



Engaged or exhausted—How does it affect dentists' clinical productivity?



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ABSTRACT

This cross-sectional study examines whether job burnout (exhaustion) and work engagement are associated with the clinical productivity of dentists measured by the amount of paid procedure fees in a single month. We conducted an OLS regression analyses of data on dentists working at municipal health centers in Finland ($N=269$; response rate 37%). The results indicated that work engagement was positively associated with the amount of procedure fees and consequently with dentists' pay level after several work-related and demographic background variables were controlled for. However, exhaustion was not related to productivity after controlling for the impact of other factors.

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1. Introduction

Health care providers, and dentistry more specifically, are facing enormous challenges due to today's aging population, shrinking workforce, cost cutting strategies in the public sector, and growing public expectations for the quality of services. At the same time, competition and business logic have spread to health care, and the productivity of work has become a highly important issue for the producers and funding bodies of health services (Andersen, 2009). To meet these challenges, dentists, like other health care professionals, should be able to maintain or even raise the level of high quality job performance and productivity.

Productivity has always been a central topic for economics and management science. In macro-economics, the growth of productivity has traditionally been linked to technological development and innovations (Schumpeter, 1976) whereas at the organizational level the focus has been on (re)organizing work processes and incentive systems, such as pay-for-performance, which is seen as one "possible tool for improving productivity" (Hasnain, Manning, & Pierskalla, 2012). Labor productivity is a revealing indicator of several economic factors as it offers a dynamic measure of economic

growth, competitiveness, and living standards within an economy (Freeman, 2008).

In this article, productivity is investigated from the viewpoints of occupational health psychology and the 'happy-productive worker' hypothesis. According to this hypothesis (Wright & Cropanzano, 2004; Zelenski, Murphy, & Jenkins, 2008), happy and satisfied employees are more productive than their less happy and stressed colleagues. However, to our knowledge, no studies have simultaneously investigated the role played by negative (exhaustion) and positive (work engagement) work-related states in employee productivity and pay level. In the present study, we examine a sample of Finnish dentists to determine whether work engagement – a positive state of feeling vigorous, dedicated, and absorbed at work, and its conceptual opposite, exhaustion – a core dimension of job burnout – are related to clinical productivity after controlling for several professional and demographic background variables.

1.1. Burnout and its relationship with job performance and productivity

Burnout, a consequence of chronic work-related stress, is a syndrome that is characterized by high levels of exhaustion, negative attitudes toward work (cynicism), and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Burnout is particularly seen among human service and health care professionals. Exhaustion refers to feelings of strain, particularly chronic fatigue resulting from overtaxing work (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996).

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The second dimension, *cynicism* refers to an indifferent or a distant attitude toward work in general and the people with whom one works, losing interest in one's work and feeling that work has lost its meaning. Finally, lack of *professional efficacy* refers to reduced feelings of competence, successful achievement, and accomplishment in both one's job and the organization. In this study we focused on exhaustion, which is considered to be the core dimension of burnout (Roelofs, Verbraak, Keijsers, de Bruin, & Schmidt, 2005; Shirom & Melamed, 2006)[e.g. 9,10] and may later lead to other burnout symptoms (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). In addition, of the burnout dimensions, exhaustion has often been found to associate with poor job performance, whereas findings concerning cynicism and reduced professional efficacy have been either non-existent or inconsistent.

Several studies have shown the negative impact of burnout on employees in general (Ahola et al., 2008; Borrit, Rugulies, Christensen, Villadsen, & Kristensen, 2006; Leiter et al., 2013) as well as on health care professionals (Schaufeli, 2007), including dentists (Ahola & Hakanen, 2007; Denton, Newton, & Bower, 2008; Gorter, te Brake, Eijkman, & Hoogstraten, 2006; Humphries, 1998). For example, a longitudinal study in a large sample of Finnish dentists by Hakanen and Schaufeli (Hakanen & Schaufeli, 2012) showed that burnout predicted depression and life dissatisfaction over a seven-year follow-up period. However, it is not really known whether burnout would negatively affect job performance and productivity in dentistry, and more generally in health care.

Why would burnout impact on job performance, i.e. clinical productivity and consequently also on performance-based pay? According to the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1998) people seek to obtain, retain, and protect that which they value, for example, material, social, personal, or energetic resources. The COR theory proposes that stress and burnout experienced by individuals can be understood in relation to potential or actual loss of resources. These resource (e.g. mental, physical, and emotional energies) losses may lead to exhaustion and consequently to poorer performance and productivity at work. This is because depletion of personal energies will reduce the dentist's capacity to exert control over their work environment and thereby negatively influence their ability to function effectively (Taris, 2006). In addition, according to the COR theory, those who lack resources are likely to adopt a defensive posture to guard their remaining resources (Hobfoll, 1998). Thus, an employee who suffers from exhaustion may invest fewer resources into work due to psychological withdrawal, and as a result, the second dimension of burnout, cynicism, may develop. An unmotivated state of cynicism will, in its turn, further undermine job performance (Taris, 2006).

In general, previous studies on the relationships of burnout (and work engagement) and productivity have often conceptualized employees' productivity in terms of job or task performance (in-role behavior). Job performance refers to, for example, the extent to which the employee has achieved the objectives of her/his work and is planning to achieve objectives and meet deadlines (Goodman & Svyantek, 1999)[e.g. 23]. The evidence on the associations between burnout and job performance is still quite meager. A meta-analysis of 16 studies by Taris (Taris, 2006) indicated that the correlations between burnout and objectively measured performance were surprisingly weak. Of the burnout dimensions, exhaustion had a meta-analytic correlation of -0.22 with performance. Taris concluded that the evidence for the other two dimensions, cynicism and professional efficacy, was inconclusive. An earlier review (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998) reported even weaker relationships and concluded that irrespective of the dimension of burnout, on average, the explained variance of objectively measured performance was less than 1%. For example, a longitudinal study by Wright and Bonett (Wright & Bonett, 1997) showed that exhaustion, but not the other two dimensions,

negatively predicted subsequent performance. In addition, a study by Bakker et al. (Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004) found that exhaustion was negatively related to in-role performance, whereas disengagement (cynicism) was related to extra-role performance (organizational citizenship behaviors).

1.2. Work engagement and its relationship with job performance and productivity

Work engagement has been defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Roma, & Bakker, 2002). Thus, engaged workers have high levels of energy, are involved in their work, and are fully concentrated on and happily engrossed in their work. Previous studies in dentistry have indicated that as in other professions, energizing and motivating aspects of work, generally labeled as job resources (e.g. clinical autonomy, skill variety, craftsmanship, professional contacts, and co-operation with dental nurses) boost work engagement (Gorter & Freeman, 2010; Gorter, te Brake, Hoogstraten, & Eijkman, 2008; Hakanen, Bakker, & Demerouti, 2005; Hakanen, Peeters, & Perhoniemi, 2011). Longitudinal studies among Finnish dentists have shown that work engagement may have positive consequences for the organization, as indicated by positive long-term effects on organizational commitment (Hakanen, Schaufeli, & Ahola, 2008a), proactive behavior and work-unit innovativeness (H, P, & T, 2008b). Indirectly, these findings suggest that work engagement is related to employee productivity.

The positive relationships between engagement and good job performance can be explained by several mechanisms, most importantly perhaps by the positive emotions that are experienced in a state of work engagement (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010). According to the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998) positive emotions broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources. Feeling good sparks the willingness to play, try things out, and experiment. This kind of initiative and creative activity fosters new ideas and novel solutions. Positive emotions may lead individuals toward more optimal functioning, creativity, and achievement motivation not just momentarily, but also in the long-term (Fredrickson, 2000). Thus, employees who experience a positive state of emotional and motivational fulfillment at work, i.e. work engagement, may over time perform better and be more productive than their less engaged colleagues.

Although the potential salience of work engagement to productivity in health care remains yet to be demonstrated, several studies in other professional sectors have focused on work engagement and job performance. For example, work engagement was positively related to job performance in a sample of firemen and their supervisors (Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010). Xanthopoulou et al. (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009) found in their study on workers of a fast-food company that day-level work engagement positively predicted daily financial returns. In another study conducted by a similar diary method among flight attendants Xanthopoulou et al. (Xanthopoulou, Heuven, Demerouti, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2008) pointed out that colleague support had an effect on in-role performance through work engagement. Similarly, Bakker and Bal (Bakker & Bal, 2010) showed that teachers' momentary work engagement positively associated with their performance. Finally, two meta-analyses also lend support to the positive association between engagement and job performance: A meta-analysis by Harter et al. (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002) suggested that employee engagement – referring to the individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work – is associated with business unit-level productivity and profitability. In their meta-analysis,

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