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# Strategic and proactive approaches to work engagement



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In a highly competitive business world where the rate of change has been accelerating, organizations increasingly rely on the strengths and talents of their employees. Modern organizations that want to stay competitive need engaged employees — individuals who have high levels of energy, dedication, and absorption. Engaged employees have an abundance of “resources” which they can invest in their work. They are enthusiastic about their work, immersed in their work activities, and persistent when confronted with challenges and hindrances. Meta-analytic studies that distill the average effect found in hundreds of studies have shown that work engagement is a crucial predictor of job and organizational performance. Moreover, research of the past decade has provided strong evidence for the notion that engagement leads to key organizational outcomes, including creativity and innovation, client satisfaction, positive financial results, and reduced sickness absenteeism.

In this paper, I discuss strategic (top-down) and proactive (bottom-up) approaches to work engagement. Organizations that follow a top-down approach may implement strategic human resource management (HRM) systems to facilitate employee work engagement, or make their leaders aware of the importance of providing job resources to their employees. Organizations may also facilitate their employees in proactively mobilizing resources themselves. I will discuss four possible bottom-up approaches to work engagement, namely (a) self-management, (b) job crafting, (c) strengths use, and (d) mobilizing ego resources. Whereas strategic HRM initiatives and transformational leadership are expected to have an important structural impact on employee work engagement through an enriched work environment, employees may also influence their own levels of work engagement by being proactive — from day to day. I will argue that employee work engagement is most likely in organizations with a clear HR strategy, in which leaders provide resources to their employees, and in which employ-

ees engage in daily proactive behaviors such as job crafting and strengths use.

## WORK ENGAGEMENT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF JD–R THEORY

Work engagement is a mental state in which a person performing a work activity is fully immersed in the activity, feeling full of energy and enthusiasm about the work. According to William Kahn, who coined the term engagement in 1990, engagement refers to the simultaneous employment and expression of a person’s ‘preferred self’ in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others. By being authentically involved, employees increase their personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement), which leads to active and full performance. This original conceptualization emphasizes that engaged workers put a lot of effort into their work because they strongly identify with it. In the academic literature, work engagement is most often defined and measured as a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Vigor refers to high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, and the ability to invest considerable effort in one’s work. Dedication indicates that one is strongly involved in one’s work, and experiences a sense of meaningfulness, enthusiasm, and inspiration. Absorption refers to being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in work, whereby time passes quickly. Work engagement can be reliably measured with the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale that I developed with Wilmar Schaufeli.

Research of the past two decades has confirmed Kahn’s original idea that employee engagement is a function of the ebbs and flows of work. Specifically, studies show that work engagement fluctuates from day to day, and even from

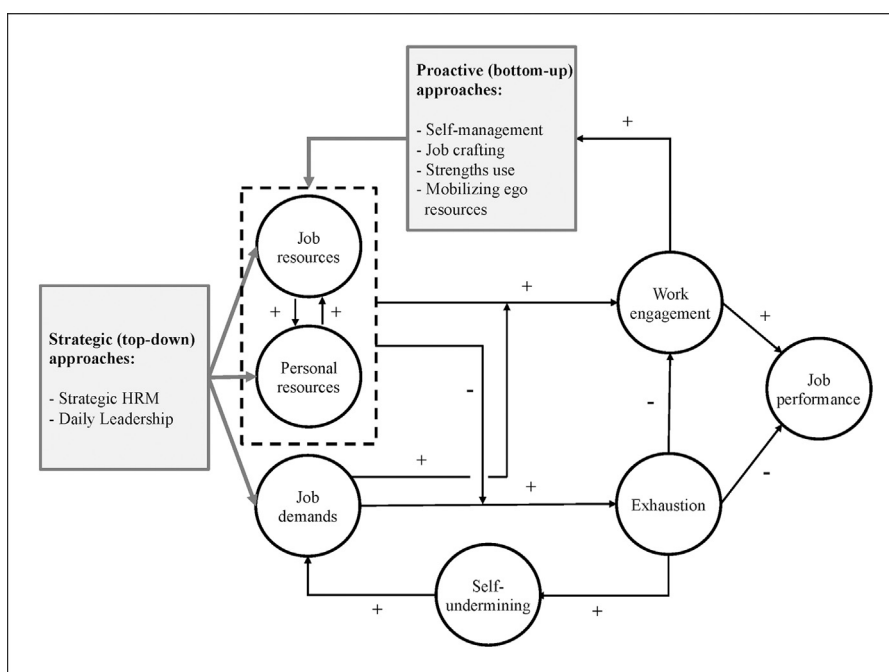
performance episode to performance episode. Whereas the specific drivers of engagement vary as a function of the type of work, occupational sector, and organization, research shows that work engagement peaks when employees are confronted with positive events and daily interesting job demands — particularly when they simultaneously have access to sufficient job resources. Thus, complex work tasks, demanding customers, and a high time pressure may act as challenges when employees receive sufficient social support from their colleagues, have decision latitude, and can use a variety of their skills while at work. Over the years, we have defined job resources as the physical, social, psychological, or organizational aspects of the job that are functional in achieving work goals. Due to their motivational potential, job resources satisfy psychological needs, and help employees to deal with job demands and meet work targets.

According to our Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) theory, work engagement is a function of the job demands and resources provided by the organization. More specifically, engagement is an intermediate factor (also called “mediator” or “throughput”) in a causal process in which job demands and resources (or their combination) are the predictors, and job/organizational performance is the outcome. However, JD–R theory also acknowledges that employees may be proactive and take the initiative to personally change their own work environment. This proactive behavior is called “job crafting”, and may take the form of increasing one’s challenges at work and increasing one’s job resources. Through job crafting, employees can start a gain cycle of feeling well and doing well (see top of Fig. 1). Engaged employees have access to an abundance of job resources. Since engaged employees are motivated to stay engaged, they employ job crafting behaviors — proactively mobilizing their own job resources. In contrast, employees who are often confronted with high and negative job

demands (called “hindrance demands”; e.g., role ambiguity, conflicts, bureaucratic procedures) develop high levels of exhaustion, and may end up in a vicious loss cycle. In this loss cycle, exhaustion is the cause of undesirable behaviors that undermine effective functioning (see bottom of Fig. 1). In JD–R theory, self-undermining refers to behaviors such as creating stress, conflicts, and misunderstanding, which add to the already high job demands. It is only through the provision or proactive mobilization of resources that employees can get out of this negative, loss cycle. In the next section, I will discuss the top-down and bottom-up approaches that can be used to increase work engagement.

## TOP-DOWN APPROACHES TO WORK ENGAGEMENT

Most modern organizations recognize that employees are increasingly looking for job roles that include opportunities for challenge, growth, and engagement. The hundreds of leaders, managers and consultants with whom I have discussed this topic in master classes, conferences, workshops and executive development programs over the last twenty years are well aware of the fact that their respective organizations need to provide an interesting and challenging work environment with sufficient resources. To attract and retain high-caliber, engaged, and productive employees, organizations need to provide work contexts that offer a good fit between employees’ role expectations and their work environment. Scholars in the domain of human resource management have argued that organizations can increase employee work engagement by selecting the candidates who are best suited to the job *and* fit with the organization’s culture. Simon Albrecht and his colleagues maintain that engagement needs to be explicitly embedded



**Figure 1** Strategic and Proactive Approaches to Work Engagement Integrated in the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014)

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