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EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Definitions, measures and outcomes

Discussion report

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(1) Introduction

What's the state of play with employee engagement?

Employee engagement has been an established management topic since the early 1990s and over the last two decades has become firmly embedded as a core area of HR. It is a fixture of management consultancy, management research, CIPD qualifications and university teaching and, most importantly, HR practice, where dedicated employee engagement specialists are not uncommon. Employee engagement has also become a focal point for executive teams, boards and investors, who often recognise its importance as an indicator of organisational health and use it to inform decisions, including on executive pay.[1]

A critical point in its development in the UK was the government-commissioned MacLeod Review, *Engaging for Success*,[2] published in 2009, which cemented it as a focal point in the Government's industrial strategy, signalled its importance to the business and research world and led to an energetic and influential movement, *Engage for Success*, which promotes management practice that fosters employee engagement *'as a better way to work that benefits individual employees, teams, and whole organisations'*. The rise of research on the topic has been enduring and supported by state funding,[3] and the use of engagement metrics in organisations has risen to the extent that they are one of the three most used employee metrics for informing CEO bonuses and long-term incentive plans.[4]

However, in the world of HR concepts, employee engagement is a tricky customer, often seen as contentious and woolly. Numerous definitions and measures exist, and it is often treated inconsistently, being described one moment as a broad umbrella term for an overarching area of people management and the next moment treated as a precise construct that can be convincingly pinned down and measured.

Aims of this report

This report aims to give HR and related professionals a stronger understanding of employee engagement and a clearer basis to act on it, building the credibility and impact of those specialising in this field. By applying the principles of evidence-based practice, we explore the outcomes of employee engagement and develop guidance on how to best think about it and how to measure it robustly. We do not provide a 'silver bullet' or one-size-fits-all approach to employee engagement. Rather, we argue it's important to tailor assessment and activity to organisational priorities, and thus set out to give an understanding and guiding principles that help develop an approach to employee engagement that is scientifically convincing and practically useful.

Employee engagement is a contentious area with champions and critics aplenty and fundamentally different perspectives. In this report we attempt a balancing act in engaging with the different camps, in particular taking on board valid criticisms without losing the value of the idea of employee engagement. After all, it appears to have galvanised efforts to adopt progressive management practices in a way that few concepts have.

Our focus starts with employee engagement, but the most robust constructs have relatively narrow definitions and practitioners' interests often go beyond these. Thus, we broaden out our focus to include other constructs that are often grouped under the umbrella of engagement, namely organisational commitment, organisational identification and motivation. These three constructs, while different, are key aspects of employee engagement. Specific questions we consider include:

- How strong is the body of research on employee engagement compared with other related constructs?
- What are the most reliable and useful measures?
- What's the best available evidence on whether and how engagement predicts performance?
- What does the body of research tell us more generally about work motivation?

Our research approach

We can describe applied research as having three broad stages. First, one attempts to identify the questions that most need to be answered. This needs exchange between, on the one hand, the professionals and stakeholders more concerned with the application and, on the other hand, the academics more concerned with the theory (a slightly daunting but necessary label). It can involve some toing and froing, as core assumptions and ideas are turned around and reframed, but can be a worthwhile endeavour in its own right. Second, we target, collect and grapple with the data that best answers those questions. This hands-on stage can involve collecting new data (primary research) or reviewing existing data (secondary research) – in either case, the data collection methods should be appropriate for the type of question we are trying to answer. Third, we step back from the detail to tell the story – what have we learned, how can we apply it to practice and what questions remain? In this research, we try to spend a decent amount of time in each of these stages.

We started with the question, important for HR professionals as well as researchers: *what's the current evidence on the link between employee engagement and improved performance?* But to answer that we need to answer some other questions. First, what is employee engagement, is it a robust construct, and how does it differ from other constructs? As many reading this will know, there are numerous definitions and, with them, different assumptions about employees and management. We assess this panoply of ideas and give recommendations on how to think about employee engagement. Second, and closely related, is the question of measures. Not everyone who talks about *employee engagement* uses measures of it, but many do – they hold a central place in management and governance, and different measures tell us different stories. So in an area of people management in which measures have proliferated and some are wilder, less well trained than others, it is important – if you are going to measure it – to have clear sight of which measures are most trustworthy and useful, that is, which will do the best job of telling you what you want to know.

From there, we come better equipped to consider the original question, which, expanded a little, reads: *what does the best available evidence say about whether greater employee engagement leads to better performance?* But have you considered that the relationship could be the other way round? Success in work tends to leave you feeling happy and potentially more 'engaged', so performance could in principle lead to engagement. This has implications for the sorts of research we rely on: in particular we need longitudinal research showing that engagement comes first.

We also needed to expand our focus. In HR circles, employee engagement is usually discussed as a broad umbrella term that encapsulates a range of constructs such as commitment, how people identify with their organisations and motivation. Therefore, to get a view of the body of research that reflects the way the term employee engagement is used, we need to look at the research on these other constructs, which is well developed (indeed often better developed than the research labelled 'engagement').

How does an evidence review help?

This report discusses the results of a series of CIPD evidence reviews that summarise the research on employee engagement and the related constructs of organisational commitment, organisational identification and motivation. The accompanying reviews can be found at cipd.co.uk/evidence-engagement

We are not the first to produce a practitioner-focused evidence review of employee engagement. The Engage for Success movement produced review of evidence linking engagement and performance in 2012,[5] adding qualitative case study research on the same theme in 2016.[6]

Of course, this review presents a more up-to-date picture of the research evidence than was available in 2012. This would be worthwhile enough on its own, as the body of research has grown substantially over the last five or so years.[7] But it also starts from a very different premise and uses a particular method in order to identify the strongest scientific research.

We follow the principles of evidence-based practice,[8] which is concerned with *'making decisions through the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of the best available evidence from multiple sources … to increase the likelihood of a favorable outcome'*.[9] This informative if dense definition leads us to a number of key steps:

1 asking: translating a practical issue or problem into an answerable question
2 acquiring: systematically searching for and retrieving the evidence
3 appraising: critically judging the trustworthiness and relevance of the evidence
4 aggregating: weighing and pulling together the evidence.

We leave the final two steps to practitioners:

5 applying: incorporating the evidence into the decision-making process
6 assessing: evaluating the outcome of the decision taken.[10]

When it comes to the body of research on employee engagement, this means two things above all. First, we need to think critically and be judicious about the constructs and measures used. The term employee engagement is often used in very hazy or inconsistent ways; we need to be clear which definitions and measures stack up and which don't.

Second, claims about the performance benefits of employee engagement are often made on the basis of shaky evidence, which is to say that it may *appear* to support the claims of benefits, but other explanations are quite possible or even likely. Through systematic search methods and critical appraisal, we can identify the studies that do the best job of establishing whether such cause-and-effect relationships are likely to exist. We discuss this further in Section 5.

② Are we agreed what engagement is?

A remarkable thing about employee engagement is that 30 years after William Kahn's[11] seminal article in the *Academy of Management Journal* and more than ten years after the influential MacLeod Review, the debate rumbles on as to what it actually is. This is an important aspect that we should deal with head on.

The need to define terms

The MacLeod Review famously found over 50 definitions, and this lack of agreement is reflected in the HR community. Ask HR professionals to describe employee engagement, and you will often hear one of two types of response. First, a self-referential answer that it's when employees are engaged with their jobs, which makes some intuitive sense but doesn't take us far. And second, references to other concepts, such as happiness, motivation, energy, effort, commitment, shared purpose, taking pride in the organisation and job satisfaction. In fact, definitions of employee engagement can be even more varied in their nature than this – for example, some scholars argue that it is crucial to consider *with what* employees are engaged – they may feel engaged with their day-to-day job, their organisation as a whole, or both.[12] It is perhaps unsurprising that a study on CEO views of engagement found that many struggled to define it.[13]

This lack of clarity is something that has led many to criticise engagement as a concept:[14]

> *Some definitions focus on employee behaviour (eg, discretionary effort), some on employee attitudes (eg, commitment), some on employee feelings (eg, enthusiasm), some on the conditions of work and what the organisation does (eg, provides support), some on various combinations of these, and yet others define engagement as a situation in which one of these things, such as attitudes, causes another, such as behaviour. In other words, when it comes to defining engagement it appears that almost anything goes.*[15]

The view has led some to argue that *'the concept of employee engagement needs to be more clearly defined … or it needs to be abandoned'*.[16] Sceptics have long argued that the term 'engagement' is likely to fall out of usage at some point because it lacks substance or distinctiveness. As well as being challenged for a lack of clear definition, it is also seen to be a re-labelling of existing constructs, and thus redundant. This has been depicted in various ways, including:

> *'Old Wine in New Bottles'*[17]

> *'New blend of old wines'* and *'Been there, bottled that'*[18]

> *'Fashionable fad or long-term fixture?'*[19]

> *'Fad, fashion, or folderol'*, distinguished as: fads being *'short-lived ideas that quickly fade away'*, fashions being *'manners or modes of action that become a norm in the field'* and folderol being *'useless ideas that sometimes come in the form of new names for old ideas'*.[20]

> And even *'Same lady different dress'*.[21]

In the opposite corner, in an understandable desire to move on to practical action, some advocates of employee engagement gloss over definitions of what it is, assuming the perspective of, 'You know it when you see it.' The problem with this is that the question tends to keep coming back, either with each new conversation or later when it becomes apparent people are talking at cross purposes. This is a tiresome situation. It is hard to envisage such lack of clarity for most HR concepts. For example, managers do not need lengthy discussions on what we mean by 'recruitment' before being able to discuss person specification; or on what 'remuneration' is before discussing pay rises.

We don't believe it's necessary to abandon the label of employee engagement. Indeed, as a discourse and influencer, it seems to have made a positive contribution. As the MacLeod Review[22] noted, the idea of employee engagement – both as a positive outcome in its own

right and as something that contributes to other desirable outcomes – has inspired many organisations to adopt progressive people management practices in a way that few other terms have.

But we can do better on definitions. Some of the terms used as synonyms of engagement – happiness, motivation, and so on – may seem interchangeable to non-specialists, but any respected profession must take its core terms seriously. To use them to good effect, they need to carry weight. For that we need shared understanding of what they are; and for that we need some precision. There is a time and place for crystallising what core terms mean and how they should be used. Nailing this frees us up to discuss what matters most.

Below we consider three approaches to understanding employee engagement: those based on scientific research, research-based consultancy and management practice. We then give some recommendations on definitions.

Employee engagement in scientific research

In the scientific research, most definitions of employee engagement clearly identify it as a psychological state. These definitions have been grouped into four categories:[23]

- **Personal role engagement**, based on the work of Kahn: employees' ability to express their preferred selves in their work, both cognitively, emotionally and physically. If they can express themselves, they will be energised, vigilant and feel connected to others; if they can't, they will withdraw.
- **Work engagement**, also called task or job engagement: this focuses specifically on a psychological state experienced by employees. Based on the work of the Utrecht school of thought, it is commonly described as having three dimensions: *vigour* towards work, *dedication* to work and *absorption* in work activity.[24] It is seen as the antithesis of, or at least negatively related to, burnout – that is, exhaustion and cynicism associated with chronic stress.[25]
- **Multidimensional engagement:** a rare definition that, like role engagement, incorporates cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects, but which distinguishes *job*-focused engagement from *organisation*-focused engagement. This expands the question of, *with what* are employees engaged?
- **Self-engagement with performance:** a very rare definition based on how importantly employees regard high performance.

Of these, work engagement is by far the most common construct and measure in scientific research and gives us the strongest evidence base. There are also good definitions of its components:

> *Vigor is characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties. Dedication refers to being strongly involved in one's work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Finally, absorption is characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work.*[26]

What do we know about the nature of work engagement?

Work engagement is generally, though not universally, understood as a relatively stable state compared with other constructs, such as job satisfaction and burnout.[27] That is, it is expected to stay relatively constant if related organisational factors – for example, colleague support or positive interactions with managers – do the same.[28] This does not

suggest that managers should ignore opportunities to foster employee engagement, but that they should not be expected to change or foster engagement over the short term. However, this aspect of engagement is not settled – contrasting research has found that engagement can in fact fluctuate day-to-day and so short-term interventions could affect engagement.[29]

Thus, even with the more established construct of *work* engagement, we could do with more research into its changing nature.

Moreover, a question that has not been entirely resolved is the extent to which work engagement is the antithesis of burnout. Some research suggests that it is a close opposite,[30] which raises the question of whether we need it as a separate idea (a charge of 'construct redundancy'),[31] but other research suggests it is distinct enough to add value.[32]

Composite approaches from research consultancy
In the management consultancy world, engagement is typically seen not only as a psychological state, but as a broader composite of experiences (for example, aspects of job quality), attitudes (for example, identification with the organisation) and behaviour (for example, how much extra effort one puts in).[33]

A number of consultancy firms have developed composite measures of engagement along these lines. The best known is Gallup's Q12. The 12 items cover a wide range of aspects of people's jobs, including *'role clarity, having an opportunity to do what you do best, opportunities to develop, opinions counting, strong coworker relationships, and a common mission or purpose'*.[34] Collectively, the Q12 is described as assessing employee engagement, but also *'the crucial elements of workplace culture'*[35] and the antecedents of job satisfaction.[36] This has been criticised as confusing because most definitions state that these are evidently not the same things.[37] However, the measure itself correlates so strongly with a simple measure of job satisfaction ($r=0.9$)[38] that another criticism has been that they are essentially the same thing – in which case, why not just ask people how satisfied they are with their jobs?[39]

Gallup's Q12 is far from alone, but it is a good case of a tool that carries influence in the consultant and practitioner world, but does not usually pass muster among academics. For example, Bailey et al (2015) excluded studies based on it from their systematic review, because of *'concerns that the Q12 is a composite, catch-all measure'* that lacks validity (see Box 1). As we discuss in Section 4, there is an established science to developing robust measures:

> *Merely attaching a name to a collection of survey items does not make it a construct. The measure must be validated by comparing and contrasting the construct to similar and different constructs to demonstrate that it is related to those constructs in theoretically predictable ways.*[40]

In less technical terms, we can say that even if they are all of interest, averaging distinct measures into an overarching score does not produce any magic. If we bundle disparate things together, we get a potpourri or mosh-pit of metrics: so much is going on that we can't really interpret it.

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For example, an organisation's interests in employee engagement may include things as disparate as strategic alignment, using one's strengths, satisfaction with pay and having good relationships with line managers, to name just a few. One could throw these together into a composite measure, but how would you interpret the results if one part of the organisation scores higher than another, or if we see improvement year on year? Without disaggregating the measure, we don't know which of these is driving the differences, so no idea which aspects to focus on or what practices to emulate. Advocates of wide-ranging composite measures may argue that they can be used in disaggregated forms, but this leaves one with a very loose collection of measures that may or may not combine into something specific.

We can also say that satisfaction-based measures muddy the waters when they are couched in terms of employee engagement. Engagement and satisfaction are not the same thing, so measures that conflate them are unhelpful.

Employers may well be interested in a range of aspects of employees' experiences and attitudes, so the attraction to all-encompassing measures is understandable. But – as we discuss more fully in Section 4 – measures need to be precise and cohesive, so often these aspects are best considered individually.

Engagement as management practice

A final, less common perspective on employee engagement is to consider it a *management practice* – that is, it's something that employers or managers 'do' to engage with employees.[41] For example, one school of thought is that there are two forms of engagement: 'soft', which focuses on promoting positive workplace conditions and manager–employee relations; and 'hard', where increasing employee productivity is encouraged through 'engagement' activities.[42] The use of the term employee engagement in this way alongside the psychological perspectives described above creates confusion, particularly outside the people profession. This confusion is heightened because it is often assumed that 'engaging' with employees will increase their 'engagement'.

This perspective is easily distinguished from other notions of engagement and we exclude it from our review: we recognise it exists, but it is not a perspective we share. Management practice is of course hugely influential in affecting aspects of employee engagement and employee engagement can rightly form a major area of people strategy. However, for the sake of clarity and consistency, and in line with the dominant academic research, we suggest that the term 'employee engagement' is used to describe a psychological state of employees, not management activity.

Landing on a definition

As we have argued, it is important to be able to define one's terms, both to ensure one is not talking at cross purposes with colleagues and, if one is measuring constructs, as a first step to measure robustly: *'if one does not know what one is measuring, the action implications will be, at best, vague and, at worst, a leap of faith.'*[43]

The value of an umbrella and specific terms

To explain this dual approach, it is important to recognise that HR professionals and academics have differing priorities. The practitioner world is closely focused on action, and the academic world spends more time defining and refining robust constructs. Employee engagement can be described as having taken a 'bottom–up' journey in this respect, originating as a construct in practice and then being picked up and refined by academic research. This is not unique – for example, the notion of burnout *'was at first a construct attributed to pop psychology'* but then developed in research[44] – but it does help us understand the term's evolution and treatment.

Many in HR use employee engagement as an umbrella term, collating different attributes into a holistic area of people strategy.[45] This is a valid option: there are other umbrella terms, like employee relations and leadership, from which we can dive into in more detail. Indeed, some argue that a lack of a specific definition is a strength of employee engagement, making it a broad church, appealing to all. The problem is slippage and inconsistency: when, in one breath, employee engagement is presented as a holistic term, and in the next it is claimed with apparent precision that, for example, only three in ten employees are actively engaged.[46] We cannot have it both ways.

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For the sake of having reliable insight, credibility and impact, people professionals need the correct tools for the job. They need some precision in the core terms they discuss and operationalise into measures. So, it is to be welcomed if, over time, academic research can help refine those terms.

Given the ground that HR practice and consultancy has made under the banner of a broadly described employee engagement, it makes sense to continue using it as an umbrella term. To do this in a way that is consistent and conceptually sound, we also need to refer to terms that sit underneath it which are more specific and have agreed meanings, and we need to be clear which we are referring to when (for example, a conversation might move on from work engagement to focus on organisational commitment).
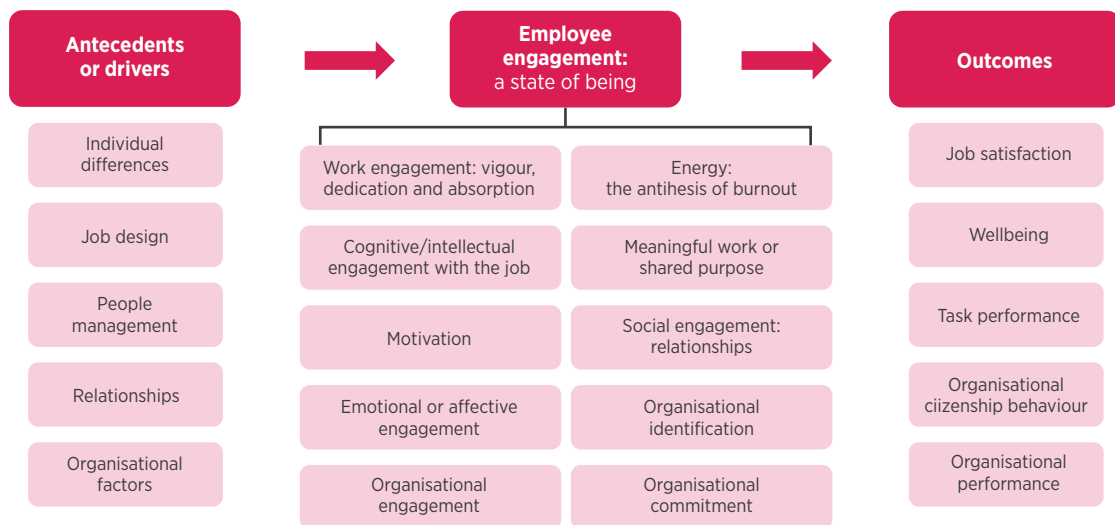
Proposed definition and model of employee engagement
In this report, we use the label of engagement in two ways:

- **employee engagement**, to describe a broad subject area or umbrella term that includes work engagement and other more specific terms, such as *intellectual engagement, organisational engagement, motivation and organisational commitment*
- **work engagement**, to describe the specific state of vigour, dedication and absorption that features most strongly in the scientific research.

Both terms refer to a psychological or physical *state of being*. We do not use the terms to describe management *activity* (which we see as a factor that affects employee engagement) or *job satisfaction* (which may either contribute to or result from employee engagement, but is distinct).

Figure 1 illustrates how employee engagement may be used consistently as an umbrella term, separating out components of it from conditions that influence or are influenced by it.[47] First, we show potential antecedents of employee engagement – that is, factors that come before and influence or drive it. Although employee engagement is itself a state, individual differences that may influence it may also include psychological states (for example, work centrality, being how important work is in people's lives[48]). Other drivers include how jobs are designed (for example, whether people have interesting work, work that matches their skills and work autonomy[49]); people management (for example, management practices that support employee voice, trust and fairness at work[50]); other work relationships (for example, social cohesion and support from colleagues[51]); and organisational factors (for example the organisation's mission or purpose and its achievements).

Figure 1: A model of employee engagement as an umbrella term

Antecedents or drivers	Employee engagement: a state of being		Outcomes
Individual differences	Work engagement: vigour, dedication and absorption	Energy: the antihesis of burnout	Job satisfaction
Job design	Cognitive/intellectual engagement with the job	Meaningful work or shared purpose	Wellbeing
People management	Motivation	Social engagement: relationships	Task performance
Relationships	Emotional or affective engagement	Organisational identification	Organisational ciizenship behaviour
Organisational factors	Organisational engagement	Organisational commitment	Organisational performance

Second, under the broad banner of employee engagement, we describe specific constructs that can be measured. These constructs may overlap – for example, cognitive or intellectual engagement may overlap with shared purpose, being how meaningful people find their work,[52] or the extent to which they internalise their goals;[53] and organisational engagement overlaps with both organisational identification and organisational commitment (discussed below).

Third, we describe potential outcomes of employee engagement, including job satisfaction and wellbeing, and different facets of performance[54] including: task or job performance; contextual performance, also labelled organisational citizenship behaviour;[55] adaptive performance, being a question of innovating and responding to changing demands; and organisational or unit-level performance.

For consistency, we recommend that HR specialists adopt this approach more generally, using employee engagement as a broad umbrella term for a collection of employee states, and referring to work engagement (or other constructs) when a more specific focus is needed.

Approaching employee engagement in this way means HR professionals need to reflect on which components they want to understand, prioritise and leverage. With this in mind, we now turn to some of these other concepts that in practitioner circles are often discussed as core parts of employee engagement.

③ What other concepts are useful?

As we've discussed, HR and management practitioners often describe their interests in employee engagement as relating to a wide range of other concepts that may not carry that label. It thus makes sense to consider these, as they have been most robustly developed and investigated in the research. Here we focus on three constructs that are often central in thinking on engagement: commitment, identification and motivation. This is not an exhaustive list (others are shown in Figure 1), but we present them as key examples of how HR professionals might dig into specific areas under the banner of employee engagement.

Organisational commitment

Employees' emotional attachment to their organisation relates to their loyalty towards it and how dedicated they are to their work. It is labelled in the scientific research as *affective organisational commitment*. Organisational commitment is not a new topic – the first meta-analysis on its antecedents and outcomes was published three decades ago.[56] The most prominent conceptualisation of commitment, still used today, distinguishes three forms: affective, continuance and normative commitment:[57]

- **Affective commitment** concerns an individual's emotional attachment to their organisation. Employees with strong affective commitment remain with their organisation because they identify with it and enjoy being a part of it.
- **Continuance commitment** is based on the employee's perceived costs of quitting. Employees with strong continuance commitment remain with their organisation because they feel they need to.
- **Normative commitment** refers to commitment based on a sense of obligation to the organisation – because it is the 'right' thing to do. Employees with strong normative commitment remain because they feel they ought to.[58]

Organisational identification

The area of organisational identification is well established with a sizeable body of research. The basic idea that it is good for workers to identify with their organisations has been established for over a hundred years, but it was properly developed as a construct and theory in the 1950s by James March and Herbert Simon and particularly gained traction in the 1980s. Variations on the theme exist, using words such as 'congruence', 'belongingness' and 'affective bond'; essentially these are all about the alignment between an employee's self-image and how they see their organisation, or how much they share the organisation's.

This might look similar to organisational commitment – indeed, the two correlate strongly – but the difference is that identification is specifically about the 'oneness' someone feels with their organisation and its values and strategic goals. Commitment also involves a psychological bond, but it is about attitudes and intended behaviour; one can be committed to yet still feel separate from one's organisation.

Work motivation

Motivation is a rather abstract construct but is generally defined as the need or reason why somebody does something or behaves in a particular way. In the realm of work and business, definitions become more specific, thinking about internal and external factors that lead people to be continually interested in and committed to their job or to make an effort to attain a goal.

Nonetheless, because of its abstract nature, motivation is often tied to specific work-related behaviour (for example, the motivation to work from home or the motivation to participate in organisational change) or a specific outcome (for example, task performance or innovation). Here we consider 'work motivation' as the need or reason(s) why employees make an effort to perform their day-to-day job to the best of their ability.

In management literature, however, 'work motivation' can have different meanings. In this review we distinguish three perspectives:

- **Motivational theories (mechanisms):** in most cases, motivation refers to a theory or logic model that explains why a certain factor (motivator) leads to a certain work-related outcome – that is to say, a *process* rather than a state or condition.

- **Motivational factors:** the term work motivation can also focus on the drivers or antecedents (for example financial incentives) that stimulate employees to make an effort to perform their job.
- **Motivational states (outcome):** in some cases, work motivation refers to an employee's affective or cognitive state. As such, it refers to the state of mind that drives (or discourages) employees to perform their job in a certain way to achieve a desired outcome.

We discuss the best evidenced theories of motivation in Section 7.

(4) What measurements should we use?

Measurements are not the be-all and end-all, but we do need them and there's little doubt that, as the adage goes, *what gets measured gets attention*. Measurement can inform strategic decisions on how to develop and allocate HR resources, such as training to develop effective people managers, and give a big-picture view that is vital for good governance and executive-level decisions.

Measures should not be an end in themselves. It is important to think about the wider 'ecosystem' in which they are used – for example, what is reported to whom, whether and how measures can be acted upon, who is accountable for this action, and what timeframes are useful for reporting. Under no circumstances should an 'engagement survey' be considered sufficient activity that one is covering off or 'doing' engagement. It is no more than the indicator.

Qualitative research and conversations can also add invaluable insight. Indeed, much of the time, there is no replacement for in-depth, person-to-person discussions, both because we deal with people on an individual basis and because it gives a richer understanding of the reasons why challenges persist or solutions work. Done well, measurement adds to this by giving a reliable gauge of whether the views of a few represent employees more widely, where the 'hot spots' are in an organisation and how a workforce is changing over time. If there is a battle between the 'quants' and the 'quals', it is an unnecessary one: these different types of data should complement each other.

To be useful, measures must be robust. We all know this from our interaction with physical sciences – for example, in units of length or mass – and the same goes for the measurement of social science constructs (see Box 1). Below we consider some of the main measures of employee engagement and related areas – to see the wording of the most important measures, see the accompanying scientific summaries at cipd.co.uk/evidence-engagement

Box 1: What makes a robust measure?

Social science is often concerned with phenomena that cannot be measured from direct observation in a systematic and accurate way. Thus, we devise tools that assess them indirectly, often by posing standardised survey questions with set response options. For complex phenomenon – like employee engagement – single questions often don't do a good enough job of assessing the underlying construct, so we form a composite scale from a suite of questions that hold together statistically.

There are certain criteria to meet in developing solid, useful measures. Usually, the first to consider is *reliability* – that is, whether the measure will produce consistent results over time, given the same or similar conditions. For example, the same person may answer a survey question that is ambiguous or overly complex differently on different days, not because their circumstances have changed, but because they are unsure how to respond.

Trustworthy measures must also be useful assessments of the specific thing they claim to represent. This is a measure's *validity* and comes in different forms. One aspect is whether the measure tells us something different from other potentially related measures (this is called *discriminant validity*). For example, if a measure of engagement overlaps substantially with measures of employee involvement, commitment, satisfaction or empowerment, we can consider whether it is redundant.

Another criterion is the ability of a measure to predict important outcomes, such as aspects of performance and wellbeing – this is known as *predictive validity*. Unfortunately, most of the research on engagement is not longitudinal in design, so does not tell us about prediction. More common is a measure's statistical *associations* with important outcomes (termed *convergent validity*). This is gained from cross-sectional data, that which is measured in a single time period. Convergent validity can be considered a level below predictive, as it does not indicate the direction of causality (which factor is an antecedent and which is an outcome). We discuss this further in Section 5.

Engagement measures

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) is the most commonly used measure in scientific literature and one we would certainly recommend. Due to its dominance in longitudinal research, and unlike other measures, we know that it predicts performance (it has 'predictive validity'). It is also easy to use: as well as the original 17-item (UWES-17) and shortened 9-item (UWES-9) measures, the designers have more recently produced an 'ultra-short' version (UWES-3) that appears to be as reliable and valid an indicator. Its three items are:

- 'At my work, I feel bursting with energy' (vigour).
- 'I am enthusiastic about my job' (dedication).
- 'I am immersed in my work' (absorption).[59]

The simplest answer as to which measure of engagement is 'best' might seem to recommend a version of the UWES. The reasoning for this would be that by using a variant of this measure, HR practitioners can align their work with the best predictive research. However, although the strongest quantitative research uses the UWES, it has not been free from methodological critique – for example, that in tapping into meaningfulness and work challenge, it conflates antecedents and components of employee engagement.[60]

Perhaps more important for practitioners is that, depending on one's interests, the UWES may not always be the most relevant measure to use. Work engagement is a narrower construct than what most people mean by employee engagement and some scholars have taken issue with its narrowness. For example, Purcell has argued that work engagement risks 'airbrushing out' power dynamics in the employment relationship and a 'pernicious' use of positive psychology to frame conflict and low engagement as deviant (however, at the same time he recognises that employee engagement 'suffers from a lack of definition').[61]

Thus, it may be useful to look at other measures as well as, or instead of, work engagement. Broader measures of employee engagement that may be of interest include:[62]

- the MBI–GS measure, which ties more closely to wellbeing by assessing the burnout–engagement continuum, covering three dimensions: exhaustion–energy, cynicism–involvement and inefficacy–efficacy[63]
- measures closely based on Kahn's needs-satisfying model, which cover the three dimensions of emotional, cognitive and physical engagement[64]
- the Intellectual, Social, Affective (ISA) scale, which adapts Kahn's model by replacing physical engagement with a relational dimension[65]
- a measure that builds on Kahn's model by differentiating engagement with the job and engagement with the organisation.[66]

If any of these less established measures are believed to fit the bill better, we would advise using them as part of investigative research, to further test their application and add to the body of knowledge. This is a methodological approach that has precedence in healthcare research.[67]

However, for those who see employee engagement more broadly, as a holistic umbrella term for various constructs – for example, organisational commitment, identification and motivation – we suggest measuring those constructs themselves. These are discussed in more detail below, with example scales presented in the scientific summaries accompanying this report.

Organisational commitment

The two most prominent scales used to measure affective organisational commitment are the Organisational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ)[68] and the Affective Commitment Scale (ACS),[69] both of which have been tested for reliability and validity. While some evidence suggests that ACS is preferred over the OCQ,[70] other research has found no difference between the two scales when measuring the impact of commitment on performance outcomes.[71]

Organisational identification

The most widely used scale is the Organisational Identification Questionnaire (OIQ).[72] This ten-item scale includes items such as 'When someone praises [name of organisation], it feels like a personal compliment,' and 'When I talk about [name of organisation], I usually say "we" rather than "they".' Van Dick's[73] scale has also been developed; this includes six items, including 'I identify myself as a member of my organisation' and 'Being a member of my organisation reflects my personality well.' These two scales have been shown to differ from scales that measure organisational commitment, such as the Affective Organisational Commitment scale.[74]

Variants of the customer-focused Net Promoter Score (NPS)[75] are often used to measure how much employees would recommend their employer. However, its impressive popularity seems to be misplaced. The usefulness of NPS has been challenged – it is certainly not, as its originator labelled it, *'the one number you need to grow'*;[76] and it does not even predict performance any better than a measure of satisfaction.[77]

Motivation

There is a wide range of questionnaires and scales of motivation in work contexts, some of which have good psychometric properties (see Box 1). One of the most widely used scales is the Multidimensional Work Motivation Scale (MWMS), which is translated and validated in several languages.[78] The MWMS is based on the framework of self-determination theory

(see Section 7) and not only measures an employee's motivational state, but also assesses the source of an employee's work motivation. A recent version of the scale can be found in the accompanying scientific summary.

As we discussed in Section 2, the nature of work engagement is not settled: in particular, it is not yet clear whether it is a naturally stable or fluctuating attribute. When it comes to motivation, we have a clearer picture. Longitudinal studies have consistently shown that work motivation naturally fluctuates over time, independently from the tasks that the workers do.[79] Thus, when measuring employees' work motivation, managers and HR workers should first consider such fluctuations as something natural rather than necessarily an indication of a work-related problem.

Satisfaction-based measures

What we do not recommend is using satisfaction-based measures to assess employee engagement (see Section 2). Both by conflating engagement (a psychological state concerning one's work or organisation) with satisfaction (whether one is content with one's job), and by bringing together very different measures into a single scale, these tend to muddy the waters. It is true that, if such measures are being used, moving away from them means losing potentially valuable trend data, but we would argue that the benefits of greater clarity, reliability and validity should outweigh this, by providing a more solid and convincing basis for reporting on employee engagement.

(5) Is performance improved by engagement, commitment and identification?

It is commonly believed that when employees feel engaged with their job role or the organisation as a whole, they are not only likely to be happier, healthier and more fulfilled, but will likely deliver better performance, contribution and innovation.[80] Moreover, the argument is not just that engagement and performance go hand in hand (or correlate), but that engagement *increases* performance. From here, arguments are made about how big a performance benefit this is and what return on investment employers might expect from attempts to foster greater engagement. These arguments are absolutely central to the case for fostering employee engagement.

Why this is not an easy question to answer

Support for the arguments above requires measurement of engagement, of outcomes such as performance, and of the dynamics between them. Assessing the evidence is a question of *predictive validity* – that is, does greater engagement at one point in time lead to *subsequent* performance (see Box 1). Unfortunately, most research that is cited is based on cross-sectional surveys (engagement and performance being assessed at the same point in time) and thus assesses *association* but not prediction.

Directions of causality: what leads to what?

This matters because there is plenty of theory to suggest that reverse causality is possible. When we see data showing that more engaged employees correlates with better performance, it might feel obvious that this is because people are more focused or dedicated and perform better as a result. But it could well also be the reverse, that good performance makes people feel good about themselves and their team or organisation, and as a result they feel happier, more engaged. Or it could work both ways. For example, in

the case of wellbeing, a study of farmers found that financial problems led to poor mental health, which predicted intentions to quit the business and further poor financial results.[81]

We jump to certain conclusions because, as humans, we are natural story-tellers, using heuristics to make connections that aren't always there. Of course we want to hear that engagement leads to performance and not vice versa – it confirms the narrative that looking after people is important. But to have claims that stand up to scrutiny and are persuasive to business leaders, investors and policy-makers, we need measures with the right level of integrity and research that is interpreted appropriately. The principles of evidence-based practice (see Section 1) are a way to guard ourselves against simply concluding what feels intuitively right.[82]

How do we assess prediction, not just association? The simple approach we took in these evidence reviews was to prioritise longitudinal studies that measure engagement (or organisational commitment or identification) at Time 1 and changes to performance at Time 2. Our intention here is not to suggest evidence that does not reach this standard is generally irrelevant, but to look at the most appropriate evidence for the particular claims made – namely, that engagement predicts performance. This means not only excluding cross-sectional studies, but also looking beyond the systematic reviews and meta-analyses which do not distinguish findings from predictive studies. For more detail on the methods, see the accompanying scientific summaries available at cipd.co.uk/evidence-engagement

What is performance?
Before presenting our findings, it is worth noting the types of performance measures used. In the main, the studies in our review look at individual-level employee performance, which is easier to tie convincingly to employee states like engagement than bottom-line measures of firm performance would be.

Two types of employee performance are commonly distinguished. *Task performance* generally describes the degree to which a person fulfils their core role; that is, how well they meet or exceed their set work goals. However, with jobs having become less routinised and less strictly defined, task performance can be difficult to measure, as employees rarely have one single standard outcome. It is important, therefore, to focus on *contextual performance*: extra-role behaviours which see employees going beyond their formal job requirements, such as taking on non-obligatory tasks and helping colleagues.

In the following sections, we summarise the findings of our evidence reviews on the performance outcomes of work engagement, organisational commitment and organisational identification. More detail can be found in the accompanying scientific summaries at cipd.co.uk/evidence-engagement

Work engagement
Several systematic reviews and meta-analyses give evidence on the relationship between engagement and performance. These reviews focus on both work and employee engagement and its association with performance – generally job or task performance at the individual level, but also higher-level performance outcomes, such as organisational or team performance, and perceived quality of work. The reviews found that research indicates an association between engagement and performance. However, the studies used cross-sectional rather than longitudinal measures, so even if researchers describe the relationship in terms of prediction,[83] it does not establish that engagement predicts or leads to better performance.

We can tell a lot more from the 23 single studies in our review that used a longitudinal study design. Greater engagement as a result of transformational (that is, inspiring) leadership was found to predict performance in one study,[84] as one group of participants

Is performance improved by engagement, commitment and identification?

was primed through being shown inspiring vignettes, while a second group were shown factual vignettes. Work engagement at Time 1 was found to predict performance outcomes – namely quality and quantity of ideas and persistence – at Time 2. Several other studies supported these findings by providing questionnaires to participants over a number of weeks and months, finding engagement to predict task performance and extra-role or 'contextual' performance.[85] However, while these studies find evidence that engagement predicts performance through robust, longitudinal methods, those that reported effect sizes only found evidence of a small effect. By 'small' we mean that the difference is not big enough to observe in day-to-day activity and would need to be measured to be detected. In short, the predictive relationship between work engagement and performance exists but is weak.

Moreover, some research indicates a converse relationship between the two variables. For example, one study[86] explored the potential reciprocal relationship between positive orientation (self-esteem, optimism and life satisfaction), work engagement and entrepreneurial success – judged by the entrepreneur's evaluation of the performance of their business. It found that engagement did not significantly predict performance, but performance predicted engagement. Overall the body of research shows a two-way relationship between the two variables, supporting the idea that, in reality, engagement and performance influence each other.

It is important that organisations recognise that while employees who are more engaged are likely to see an increase in performance, those who perform better are likely to become more engaged in their work.

It is also important to note that almost all the high-quality studies of whether engagement predicts performance use measures of *work engagement*, rather than other measures of employee engagement (see Section 4).

Organisational commitment

Based on our analysis of 48 meta-analyses, we found that affective commitment has an impact on a number of work-related outcomes: absenteeism, job satisfaction, job involvement, performance, turnover and wellbeing.

The importance of affective commitment is often illustrated through the belief that organisations with highly committed employees perform more effectively. Unsurprisingly, over 300 studies considered the relationship between commitment and task performance. Surprisingly, however, research indicates that the relationship between the two constructs is rather small: affective commitment is at best a weak predictor of task performance.[87]

In addition, over 80 studies discussed the relationship between commitment and contextual performance. Given that going above and beyond is largely left to the discretion of the workers themselves, it was expected that committed employees would show greater contextual performance. Indeed, studies demonstrated commitment has a stronger relationship with contextual performance than with task performance. Moreover, research indicated that affective commitment is a predictor of contextual performance, rather than vice versa.[88]

Organisational identification

Based on our analysis of six meta-analyses and 32 single studies, we found evidence that organisational identification influences a number of work-related outcomes, namely employee performance, turnover intentions, job satisfaction, employee wellbeing, attitudes and brand-congruent behaviour.

Several studies consistently found a small to moderate positive relation between organisational identification and task performance. The relationship between organisational identification and contextual performance was found to be stronger than with task performance.[89]

There is a question over whether reverse causality may be an issue here – if employees identify more with the organisation as a result of meeting performance targets. However, identification was found to be a greater predictor of performance than vice versa.

(6) Other work-related outcomes

Although the case for employee engagement is often made on the basis that it contributes to performance, this is clearly not the only potential outcome of interest. Indeed, a fundamental argument for employee engagement is its mutual gains, leading to the good of the employer and the good of employees in tandem. It is thus relevant to consider its relationship to factors such as wellbeing as well as other benefits to the organisation, such as reduced levels of staff absence or turnover.

We find evidence that work engagement mediates the effects of different variables on performance outcomes. This means it explains why there is a relationship between two variables; it is integral to the causal mechanism. While research indicates that work engagement has a positive association with performance, it has also been found to mediate the relationship between several variables, notably leader–member exchange, workplace ostracism and job crafting,[90] on performance outcomes, like creative performance, and extra-role behaviours such as knowledge-sharing and innovation.[91] So, while the link between engagement and performance has been supported with evidence, there is ample more to suggest that engagement can be a positive influence on other variables which themselves can improve performance. In some cases, research has found that work engagement does in fact affect other outcomes more strongly, such as organisational commitment and absence intentions.[92]

Below we summarise research on a non-exhaustive selection of outcomes besides performance, in particular focusing on the outcomes of organisational commitment and identification. For more detail, see the scientific summaries at cipd.co.uk/evidence-engagement

Job satisfaction
Over 70 studies explored the relationship between affective commitment and job satisfaction. While research found them to be closely related, we don't know which of the two causes the other.[93] Some studies even found no evidence to support a causal relation between the two constructs. It is thought that the lack of clarity here is down to the fact that the two constructs share the same antecedents – if present, both job satisfaction and affective commitment increase.

Studies found a strong relationship between organisational identification and job satisfaction;[94] however, it was not found whether employees are more likely to enjoy their job because they identify with their organisation, or the other way around.

Job involvement
Job involvement, or the degree to which an employee relates to their job, is a concept that overlaps considerably with affective commitment. As a result, it is unclear which one of the two drives the other. Just 16 studies discussed the relationship between these two constructs.

Brand-congruent behaviour

One study found that employees who strongly identify with their organisation clearly display stronger brand-congruent behaviour and thus are more likely to champion the brand, strengthening the brand/image of the organisation.[95]

Attitudes to organisational change

Employees who strongly identify with their organisation are found to report slightly more positive feelings about upcoming changes, as well as greater preparedness for change.

Moreover, several studies have demonstrated that organisational identification is a strong predictor of post-merger worker attitudes. Employees who do not identify with the organisation before a merger are unlikely to do so afterwards, suggesting that managers should pay extra attention to those with weaker social bonds in order to improve their identification.[96]

Absenteeism

Over 30 studies discussed the relationship between absenteeism and affective commitment. While research found a small correlation between the two, this finding fails to tell us the direction of the relationship.[97] However, several longitudinal studies provided evidence that affective commitment does predict lower absenteeism, not the other way around.[98] Unfortunately, effect sizes were small, suggesting only a small impact of affective commitment on absenteeism – other factors, such as wellbeing and workload, are likely to be more important.

Staff turnover

While performance remains the most important outcome for most organisations, managers and leaders also emphasise the importance of retaining key talent. Employees with high continuance commitment intend to remain with their employer to avoid costs associated with leaving, whereas employees with high normative commitment feel that it would be morally inappropriate to leave the company. Likewise, employees who are emotionally attached to the organisation enjoy being an organisational member and are thus less likely to quit. A large number of studies found affective commitment to be a strong predictor of employees' turnover intentions.[99] However, the relationship with actual turnover is weaker.[100]

Several studies found a strong negative correlation between organisational identification and turnover intentions. However, this fails to consider actual turnover. Reverse causality again may be a factor here, as it could be argued that when workers desire to leave the organisation, their level of identification will drop. However, one study found organisational identification to be a stronger predictor of future turnover intentions than vice versa.

Wellbeing

There is evidence that affective commitment may be related to psychological wellbeing, and reduce sleep complaints, stress, burnout and fatigue. We found five studies that explored this relationship. One longitudinal study found that affective commitment most likely precedes psychological wellbeing. A possible explanation for this finding is that employees who experience identification and emotional attachment to their organisation may cope better with stress than others because they can make sense of why they are facing high demands.

One study found that organisational identification weakly predicts employees' physical and psychological wellbeing. However, another found that too much identification with the organisation increases workaholism, which may in turn negatively affect wellbeing.

The relationship between engagement and wellbeing was beyond the scope of our current review but is certainly worth investigation. The most obvious relationship, if we focus on

work engagement, is that they are very closely related, as engagement is the antithesis, or at least a near opposite, of burnout. This is the view that:

> *burnout [is] an erosion of engagement with the job. What started out as important, meaningful, and challenging work becomes unpleasant, unfulfilling, and meaningless. Energy turns into exhaustion, involvement turns into cynicism, and efficacy turns into ineffectiveness.*[101]

However, slightly different definitions have led some to talk about the 'dark side' of employee engagement. This contrasting view proposes that moderate levels of engagement correlate positively with health and wellbeing, but very high levels equate to workaholism, with employees becoming *'so involved in their job that they stop being concerned about other important parts of their lives'*, resulting in declining health.[102] Scholars who understand work engagement as the antithesis of burnout would not label this a problem of over-engagement, but if we call it work–life balance or job involvement, they would agree with the basic point: for example, studies have shown that psychological detachment from work and off-work recovery have positive impacts on work engagement.[103]

Contagion: crossover between employees

Some interesting research found that the association between engagement and performance can cross over from one employee to another.[104] Particularly on days which involved frequent communication between colleagues, work engagement was found to transfer from the participant to their colleague, who subsequently enjoyed an increase in performance. This research has implications for employees and line managers. For example, ensuring team members are allowed ample time to communicate and collaborate can lead to a shared increase in engagement and, in turn, performance.

⑦ What leads to engagement, commitment and identification?

Having highlighted the importance of engagement and its key components through examining their relationship with performance, we now consider factors that predict engagement. Following this, in Section 8 we look at evidence on theories of work motivation. This gives us insight into what managers can do to foster engagement among the workforce.

For more detail, see the scientific summaries at cipd.co.uk/evidence-engagement

Predictors of work engagement

Bailey et al's (2017) systematic review into employee engagement included 155 studies that evidenced the antecedents of engagement – that is, the factors that come before or predict it.[105] The review grouped the antecedents into five areas, which we summarise below.

Individual psychological states

There is a good body of research to suggest that aspects of people's psychological makeup relate to employee engagement. The connected areas of self-efficacy (similar to self-confidence), resilience and a belief that one has adequate 'personal resources' stand out in this regard.[106]

This means that the relatively time-bound *state* of engagement is likely to be influenced by individuals' more permanent psychological *traits* and by having the right capabilities for the job. These are factors that can be assessed during the hiring process, but as we

see next, it is far from the case that engagement is all about recruiting people with the 'right attitude' – employers and managers play a central role in creating the right work environment.

Job design

The relation between work engagement and job design, particularly the balance between job demands and resources, is also well researched.[107] Greater job demands can either lead to greater engagement or make no difference. However, many studies showed at least some degree of positive association between engagement and 'job resources' – such as supervisor support, feedback and autonomy.

These findings highlight the importance of ensuring employees do not feel overwhelmed by the demands of their job through providing them with the resources to perform successfully. This is particularly key for line managers and teammates, who are responsible for providing employees with support and feedback, and determine their level of autonomy.

People management

There is a substantial body of research showing a link between more positive forms of people management or leadership and greater engagement among employees. As above, supervisor support was highlighted as a key influencer of engagement.[108] In practice, this again points to the importance of leaders in fostering engagement among their staff, particularly those that lead in a transformational way – inspiring their team to work towards a goal or vision.[109] This is not only a question of people management capability; people managers themselves must also feel supported and empowered to adopt such a leadership style authentically.[110]

Perceptions of organisational and team factors

There is a solid evidence base on how organisational and team-level factors link to work engagement. In particular, perceived organisational support was associated with greater levels of engagement.[111] As with the above findings focused on leader and colleague support, this highlights the need for organisations to ensure their staff feel cared for and valued. Also important was the relationship between organisational identification and engagement.[112] The factors that influence organisational identification are discussed later on.

Organisational interventions

A small body of evidence exists on individual responses to organisational interventions, such as training and development programmes. Several studies showed a positive relationship between individuals' experiences of various interventions, such as mindfulness techniques and flexible working (giving employees choice on where and when they work), with engagement.[113]

Predictors of organisational commitment

In our analysis of 48 meta-analyses, the key antecedents of affective commitment were explored: social support, empowerment, job characteristics, organisational justice, recognition and rewards, and leadership.

Social support

Perceived social support is often referred to as the extent to which a job enables an employee to receive assistance or advice from either supervisors or co-workers. One early study found that, of all variables included, perceived organisational support most strongly correlated with affective commitment. Many more confirmed that increased support in times of need, honest feedback, praise and recognition contribute to improved affective commitment. While these studies were not longitudinal so cannot indicate causality, reverse causation seems unlikely.

Empowerment
Empowerment is generally split into structural empowerment, where employees are given more authority and responsibility, and psychological empowerment, where employees feel they have autonomy in deciding how to do their jobs. Psychological empowerment in particular was found to be strongly associated with commitment. While there was no longitudinal research into this relationship, reverse causality again is deemed unlikely.

Job characteristics
Numerous studies found job characteristics, particularly jobs that are clearly defined, make full use of employee skills, are rich, challenging and perceived as meaningful, to be positively associated with their psychological commitment. Job security was found to be the characteristic with the strongest positive correlation to commitment.

Organisational justice
Research distinguishes between three types of justice: distributive (outcomes), procedural (process) and interactional. Procedural justice – the perceived fairness, consistency, accuracy and openness of decision-making – was particularly strongly associated with affective commitment.

Recognition and rewards
While recognition is normally intangible, relational, unconditional and unexpected, rewards are tangible, transactional, conditional and expected. Both were found to be strongly associated with commitment, particularly with regards to satisfaction with pay and recognition and reward for contribution.

Leadership
Leaders who build positive interpersonal relations with their employees (leader–member exchange), have a transformational (rather than laissez-faire) approach, and are trusted and appreciated by their employees, see high levels of commitment among their teams.

Predictors of organisational identification

Perceived organisational prestige and reputation
Several studies found the perceived prestige of an organisation to predict organisational identification, suggesting that when a company's reputation drops, so too will employee identification. Related to this, perceived corporate social responsibility was found to strongly affect organisational identification, likely due to employees feeling greater pride in organisations that are conscious of their economic, social and environmental impact.

Employee trust
Employees were found to more likely identify with the organisation when they trust and respect their supervisor and higher management. This is likely because decisions made by supervisors and management affect employee perceptions of the organisation, thereby influencing their identification.

Person–organisation fit
One study found that perceived person–organisation fit, or the fit between employees' personal values and those of the organisation, strongly predicts organisational identification.

Perceived organisational justice
Perceived justice, in particular procedural justice – the perceived fairness of decision-making processes – was found to be a strong predictor of employee organisational identification.

Perceived organisational support and trust
The extent to which employees feel that their organisation values their contribution and cares about their wellbeing, also known as organisational support, was strongly correlated to their level of organisational identification. A similar association was found between the perceived trust employees feel their organisation feels towards them.

Organisational tenure and educational level
Among the various expected antecedents of organisational identification, evidence was found that employee tenure and educational level are not related to their identification with the organisation.

As well as understanding the factors that influence engagement, organisational commitment and organisational identification, it's important that we uncover what drives another key component of engagement: motivation. Motivation explains some of the fundamental mechanisms of engagement. This is widely discussed through various theories. These are outlined below, beginning with those that have the strongest evidence, before we consider theories that are outdated, have been subsumed by other theories or are discredited.

8 What motivates us at work?

In the last section we looked at the evidence on what predicts engagement, commitment and identification and the implications of this for people management practice. In this section we summarise a similar area in looking at the evidence on work motivation. However, motivation requires a different angle, for two reasons: first, theories of motivation describe *processes*, rather than focusing on psychological *states*; and second, the area of motivation is so well researched and the body of literature so large, that we could not realistically summarise it using the same rapid evidence assessment methods. Instead, we conducted a more traditional literature review, which does not follow the same systematic process of searching and appraisal.

Below we present the evidence from our thematic review of the literature. For more detail, see the scientific summary at cipd.co.uk/evidence-engagement

Evidence-based motivational theories
Based on the extensive body of theoretical and empirical research, we recommend four theories as the best bases to understand work motivation.

Social exchange theory
This theory concerns the extent to which people perceive the favourable treatment they receive from others as reflecting a concern for their wellbeing; such benefactors are considered more trustworthy and likely to provide valuable resources in the future.[114] Thus, employees who have had satisfying experiences with their organisation are more likely to develop a psychological attachment with that organisation.

Social identity theory
This suggests that motivation is not solely determined by self-interest, but rather by how people categorise themselves, such as by their characteristics (their gender, social background, or taste in music), or more specifically by their job level (for example manager, executive). People are motivated to attain goals that are compatible with the most important aspects of their social identity.

Self-determination theory
While not a single theory, self-determination theory suggests that all humans have three basic psychological needs that, when fulfilled, enable psychological growth and wellbeing: autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Self-regulation theory
This describes self-management that guides thoughts and behaviours and allows us to reach our goals. Self-regulation is mainly about stopping ourselves from doing things we know we should not do because it conflicts with long-term goals. For example, we may be motivated to tell our colleagues or the company's managers that they are stupid and incompetent, but self-regulation helps us overcome this career-limiting impulse.

Outdated motivational theories

There are several other theories that we would suggest are outdated, for example because they are subsumed within the motivational theories that are more fully developed or better evidenced. These include:

- **Reinforcement theory** suggests that people behave as a response to external stimuli and does not consider that behaviour can also result from internal processes. It is considered limited and no longer relevant.
- **Drive theory** asserts that behaviour is a result of internal drives and needs. Once the predominant motivational theory, drive theory is nowadays largely irrelevant and integrated in contemporary theories such as self-determination theory and self-regulation theory.
- **Cognitive dissonance theory** suggests that when people hold two or more conflicting or inconsistent ideas, they feel discomfort, and are motivated to remove this feeling by changing their attitudes or behaviour. Nowadays, it is considered too limited to explain what drives people's behaviour.
- **Job characteristic theory** states that certain conditions, or job dimensions, are required for people to be intrinsically motivated to perform well. It is supported by considerable evidence, but fails to consider important contextual variables, such as working in teams. It has been displaced by self-determination theory, which provides a more rounded explanation of motivation.
- **Expectancy theory** states that people are motivated to behave in a certain way based on their expected result of that behaviour. Conceptual and methodological weaknesses have meant that it is now integrated into self-regulation theory.
- **Social comparison theory** suggests that people compare themselves with others to judge their own achievements. When faced with unfavourable comparative information, they are motivated to put more effort in. **Equity theory** is similar, whereby employees compare their and others' input (effort) and outcomes (rewards) to determine what is fair. They are limited theories in that perceived fairness is influenced by various factors. Therefore, these theories fit within the broader construct of self-regulation and social exchange.

Finally, two theories of 'drive' in particular stand out for their ongoing popularity, but are widely discredited by scientific research. They are Maslow's hierarchical needs theory and Herzberg's motivation–hygiene theory.

Maslow's was once the predominant motivational theory, but nowadays it is largely irrelevant in scientific research and integrated into contemporary theories as described above. Although it may be intuitively appealing and is still often referred to in management literature, empirical research shows that there is little to no evidence supporting the existence of a hierarchy of needs[115] and the theory does not predict specific behaviour.[116]

Similarly, although Herzberg's theory remains attractive to many and is still frequently mentioned in popular textbooks, it is not supported by empirical evidence. In fact, the theory was refuted over 50 years ago.[117] In both cases, the refuting evidence is not new and well established, so we would suggest it is high time we laid these theories to rest.

What factors drive work motivation?

The body of research points consistently to a number of key factors that influence work motivation. The descriptions below are deliberately brief; each of the following areas are worthy of evidence reviews in their own right – indeed, the CIPD has conducted evidence reviews on goal-setting, appraisal (which relates to feedback)[118] and fairness in recruitment and selection:[119]

- **goal-setting:** consciously deciding goals for employees, teams, or organisations, setting time frames and monitoring progress
- **feedback:** providing information about a person's performance as a basis for improvement
- **recognition:** providing personal, non-monetary rewards for individual efforts to recognise and reinforce desired behaviours
- **monetary rewards:** pre-determined criteria and understood policies for allocating financial incentives
- **perceived work meaningfulness:** ensuring personal growth and enabling employees to help others and contribute to the greater good
- **perceived supervisory support:** providing positive interaction and feedback to employees from managers
- **empowerment/autonomy:** allowing employees both responsibility and autonomy to decide how to do their job
- **psychological safety:** a shared belief held by members that the group is safe for 'interpersonal risk-taking' – perceiving that speaking up will not result in ridicule or rejection
- **perceived fairness/justice:** subjective fairness, perceived by employees.

(9) Conclusion

What I talk about when I talk about employee engagement

Given the lack of common agreement on what employee engagement is, it is imperative that people using it identify which construct they are referring to, or at the very least agree a working definition. If we want core terms in the people profession to have due respect, they need a solid and clear foundation.

We can recommend two options when it comes to employee engagement. First, HR professionals can treat it as an umbrella term consistently, using it to describe a broad area of people management and referring to more specific constructs – like work engagement, organisational commitment and organisational identification – when we wish to be more specific. Given the grounds made by looking at engagement in this way, this is likely to be a very pragmatic solution.

A second valid option is to narrow what we mean by engagement to focus on the more precise and robust construct of *work engagement*. This has an advantage that it aligns with the best research on engagement, so it is easier to make decisions on points of nuance that are evidence-based and thus likely to be effective. It does require a narrower focus, but other constructs – like organisational commitment and identification – can be brought in to cater for other interests.

What we would strongly advise against is vagueness or inconsistency. If we treat engagement one moment as a wide-ranging, multifaceted idea and the next moment make specific claims about its nature, extent or benefits, we are attempting to have our cake and eat it. In addition, we recommend against using the term employee engagement to describe management activity. It may make grammatical sense, but it is not in line with the dominant view and thus is confusing.

It is always worth clarifying what people mean by employee engagement when they use the term; and if they don't know, it is worth exploring what is really of interest to them. One way of gauging someone's perspective may be to ask what they see as the opposite. If they say someone is burnt out, they are in the work engagement paradigm; if they say someone is 'busy acting out their unhappiness',[120] spreading negative energy or undermining others' efforts, they are in the satisfaction–engagement paradigm; if they say someone lacks a voice and is disenfranchised, they take an employee relations perspective.

Measurement

Measurements of engagement are never far behind the definitions, and with good reason. A version of the UWES, the shortest of which is only three items, has much to recommend it, as it is used by almost all the strongest research examining outcomes of engagement. A strength of the UWES lies in its specificity, but by the same token – being a measure specifically of work engagement – it does not cover other aspects of employee engagement that may be important. In short, just because the strongest quantitative research uses this measure does not mean that it is always the most relevant measure to use. Depending on one's interests, tried and tested measures of organisational commitment and organisational identification are available, and broader measures of employee engagement, though less well tested, look promising.

Some satisfaction-based measures have been influential in making employee engagement a fixture in boardroom discussions, but at the same time they do not wholly convince, especially as they bring together too many disparate things. HR professionals should carefully appraise the measures they use and opt for those that are properly tested and based on the strongest scientific constructs. Having said this, changing measures can be a big step: there is a trade-off between improving measures and keeping trend data.

A final word on engagement measurement would be that it is not the be-all and end-all. It is an important way to identify 'hot spots' in an organisation and trends over time, but may not always be necessary, especially in smaller organisations. Moreover, as a diagnostic tool, it is only a starting point. What employers and managers then do to respond is far more important.

Action

We have also investigated the drivers of engagement, organisational commitment, organisational identification and motivation. Fostering these attributes is not the sole responsibility of the HR function, or indeed any one group of people, but rather needs positive behaviour from managers at all levels of the organisation and from each employee.

A major influence on commitment and especially on identification is organisational *justice*, in particular procedural justice, being the perceived fairness and openness of decision-making. *Support* from supervisors, co-workers and from the organisation is also very important for organisational commitment and identification. And when employees feel their contribution is *recognised and valued* and are given honest and useful *feedback*, they are also more likely to identify closely with and feel committed towards their organisations. This is not an exhaustive list; other drivers of organisational commitment

and identification can be found in the scientific summaries available at cipd.co.uk/evidence-engagement Nonetheless, we recommend that these factors are placed high on the organisational agenda in order to boost employees' motivation, commitment and identification with their organisation.

Closing remarks: the evolution of engagement

Despite the subject being around for 30 years, the body of research on employee engagement is still relatively nascent. There is a lack of robust evidence showing causal relationships with outcomes, but engagement is not alone in this. Organisations are complex entities and causality can be difficult to establish in any aspect of HR or workplace research.

However, one thing we can be clear on is that engagement is a less mature construct than others, like organisational commitment, and far less so than theories of work motivation, on which there is a stronger body of research at this level.

Employee engagement is an idea that was borne of management practice and consultancy, so it is understandable that the constructs and evidence have not always stood up to academic scrutiny. This is not an issue to ignore but nor must it be fatal for the future of employee engagement. Evolution of constructs is a welcome development, both in the narrowing of the construct to *work engagement*, which can be more convincingly pinned down and measured, and in the better arrangement of employee engagement as an umbrella term, so that we are clear which specific constructs it relates to. Our hope is that this report reinforces the body of knowledge on this influential concept.

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