employee.* Unique characteristics, beliefs, and work philosophies are ubiquitous among humans. A characteristic of the employee is defined as a perception that the employee has about himself or herself and that this actively applied to life roles. Two unique characteristics emerged as patterns throughout or data collection. They were (a) the need for challenge and (b) an entrepreneurial spirit. The need for challenge referred by the participants talked about being challenged affect performance and engagement. For instance, Ashley shared stories about her previous experience working in several restaurants and large hotels before her current position. She spoke of looking for challenge in her work and seeking opportunities to grow. Ashley went on to share that if she challenged herself, she would learn more on the job, and potentially be promoted. When asked about why she felt a need for challenge Ashley expressed feeling an innate characteristic that was hard to capture in words. "There is something inside of me, I want to keep going, I want to learn more, I want to jump higher. I want to be challenged". After sharing this information, she went on to talk about moving from company to company often in search of a challenging environment, hoping to stretch her knowledge and continue learning more. Sarah alluded to her motivation at work and the need for challenge. Sarah recalled that she looks for challenge to keep occupied and in continuous development. "I am a very quick learner, so I get bored really fast if I don't have challenges, if something is not challenging, it's boring". Probing deeper with Sarah, we asked about a challenge she had recently faced. Sarah shared a story about learning to work on a cash register for the first time in a very commanding and confident tone. She felt like she could try anything and liked the idea of being challenged daily at work. "I had never worked on a register on my life. I just figured it out. Let me do it. That doesn't bother me at all". The Entrepreneurial spirit sub theme refers to the desire expressed by the participants to own their own businesses in the future. They were each taking this time to learn as much as they could about the business to better prepare them for opening their own venture in the future. Both participants spoke excitedly about the future and the opportunities the future seemed to hold for them. Sarah shared the following about her dream of owning a business in the future: "honestly I hope to open my own restaurant. I would love to manage a restaurant, like it would just be mine, just mine...and I think that would be great...(long pause), I would really like having my own restaurant." John shared his hopes of owning a business in a shy, almost hidden voice. While John could see his dream, he had not embraced the idea fully and was still exploring the potential reality, but it was there. "I kind of secretly always wanted to open up a restaurant and try to open up a bar." John seemed unsure of his future concretely, but had a dream and was consciously self-aware of it, turning it into motivation to learn and challenge at work. This self-awareness and the ability to be self-aware in the workplace, while not tangible, was important to the experience of engagement at work for these participants.

*Opportunity to Learn.* Opportunities to learn something new at work were important to all three participants. Learning is defined as "a change in behavior, cognition, or affect that occurs as a result of one's interaction with the environment" (Werner & Desimone, 2006, p. 33). A learning environment results from opportunities to learn at work and is defined as an environment that allows employees to gain new skills and knowledge "without fear or negative consequences to self image, status, or career" (Kahn, 1990, p. 705). Learning is foundational to the employee experience and occurs instinctively, although at times unconsciously throughout the course of employment. Employees seek information about the experiences they encounter to make meaning of what they have experienced. Participants expressed learning more as an incidental experience rather than an act they set out to accomplish everyday. Incidental learning is defined as ever-present unconscious learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Ashley walked us through her promotions at an earlier company. She shared her experiences of working in the dish room, next being moved to prep chef, and lastly finding herself in the kitchen as an assistant, but was never formally trained or asked to attend professional development to gain the skills to continue advancing. "Every time they kept moving me, they was like, giving me some more money, more benefits, but by that time I did not even care about the money, because I was happy because they were moving me and I was learning." For Sarah,

learning emerged as an important pattern in her motivation for coming to work and performing her best. Although unable to define the learning that was occurring, when asked how she ranked the feeling of learning with other tangible artifacts such as pay, Sarah shared that learning for her was the most important variable right now. She saw her career aspiration of opening a business as primary motivation that enhanced the motivation for work. “For me right now, experience is more important than money, because this is my career. I want all the experience I can get.”

### **Discussion of Impact**

As employers of non-salaried employees, supervisors should be more aware of the environment they created in relation to a feeling of safety and meaningfulness (Kahn, 1990; Maslow, 1970) at work as well as the formal and informal learning opportunities presented to employees, no matter their level. The feeling of learning something new everyday at work, no matter conscious or unconscious kept our participants motivated. The learning theme was not a surprise, however, the role incidental learning plays into the experience of learning was. Each of us would have expected that meaningful learning would be overt through professional development opportunities, however, our participants showed us that learning can take place all the time throughout any activity the employee is engaged in. Additionally, the importance of the supervisory role was reinforced such as the literature suggests (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Harter & Wagner, 2006); this research bolsters those findings.

As an outcome of engagement, our participants each talked about the significant role a supportive workplace environment played in their lives. John and Ashley called those they worked with a second family while Sarah eluded to the significance her co-workers played in her daily life. There was a clear distinction that to each of them, feeling comfortable with those they worked beside and feeling that those they worked with cared about who they were as a human being was a motivating factor. The literature supports the feeling of family at work (Rath, 2006), however it is our experience that this workplace it hard to find and even harder to foster. As an output of engagement, a family type workplace emerges and the emotionality of employees takes on a whole new dimension. Supervisors at all levels should pay attention to the environments they create and directly influence. As the literature suggests, this population of non-salaried staff are becoming more critical to the functionality and operation of business (Beck, 2003). Attending to the findings of this exploratory study could help employers take advantage of the benefits of employee engagement.

### **Contribution to the HRD**

Clear expectations, unambiguous feedback, and worker resources have all been considered key conditions to creating an engaged work environments (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Harter & Wagner, 2006); our participants did not refer to these constructs during the interview. This exploratory phenomenology then, offers a new perspective to articulate interventions that lend themselves to the creation of engaging work environments, reducing turnover and increasing employee motivation. Our findings suggest that to enhance engagement someone must empower opportunities for learning in employees, establish a rapport between supervisor and employee (i.e. build trust), and encourage the understanding of unique employee characteristics. Staffing practices, recruitment process, career development plans, and on the job trainings should be designed to secure learning environments, challenge thought, and encourage the development of individual employees, and lastly, provide opportunities for relationships to develop.

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