

# Engagement within occupational trainees: Individual difference predictors and commitment outcome

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## ABSTRACT

The present study examines occupational entrants' experiences of their vocational training, its relation with relevant internal characteristics, and its proposed impact on commitment to the profession. Particular focus is paid to trainees' engagement, hypothesizing motivation and self-efficacy as predictors, and occupational commitment as a distal outcome. Data were from 247 recent entrants into professional degree programs (architecture, engineering). All hypothesized predictive relations were supported, such that motivation (as both a composite and as solely intrinsic) and self-efficacy are predictive of engagement, and engagement is predictive of occupational commitment among early-stage trainees. Further, engagement partially mediated the relation between self-efficacy and commitment, and fully mediated the relation between motivation and commitment. Squared multiple correlations for endogenous variables indicated substantial variance in engagement and commitment accounted for by their respective predictors. Moreover, two structural equation models were examined and compared, proposing more holistic nomological nets for how these constructs fit together. A respecified model accounting for a sole focus on intrinsic motivation and a direct path between motivation and commitment was an excellent fit, superseding a competing model conceptualizing motivation as a composite and only an indirect motivation–commitment path. Finally, need for achievement moderated the relation between motivation and engagement such that the relation is stronger for individuals high in need for achievement than it is for those low in the desire to grow in their profession. The study contributes to our understanding of how early occupational trainees' experiences of work and individual characteristics impact their commitment to their intended profession.

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## 1. Introduction

The rise of positive organizational behavior (Luthans, 2002) has led to a greater focus on related constructs such as work engagement, and this is true in both the realms of the workplace, as well as the educational classrooms and experiences preparing people for those workplaces (e.g., Kezar & Kinzie, 2006). However, despite evidence that engagement has a positive effect on learning (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), little attention has been paid to engagement and its correlates at the intersection of those two realms: the education and training of those entering professional occupations. Likewise, researchers (e.g., Rothman,

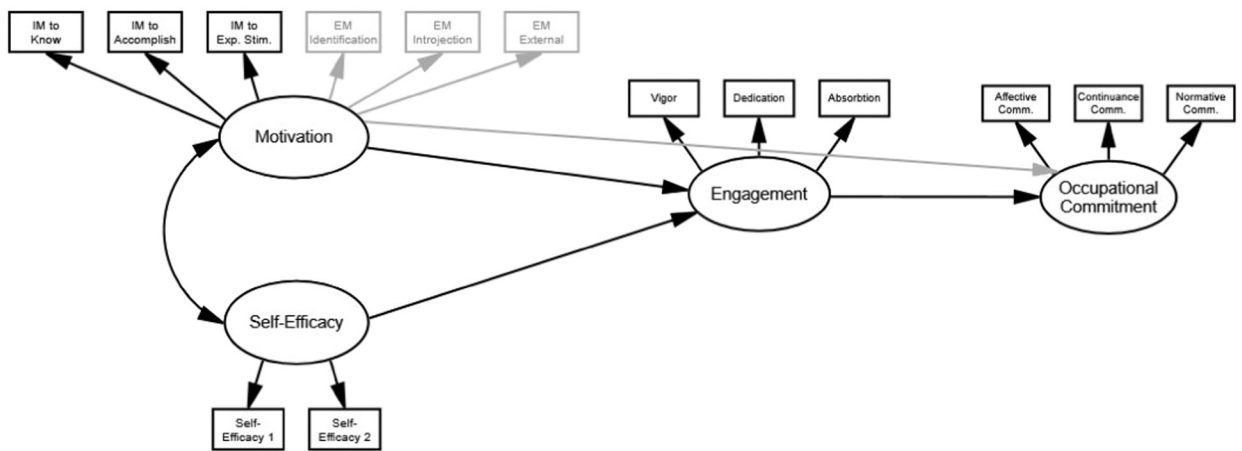
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2003; Saks, 2006) have argued that further inquiry into engagement and its antecedents is needed in general, but especially within the domain of academic training. Nevertheless, despite engagement having been explored as a mediator in several models, Rothman (2003) argued that many more such models are needed to better understand the nomological net within which engagement functions. Saks (2006) echoed this contention, but more specifically emphasized the need for academically-oriented engagement models to ascertain the role that engagement plays in preparing future workers for their intended professions. Notably, this need goes beyond Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement, which – while relevant to the extent that it recognizes both the psychological and physical energy necessary for successful pursuit of academic goals – is more targeted toward an overall student experience in the collegiate realm (e.g., including extracurricular activities), as opposed to the focus of the current study, which is concerned with engagement in one's professional training undertakings (e.g., architecture's hands-on studio courses). Further, since Astin's initial work there has been considerable evidence suggesting that engagement and involvement are distinct – albeit related – constructs, and that this is the case in both the educational realm (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014) as well as the employment realm (Scrima, Lorito, Parry, & Falgares, 2014; Steele et al., 2012).

The present study contributes toward closing the aforementioned gaps in the extant research literature by a) proposing and empirically examining a model of engagement's relations with important employee- and occupationally-relevant constructs, and b) doing so within a sample of recent entrants into professional degree programs, thereby targeting occupational entrants at their earliest point of entry into, and training for, their respective professional fields. This has recently been suggested (Volodina, Nagy, & Koller, 2015) as a crucial time period during which to evaluate occupational interests and commitment and their individual difference predictors, and this holds especially true for job types with a strong professional identity such as those studied herein. The aim of the present research is to contribute to the literature by examining an engagement model (Fig. 1) that may yield important insights into how early occupational entrants experience their vocational training, thereby delineating ways that vocational training programs can enhance engagement (e.g., by enhancing motivation and/or self-efficacy) and, in turn, also enhance other positive outcomes that are of relevance to their respective professional field (e.g., commitment to the occupation).

Defined as a “persistent, positive affective-motivational state of fulfillment” (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001, p. 417), engagement comprises *vigor* (energy, effort, resilience, persistence), *dedication* (involvement, enthusiasm, a sense of pride and inspiration), and *absorption* (immersion in one's work, the sense of time passing quickly) (Schaufeli, Martínez, Marques-Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002a; Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Romá, & Bakker, 2002b). Although models of engagement are arguably limited (Rothman, 2003), they include a model supported by Hakanen, Bakker, and Schaufeli (2006). Grounded in the job demands-resources model, Hakanen et al. identified engagement as a motivational process that mediates the relation between job resources and organizational commitment. Salanova and Schaufeli (2008) likewise confirmed a model of engagement mediating the relation between job resources and proactive behavior, and others (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Heuven, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2008) found that engagement mediated the relation between self-efficacy and job performance. Beyond this, Fredrickson's (2001) broaden and build theory suggests that engagement may be predicted by other positive constructs, and may in turn be predictive of subsequent positive outcomes. This is in line with the ‘upward spirals’ facet of the theory, such that positive affective states and behaviors beget subsequent positive affective states and behaviors, which in turn beget others, reinforcing a cyclical pattern.



**Fig. 1.** Model 1 and Model 2 † ‡. † Grey paths/variables represent changes from Model 1 to Model 2, as follows: Model 1 is represented by diagram excepting motivation → commitment direct path. Model 2 is represented by diagram excepting extrinsic motivational factors.

‡ Structural equation modeling precludes analysis of unidimensional latent variables, therefore self-efficacy was evenly divided into two subscales (odd-numbered items, even-numbered items) prior to aggregation.

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