



## Does work engagement mediate the effects of challenge stressors on job outcomes? Evidence from the hotel industry



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### ABSTRACT

Drawing on the transactional theory of stress, a research model investigating whether challenge stressors, as manifested by work overload and job responsibility, heighten work engagement and organizationally valued job outcomes is proposed and tested. Using data gathered from frontline employees with a time lag of two weeks and their supervisors in the five-star hotels in Northern Cyprus, the relationships were assessed through structural equation modeling. As hypothesized, work engagement fully mediates the effects of challenge stressors on affective organizational commitment and job performance. Employees who experience such stressors are engaged in their work, and therefore, display positive job outcomes. Theoretical implications as well as management implications are discussed in the article.

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### 1. Introduction

Long and anti-social work hours, organizational politics, emotional dissonance, and work-family conflict are among potential stressful demands in frontline service jobs. This is a major concern to hotel managers, because such stressful and demanding situations influence employees' motivation and job outcomes (e.g., organizational commitment, job satisfaction) deleteriously (e.g., [Gursoy et al., 2011](#); [Kusluvan et al., 2010](#); [Zhao and Mattila, 2013](#)). However, an inspection of the current literature suggests that not all stressors may always exert detrimental effects on employee outcomes. Consistent with this reasoning, [Cavanaugh et al. \(2000\)](#) classified stressors into two categories: hindrance and challenge stressors. Hindrance stressors (e.g., role conflict, organizational politics, role ambiguity) have been reported to be negatively associated with motivation and job outcomes ([Crawford et al., 2010](#); [Rodell and Judge, 2009](#)). Examples of challenge stressors consist of work overload and job responsibility. Challenge stressors have been shown to trigger employees' motivation and job outcomes, since they increase positive emotions, promote personal growth, and give a sense of personal accomplishment ([LePine et al., 2005](#)).

#### 1.1. Purpose

Against this backdrop, this study develops and tests a research model that investigates whether challenge stressors enhance organizationally valued job outcomes through work engagement. Affective organizational commitment and job performance are the outcomes examined in this study.

As a motivational variable, work engagement is defined as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” ([Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74](#)). Work engagement is related to activation and optimal functioning in the workplace in terms of well-being ([Christian et al., 2011](#); [Hallberg and Schaufeli, 2006](#)). However, affective organizational commitment is related to the strength of an employee's emotional attachment to an organization. Job satisfaction is associated with an evaluation of job characteristics ([Christian et al., 2011](#)). As a cognitive construct, job involvement can be considered an aspect of engagement but “does not refer to work tasks specifically but rather to aspects of the job including how much the job can satisfy an individual's needs” ([Christian et al., 2011, p. 98](#)).

[Hallberg and Schaufeli's \(2006\)](#) study provides evidence for discriminant validity between work engagement, job involvement, and affective organizational commitment and further demonstrates that work engagement has strong and consistent associations with health complaints when compared with those of job involvement and affective organizational commitment. In [Rich et al.'s \(2010\)](#) study, it is reported that job involvement and job satisfaction do not exceed work engagement in explaining the relationship between the antecedents (e.g., perceived organizational support) and performance outcomes (e.g., task performance). [Christian et al.'s \(2011\)](#) meta-analytic study includes job

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satisfaction, affective organizational commitment, and job involvement as mediators in a research model due to their conceptual similarities with work engagement and their proximity to performance outcomes (Christian et al., 2011). However, the results of their study show that work engagement explains incremental variance in predicting performance outcomes.

Based on information and evidence given above, it can be concluded that work engagement, affective organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and job involvement are empirically different constructs (Christian et al., 2011; Hallberg and Schaufeli, 2006). It also seems that work engagement is a critical construct in predicting job performance better than job attitudes (Rich et al., 2010).

Job performance refers to “the level of productivity of an individual employee, relative to his or her peers, on several job-related behaviors and outcomes” (Babin and Boles, 1998, p. 82). Employees who are highly engaged in their work display elevated levels of affective commitment to the organization and perform effectively in service delivery process (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008; Karatepe, 2011). The previously mentioned relationships are evaluated with data collected from frontline employees with a two-week time lag and their supervisors in the five-star hotels in Northern Cyprus.

### 1.2. Contribution to the current knowledge base

Two contributions to the hospitality management literature are of note. First, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model assumes two processes: the health impairment process and the motivational process (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). According to the health impairment process, chronic job demands such as role ambiguity and work-family conflict exhaust employees' physical and mental resources and lead to energy depletion and health problems. The motivational process contends that job resources, due to their motivational role, stimulate work engagement and job outcomes. However, the JD-R model does not differentiate job demands in terms of challenging or threatening demands. Though employees tend to have different perceptions and appraisal with respect to these job demands, the JD-R model does not distinguish challenge stressors from hindrance stressors. Studies that have used the JD-R model generally reveal that job demands do not predict work engagement (e.g., Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004).

It appears that there is a dearth of empirical research about demands that are appraised by employees as challenges are positively related to work engagement (Crawford et al., 2010). Furthermore, the hospitality management literature seems to be devoid of empirical research pertaining to the effects of *challenge stressors* on frontline employee outcomes. Specifically, it has been argued that very little is known about whether work-related stress (e.g., challenge stressors) is always detrimental to employees' performance outcomes (e.g., creative performance) (Hon et al., 2013).

Second, this study treats work engagement as a *mediator* of the impacts of challenge stressors on affective organizational commitment and job performance. LePine et al.'s (2005) meta-analytic study reveals that challenge stressors are positively related to overall job performance through motivation. In another meta-analytic study, it has been reported that challenge stressors positively influence affective organizational commitment directly and indirectly through job satisfaction (Podsakoff et al., 2007). According to Rich et al. (2010), there is still a dearth of empirical research about work engagement as a critical mechanism through which organizational factors influence employee performance. In short, the mechanism linking challenge stressors to specific job outcomes is still a black box. Realizing the gap in the current knowledge base and responding to calls for more empirical research, this study links challenge stressors to affective organizational commitment and job performance via work engagement *simultaneously* using the transactional

theory of stress as the theoretical framework. To the best of authors' knowledge, no empirical study has assessed the aforementioned relationships using data gathered from frontline hotel employees. Finally, the results of this study will offer useful implications regarding management of stress in terms of challenge stressors.

## 2. Theoretical background, hypotheses, and research model

### 2.1. Background

The stressor-strain-outcome perspective or the health impairment process of the JD-R model has been used to ascertain whether job demands increase strain and thus negatively influence employee attitudes and behaviors. For example, in a study of frontline employees in the Korean tourism and hospitality industry, Choi et al. (2012) found that customer-related social stressors mitigated service recovery performance and customer orientation through emotional exhaustion. Lee and Ok (2012) demonstrated that customer-contact employees were emotionally exhausted due to emotional dissonance, and therefore, were dissatisfied with the job. Moon et al. (2013) reported that surface acting was linked to organizational commitment through emotional exhaustion among flight attendants in Korea. Not surprisingly, strain/emotional exhaustion leads to negative job outcomes, because it increases negative emotions and cognitions (Podsakoff et al., 2007).

Although evidence suggests that stressors lead to strain and undesirable job outcomes, different types of stressors may give rise to different attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. The transactional theory of stress provides guidance for this claim. Specifically, stress emerges from a transaction between a person and his or her environment (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Individuals evaluate whether demands and resources have implications for their well-being (Judge and Colquitt, 2004; Lyon, 2012). Demands can be evaluated as either potentially challenging or threatening. As classified by Cavanaugh et al. (2000), there are two types of stressors: hindrance and challenge stressors. Hindrance stressors lead to strain and negative job outcomes, because they result in negative emotions and individuals assess them as threatening and barriers to their personal development and goal accomplishment (Podsakoff et al., 2007). However, challenge stressors lead to positive emotions and foster personal development and growth. Individuals evaluate challenge stressors as motivating and meaningful and tend to invest their effort and time in meeting challenging demands (Crawford et al., 2010).

Cavanaugh et al. (2000) reported that challenge stressors enhanced job satisfaction and reduced job search behaviors, because employees viewed such stressors as an opportunity for personal development and accomplishment. In LePine et al.'s (2005) meta-analytic inquiry, challenge stressors were positively associated with motivation and overall job performance. Recently, Crawford et al.'s (2010) meta-analytic test indicated that challenge stressors had a stronger positive influence on work engagement than on burnout.

In light of the aforementioned information, this study posits that challenge stressors, as manifested by work overload and job responsibility, enhance employees' work engagement in frontline service jobs in the hotel industry. Such employees in turn display affective commitment to the organization and high quality performance in service delivery process. The hypothesized relationships are discussed below.

### 2.2. Hypotheses

Work overload and job responsibility are treated as the indicators of challenge stressors in this study. These stressors are

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