Learning from the Past, Looking into the Future: The Reciprocal Relationship between Self-Directed Learning and Employee Engagement

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The demands of a changing world put pressure on employees to be fully engaged and to learn continuously in the workplace. A recent global study found that as high as 40% of employees are either passively or actively disengaged (AON Hewitt, 2013). Like employee engagement, self-directed learning (SDL) is important to organizations because of the imperative of continuous learning to be successful in today’s rapidly changing environment. Despite the significance of engagement and self-directed learning in the workplace and their relationship to organizational performance, the relationship between the two has not been studied. This paper explores the reciprocal relationship between employee engagement and self-directed learning as presented in the literature. The research questions guiding this literature review paper are the following: What is the relationship between employee engagement and employee SDL? What organizational factors influence both employee engagement and SDL? What personal characteristics of employees impact both employee engagement and SDL?

Methodology

The methodology used for this paper was a literature review of peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books on the topic. Sources cited include empirical studies, literature review and conceptual/theoretical papers. Electronic databases and online resources used included Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, ABI/Inform Complete Plus, PsycInfo, Sage, ProQuest, Wiley Online Library, JSTOR, and PsycInfo. No date limits on publishing periods were used in electronic searches, and only sources in English were referenced. Key words used in online searches for this paper were employee engagement, workplace engagement, self-directed learning, workplace learning, and human resource development.
Employee Engagement

Employee engagement, also referred to in the literature as engagement and work engagement, is relatively new, with the majority of literature tracing back to Kahn’s (1990) conceptual foundation (Shuck, 2011; Christian et al., 2011). Kahn (1990) introduced engagement as a unique motivational concept whereby employees choose to invest themselves holistically into their work (1990). This multidimensional investment involves the individual’s simultaneous application of their “physical, cognitive and emotional energies to work role performances” (Rich et al., 2010, p. 617).

Engagement first captured the attention of practitioners and was embraced by some in the corporate realm as a panacea to improve organizational performance (Saks, 2006; Macey and Schneider, 2008). As a result, academic scholars found themselves playing “catch up” to determine if industry claims of the importance of engagement to organizational success could or would be substantiated when subjected to empirical scrutiny and examination (Macey and Schneider, 2008; Shuck et al., 2013). The perceived similarity to other attitudinal constructs led to considerable debate in the literature over whether engagement offered anything new and distinct to the research field (Macey and Schneider, 2008).

Maslach et al. (2001) posited that the three characteristics of engagement, energy, involvement, and efficacy are direct opposites of the three burnout dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness. A similar view was asserted by González-Romá et al. (2006), finding that burnout’s exhaustion and cynicism were opposite of engagement’s vigor and dedication. Engagement has also been shown to be negatively related to the intention to quit (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Some researchers argued engagement was subsumed within the constructs of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job involvement (Shuck et al., 2013). However,
empirical testing distinguished the constructs of job involvement and organizational commitment from engagement (Hallberg and Schaufeli, 2006).

Shuck et al. (2013) articulated conceptual differences to further delineate engagement from prior constructs. Job satisfaction is an overall attitude or stationary expression of fulfillment, whereas engagement “is a progressively forward moving state” (p. 17). Similarly, job involvement is a “judgment about the job itself” and is distinguishable from engagement which refers to “enthusiasm toward the job” (p. 19). Finally, although engagement and organizational commitment may share common antecedents, including “perceived organizational support, supportive organizational culture, and leadership,” engagement connotes energy as opposed to one’s affinity toward an organization (p. 23). As compared to these other constructs, the unique quality of engagement is that it connotes action or agency (Rich et al., 2010).

Arguably, the conceptual framework of engagement has been sufficiently distinguished to demonstrate its freedom from the so-called Jangle Fallacy (Kelley, 1927; Macey and Schneider, 2008; Christian et al., 2011).

Engagement refers to “a psychological connection with the performance of work tasks rather than an attitude toward the features of the organization or the job” (Christian et al., 2011, p. 91, emphasis in original). Three psychological conditions are central to Kahn’s (1990) theoretical concept of employee engagement: meaningfulness, safety, and availability.

Meaningfulness is a sense of a return on investment from one’s efforts, such as feeling “worthwhile, useful, and valuable” (p. 704). Rich et al. (2010) asserted that “perceptions of organizational and work factors related to tasks and roles are the primary influences on psychological meaningfulness” (p. 620). Kahn (1990) described two components of work roles that influence meaningfulness, identity and status. Identity related to how well the work role fit
in terms of how one wanted to see oneself and status related to having power to shape one’s environment (Kahn 1990).

According to Kahn (1990), psychological safety is the “sense of being able to show and employ one’s self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career” (p. 708). The primary influences on psychological safety are perceptions of social systems related to support and relationships (Rich et al., 2010). People feel safe when they trust “they will not suffer for their personal engagement” (Kahn, 1990, p. 708) and when their role performances are “clearly within the boundaries of organizational norms” (p. 712).

Psychological availability is the “sense of having the physical, emotional, or psychological resources to personally engage at a particular moment” (Kahn, 1990, p. 714). According to Kahn (1990), psychological availability is dependent on how secure people feel about their work and status. Rich et al., (2010) described availability as the individuals’ confidence in their abilities and resources and their perceived ability to cope with workplace demands.

Each of the three psychological conditions described above were found to be significantly positively related to engagement (May et al., 2004). Other researchers have delineated engagement into multidimensional models, depicting trait engagement, state engagement, and behavioral engagement as related to, but distinct from, each other (Macey and Schneider, 2008). The overarching concept is that people have traits and that these traits along with workplace conditions affect the employee’s psychological state. This psychological state then directly influences engagement behavior (Macey and Schneider, 2008). Kahn’s theory was that more engaged employees bring more of themselves, or their full selves into performing their work.
The actual manifestation of employee engagement has been referred to as a more “stirring” performance (Kahn, 1990); an amount of discretionary effort (Saks, 2006); high levels of personal investment in the work performed (Christian et al., 2011); vigor, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74); and investing the “hands, head, and heart” (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995, p. 110). Macey and Schneider (2008) described employee engagement as “organizationally focused adaptive behavior” that results from a job or organizational challenge (p. 18). Engagement behaviors are “innovative behaviors, demonstrations of initiative, proactively seeking opportunities to contribute, and going beyond what is, within specific frames of reference, typically expected or required” (p. 15). Researchers have asserted that employees who are engaged will also be willing to expand their roles beyond job descriptions to extra-role behavior, such as performing extra-role tasks (Rich et al., 2010; Macey and Schneider, 2008). Although Rich et al. (2010) showed a positive relationship between engagement and organizational corporate behavior, not all authors agree that engagement includes behaviors outside of the main job responsibilities (Shuck and Wollard, 2010).

The discussion above illustrates that the definition of employee engagement is not well settled. However, Shuck and Wollard’s (2010) definition captures the meaning of engagement as defined by other authors: “employee engagement is about adaptive behaviors purposefully focused on meeting or exceeding organizational outcomes” (p. 103). Employee engagement is an individual-level construct, with behaviors manifesting from a personal decision to engage (Shuck and Wollard, 2010, p. 106). The three psychological states of meaningfulness, safety, and availability identified by Kahn remain at the center of the engagement theory. The potentially positive organizational outcomes from employee engagement lead to the compelling question of what factors influence the decision to engage.
Self-Directed Learning (SDL)

Employee development through self-directed learning may be relevant to understanding employee engagement. Self-directed learning (SDL) refers to a self-initiated process where the learner assumes responsibility for setting a goal based on a self-assessed learning need, selecting appropriate resources to meet the need, engaging in learning, and evaluating the experience (Knowles, 1975). Tough (1979) stated that self-directed learners make choices about what they learn, how they learn, and the pace at which learning takes place. Candy (1991) defined self-directed learners as those individuals who identify, assess, and select appropriate learning resources, ask critical questions, and evaluate their own learning. SDL is differentiated from other types of learning in that it empowers the learner to determine both what and how to learn. For the purpose of this paper, self-directed learning is generally understood to mean informal learning experiences that the learner plans, carries out, and evaluates.

Raemdonck et al. (2012) describes SDL in the workplace as “a tendency to take an active and self-starting approach to work-related learning activities and situations and to persist in overcoming barriers and setbacks to learning” (p. 574). As Clardy (2000) noted, through self-directed learning, employees can acquire new knowledge and skills needed to accomplish assigned work. Self-directed learning can take the form of informal learning (unstructured, experiential, and noninstitutional) and can involve others as resources, such as subject matter experts, coaches, and mentors (Ellinger, 2004; Knowles, 1975).

Numerous studies have been conducted to better understand self-directed learning in the workplace. Clardy (2000) found that the conditions of employee motivation to act and learn occurring simultaneously with a workplace opportunity for change or innovation may positively influence self-directed learning activity. In a study of Korean companies, Park and Kwon (2004) found self-directed learning was related to employee perceptions of four work environment
factors: valuing of individual differences, teamwork, risk taking and innovation, and individual involvement in decision making. Smith et al. (2007) looked across Australian industry sectors to investigate the role of organizational leaders in developing employee self-directedness in learning. The authors concluded that leader recognition of the value of SDL and their active encouragement is critical to the development of SDL at all employee levels. Raemdonck et al. (2012) studied relationships between self-directed learning and variables at the individual and company levels within thirty-five Belgium companies. The authors found personal characteristics, including a proactive personality, striving for knowledge work, and past learning initiative, were positively related to self-directed learning. At the organizational level, job characteristics of task variety and growth potential were significant predictors of self-directed learning (Raemdonck et al., 2012).

As the research indicates, the psychological state that leads one to initiate self-directed learning activities is influenced by factors at both the individual and organizational levels. A key feature of understanding whether an individual will likely participate in SDL involves the degree to which an individual has the attitudes and skills associated with psychological readiness for SDL. The Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS), developed by Guglielmino (1978), measures psychological readiness for SDL. Analysis of the SDLRS responses shows whether eight factors associated with SDL are present. Among these factors are openness to learning opportunities, initiative and independence in learning, and informed acceptance of responsibility for one’s own learning.

Durr et al. (1996) found that readiness for SDL may vary across occupations and also noted the relationship between employee readiness and the level of support existing in the workplace for participating in self-directed learning activities. More recently, the following
organizational factors have been found to positively correlate with SDL: job complexity, task variety, worker autonomy, growth potential of the job (Raemdonck et al., 2012); innovation and change (Clardy, 2000); and leader recognition of the value of SDL (Smith et al., 2007). Straka (2000) also found a correlation between self-directed learning and social relatedness, receiving acknowledgement from superiors and co-workers and feeling integrated in the work community.

Like engagement, SDL can be described in terms of personal traits, organizational factors, psychological state, and behavioral outcomes. Readiness for self-directed learning may or may not lead to self-directed learning behavior. The next section will present the individual characteristics and organizational factors that are similar in employee engagement and self-directed learning, thus highlighting the possible relationship between them.

**Relationship between Engagement and SDL**

The research on employee engagement and SDL reveals parallels between the two constructs. For both constructs, the psychological state is influenced by workplace conditions and self-perceptions of individual characteristics and abilities. The psychological state relates to agentic behavior, including the willingness to engage in work and to participate in self-directed learning activities. Further, there may be a reciprocal relationship between the two constructs. That is, engaged employees may be more likely to participate in self-directed learning and participating in self-directed learning may lead to employee engagement. This section will analyze how many similar personal characteristics and organizational factors relate to both engagement and self-directed learning. The personal characteristics influencing engagement and SDL will be analyzed using Kahn’s psychological states of meaningfulness, availability, and safety. Organizational factors influencing engagement and SDL will be analyzed by focusing on those relating to the work itself, the employee’s role, and workplace conditions.
Personal Characteristics in Engagement and SDL

Psychological meaningfulness relates to how employees see themselves in the workplace in terms of both how well the work aligns to employee values (identity), and how much control or autonomy employees can exercise over the work environment (status). Employees are more likely to be engaged when they believe in the work outcomes and when they have a degree of power over their work environment. Self-directed learning also relates to both identity and status. Self-directed learning intentions may result from an individual’s perceived need for self-improvement to meet new or changing work requirements (Clardy, 2000). Participating in self-directed learning may enhance the employee’s self-perception and give the employee a sense of return on investment. Self-directed learning, by definition, provides opportunities to exercise autonomy over workplace learning activities, related to status.

Kahn (1990) asserted that experiencing rewarding interpersonal interactions with co-workers that involve mutual appreciation, respect, and positive feedback leads people to feel valued. As learners reach out to others as resources, rewarding interpersonal interactions could also be a part of self-directed learning. Engaged employees are more likely to exhibit extra-role behavior, such as participating in self-directed learning. Xanthopoulou et al. (2008) describes a reciprocal relationship whereby employee learning or personal development may help them achieve work goals, causing a sense of fulfillment which will cause employees to become more committed and engaged.

Kahn’s (1990) second psychological state, safety, connotes supportive and trusting interpersonal relationships, supportive management that allows for risk taking and experimenting, and working within organizational norms. Self-directed learning has also been positively correlated with supportive management and trust in the workplace. Self-directed
learning activities provide opportunities for building interpersonal relationship and for experimenting by learning and trying new skills and abilities.

Kahn’s psychological state of availability encompasses employee perceptions of their knowledge, skills, and capabilities (Shuck, 2011). According to Shuck et al. (2013), employees’ evaluations of the adequacy and availability of resources is dynamic, taking place repeatedly, and the outcomes can change depending on the employees’ perceptions of a given situation at a certain place and time. Self-directed learning is also a dynamic activity, with the employee controlling the types of activities, their intensity and duration. Enabling employees to gain or to improve skills needed in the workplace through self-directed learning may reduce feelings of insecurity which detract from psychological availability.

Xanthopoulou et al. (2008) described the relationship between job and personal resources as reciprocal. The authors asserted, “When employees experience work engagement, they tend to easily recognize, activate or create resources” (p. 242). Activating or creating resources extends to self-directed learning activities. Therefore, engagement may lead to self-directed learning and self-directed learning, by increasing psychological availability, may lead to employee engagement.

*Organizational Factors in Engagement and Self-Directed Learning*

The previous section described the reciprocal relationship between employee engagement and self-directed learning by comparing individual characteristic through the lens of Kahn’s engagement construct of psychological meaningfulness, safety, and availability. In addition to these individual characteristics, several organizational factors have been identified as supportive of both employee engagement and self-directed learning. This section will focus on
organizational factors, analyzing the work or tasks, the work role, and the work conditions to show the relationship between employee engagement and self-directed learning.

Considering the work itself, Christian et al. (2011) found that task variety and significance are related with engagement. Task variety and job complexity are also believed to have a positive influence on SDL (Reamdonk et al. 2012; Ellinger, 2004). However, Noe, et al. (2010) warned that although a challenging job can serve to increase employee engagement, if a job becomes too challenging, the resulting anxiety may diminish psychological safety and therefore reduce or preclude engagement behavior.

As for the employee’s role in the organization, employee autonomy is related to both SDL (Raemdonck et al., 2012) and engagement (Xanthopoulou et al., 2008). Similarly, the ability to take risks has also been identified as important for both employee engagement (Rich et al., 2010) and SDL (Park and Kwon, 2004).

The work conditions encompass policies, structures, and the relationships with leaders and co-workers. Supervisory coaching, defined as helping employees solve problems, has been identified as an antecedent to employee engagement (Xanthopoulou et al., 2008). Similarly, research has illuminated the importance of the workplace manager in supporting SDL by fostering a culture of learning, encouraging employees to participate in SDL, and developing policies and practices supportive of SDL (Smith et al., 1997). May et al. (2004) noted the importance of managers encouraging employees to develop their skills in order to achieve employee engagement. Opportunities for professional development have also been linked to employee engagement (Xanthopoulou et al., 2008). SDL activity could be categorized as an opportunity for professional development. Therefore, participating in SDL activity could increase the likelihood of engagement.
The analysis of employee engagement and self-directed learning in the context of organizational factors supports the prior analysis of individual characteristics that a reciprocal relationship may exist. A workforce is more likely to be engaged in a supportive work environment that offers opportunities to learn, when work role performance includes participating in learning, and when jobs are challenging and provide some degree of autonomy. A workforce is likely to participate in self-directed learning when there is management support, the employee experiences a challenge to completing the work with current skills, and the employee has access to learning opportunities. An engaged workforce is more likely to participate in learning to improve or change their skills to better meet job requirements.

**Implications for HRD Research and Practice**

Overall, the relationship between employee engagement and self-directed learning is not well defined. This literature review discusses several parallels between employee engagement and self-directed learning and indicates there may be a reciprocal relationship between the two. If employees are engaged, they may be more active in participating in self-directed learning opportunities. This participation in SDL may, in turn, positively influence their engagement. More studies are necessary to better understand the specific relationship between these two constructs.

The individual characteristics and organizational factors presented in this literature review implicate the role of HRD professionals in developing effective practices, policies, and structures to enable and promote both learning and engagement. The role of HRD is to create working and learning environments in which employees can flourish. By creating policies and procedures, and by facilitating leadership, learning and change, HRD professionals can positively impact employee engagement and provide for the professional development of the
workforce through self-directed learning to achieve organizational objectives. This will allow organizations to learn and perform to be competitive in the global market.

References


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