



# A task-level perspective on work engagement: A new approach that helps to differentiate the concepts of engagement and burnout



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## ABSTRACT

This theoretical paper differentiates work engagement from the burnout concept by using a task-level perspective. Specifically, I argue that work engagement (i.e., the experience of vigor, dedication and absorption, Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) emerges during the process of working. It does not only differ between persons and does not only fluctuate from one day to the other (or even within the course of a day), but can vary largely between different work tasks. Burnout (and particularly exhaustion) as a chronic state does not differ from one work task to the other. I describe task features derived from the job characteristics model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) as predictors of task-specific work engagement and discuss interaction effects between task features on the one hand and job-level social and personal resources on the other hand. I outline possible avenues for future research and address practical implications, including task design and employee's energy management throughout the workday.

## 1. Introduction

The phenomena of engagement and burnout attracted substantial research attention during the past decades. One important topic in this research area refers to the question of how work engagement as a “positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind” (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) and burnout as a “prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job” (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001, p. 397) with exhaustion as its “central quality” (p. 402) relate to one another. For instance, Maslach and Leiter (1999) described burnout and engagement as two ends of one continuum, whereas Schaufeli and his co-workers (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002) conceptualized engagement and burnout as two distinct constructs.

Confirmatory factor analyses tend to support the perspective that engagement and burnout are distinct constructs, at least when conducting the analysis at the item level (Byrne, Peters, & Weston, 2016; for a different approach, cf. Cole, Walter, Bedeian, & O'Boyle, 2012). Meta-analyses based on studies that used person-level measures of engagement and burnout reported mean correlations of  $\rho = -0.48$ ,  $k = 54$ ,  $N = 25,998$  (Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010) and  $\rho = -0.55$  (Cole et al., 2012) between the two constructs. Correlations varied across the various sub-dimensions of engagement and burnout. Specifically, the correlation of exhaustion with the three sub-dimensions of engagement ranged between  $\rho = -0.21$ ,  $k = 21$ ,  $N = 15,503$ , for absorption, and  $\rho = -0.43$ ,  $k = 36$ ,  $N = 24,095$ , for vigor (Cole

et al., 2012). Thus, person-level analyses document substantial associations between the engagement and burnout in general and between engagement and exhaustion in particular. However, the underlying constructs seem to be distinct.

Although it is important to look at engagement and burnout at the person level and to identify factors that may contribute to between-person differences in engagement and burnout (cf., Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Crawford et al., 2010; for meta-analyses), a between-person perspective does not capture all core features of these important concepts, particularly not with respect to work engagement. It has been argued that a person's work engagement fluctuates from day to day (Sonnentag, 2003; Sonnentag, Demerouti, & Dormann, 2010) and also during the course of the day (Sonnentag & Kühnel, 2016). Empirical studies have provided empirical support for this perspective (e.g., Reis, Arndt, Hoppe, & Lischetzke, in press; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Heuven, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2008). Importantly, this within-person fluctuation is not random, but can be predicted by events and experiences that also fluctuate from day to day (Breevaart et al., 2014b; Christian, Eisenkraft, & Kapadia, 2015; Demerouti, Bakker, & Halbesleben, 2015).

In this paper, I argue that work engagement does not only differ between persons and does not only fluctuate from one day to the other (or even within the course of a day), but that it also largely varies between different work tasks (Bakker, 2014; Sonnentag, 2011). Work engagement does not only refer to one's *work* as a broad umbrella concept comprising the whole work situation and all work activities;

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work engagement emerges in the *process of working*, that is, when dealing with specific tasks. Based on the pioneering work of Kahn (1990), I argue that task features substantially contribute to the experience of work engagement. For instance, a human-resource consultant will be engaged when developing a new training concept for an important client, but will be much less engaged when answering routine e-mails addressing administrative questions.

This task specificity of work engagement differentiates work engagement from burnout in general and from exhaustion in particular. Whereas work engagement may differ from task to task, contingent on characteristics of the task, burnout is a chronic state. Exhaustion as the core component of burnout refers to ‘feelings of being overextended and depleted of one’s emotional and physical resources’ (Maslach et al., 2001). These chronic feelings of overextension and depletion do not fluctuate depending on the task a person is actually working on at the moment, but is more or less stable over longer periods of time (Schaufeli, Maassen, Bakker, & Sixma, 2011). When a person experiences exhaustion as the central sub-dimension of burnout, the person will come to work in the morning in a state of chronic exhaustion. Over the course of the day, momentary exhaustion might increase because investing effort into work will deplete the momentary energy reservoir even further (Kammeyer-Mueller, Simon, & Judge, 2016; Trougakos, Beal, Cheng, Hideg, & Zweig, 2015) and the chronic state of exhaustion will influence how a person approaches his or her tasks (Bakker & Costa, 2014), but the chronic level of exhaustion is not influenced by specific task features and does not change while working on a specific task. In contrast, work engagement happens in the process of working and fluctuates depending on the task the person is working on at the moment.

Of course, the task-specificity perspective on work engagement does not imply that no between-person differences or between-day fluctuations in work engagement exist. Similar to processes underlying longer-term trajectories of change in burnout (Dunford, Shipp, Boss, Angermeier, & Boss, 2012), a person’s general level of work engagement can increase or decrease over longer periods of time, contingent on job-level and personal resources (Weigl et al., 2010; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009a). Moreover, rank-order stabilities of burnout and a person’s general level of work engagement are rather similar, with work engagement even showing a bit higher rank-order stabilities than does burnout (Mäkikangas, Kinnunen, Feldt, & Schaufeli, 2016). Despite this overlap when taking a longer-term temporal perspective on burnout and work engagement, it is typical for work engagement that it manifests itself in the process of working and can change from one task to the other. Thus, the task-specific perspective adds a more experiential approach to work engagement (Weiss & Rupp, 2011), focusing on specific tasks the employee is involved in at the very moment.

In developing the task-specificity approach to work engagement, I start with describing the task concept and summarizing studies that showed that it makes sense to address the task level. In the section that follows I argue that work engagement emerges in the process of working, highlighting the importance of the task for work engagement. Thereafter, I discuss how task features derived from the job characteristics model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) can explain between-task variability of work engagement. Then I describe how task characteristics interact with job-level social and personal resources as well as chronic levels of burnout in predicting work engagement. I devote one section to possible links between burnout and task-related process. Finally, I discuss how the task-specificity approach to work engagement helps to differentiate the work-engagement concept from the burnout concept. I conclude with practical implications and suggestions for future research.

## 2. The role of tasks

Tasks are essential aspects of a person’s overall work or job

situation. A task is a “set of prescribed activities a person normally performs during a typical work period” (Griffin, 1987; p. 94). Usually, various tasks are grouped or clustered together to build a job (Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991). Only very monotonous jobs comprise not more than one or two different tasks. Often jobs comprise a quite diverse set of tasks and job-design efforts (e.g., job enlargement) aimed at combining various tasks into one job so that the overall task mix results in higher motivation and better performance outcomes (Kilbridge, 1960). Relatedly, more recent research on workday design (Elsbach & Hargadon, 2006) suggested combining different types of tasks when striving for an optimal allocation of time and psychological resources during the workday.

The majority of job-design approaches mentioning “task characteristics” (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; p. 1323) have actually looked at a job’s average level of specific task attributes (Morgeson, Garza, & Campion, 2012; Wong & Campion, 1991). For instance, items of the Work Design Questionnaire (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006) address features of the job, and not features of single tasks. Similarly, the job-demands job-resources model as the most influential model specifying predictors of work engagement discusses task features (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). However, it does not address them at the task level, but focuses on task features at the job level. Thus, the job-design literature in general and the engagement literature in particular mainly looked at average levels of certain task characteristics within a job, but largely ignored the characteristics of specific tasks at the task level.

Although it might be sufficient for many purposes to characterize a job as a whole (Parker, Morgeson, & Johns, *in press*), this approach neglects that the distinct tasks that are grouped together in a job can have distinct features and will have quite different psychological implications. For instance, Elsbach and Hargadon (2006) have argued that workdays that comprise only cognitively demanding and challenging tasks may deplete employees’ creative potential, whereas workdays that allow for some “mindless work” can be beneficial for employees’ creativity. This reasoning implies that the cognitively less demanding tasks that are subsumed under “mindless” work (p. 470) differ in their psychological implications from the more demanding tasks.

Empirical studies suggest that addressing processes at the task level provides insights that do not become evident when looking at the job or person level (Taber & Alliger, 1995) or even the day level (Gabriel, Diefendorff, & Erickson, 2011). Taber and Alliger (1995) reported that within a given job tasks differ substantially in the degree to which they are perceived to be important, complex, enjoyable and whether they require concentration and close supervision.

In a study with nursing staff, Gabriel et al. (2011) examined satisfaction with tasks that were closely related to the nursing role (e.g., directly addressing patients and their families) and satisfaction with tasks that were only indirectly related to the nursing role (e.g., administrative tasks). Gabriel and her co-workers found that satisfaction with tasks more central to the nursing role showed stronger associations with affect at the end of the workday, and that social and psychological resources showed a different interaction pattern with satisfaction with direct versus indirect care tasks. In an experience-sampling study with five measurement points per day, Fisher, Minbashian, Beckmann, and Wood (2013) found that appraisals of specific task features were associated with change in affect. In more detail, appraising a task as important and being confident about effective task completion were positively related to an increase in positive affect and a decrease in negative affect from one measurement point to the next. Importantly, appraisals referred to relative importance and confidence, compared to the respondent’s average level of task importance and task confidence. Overall, these studies suggest that there are substantial differences in the affective processes associated with various types of work tasks.

These findings illustrate that it will also be fruitful for work-engagement research to develop a task-specific approach and to take

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