



A new look at compliance with work procedures: An engagement perspective

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ABSTRACT

This research presents a model of employee behaviour related to the use of procedures in safety critical industries. A key contribution is the focus on procedure-related behaviour that is enacted when employees are engaged with their work—such as when they invest personal effort into complying with procedures and voice suggestions or concerns they have with the procedures. This study examines how these two engaged behaviours, namely, effort towards compliance and procedure-related voice behaviour, are influenced by psychological and organizational factors. In doing so, we introduce Kahn's theory of work engagement into the safety procedure literature. Survey data were collected from 152 maintainers in a mining corporation in Australia. The data were analysed using path analysis. Our results indicated that supervisor helping behaviour had a significant positive effect on effort towards compliance and procedure-related voice, via its influence on perceived usefulness and job self-efficacy, respectively. The results suggest that employees' perceptions of the utility value of the procedures as well as their own capabilities in carrying out their job tasks play a key role in shaping how employees use procedures. Organizations should influence those perceptions in order to encourage employees' engagement in the use of procedures. Our study suggests that this can be achieved by structuring the role of supervisors to ensure they have the capacity and availability to help their team members.

1. Introduction

In safety critical industries, organisations tend to rely on written procedures to specify how potentially hazardous work tasks should be executed as a major approach to control risks (Hale and Swuste, 1998). The terms “safety procedure” and “procedure” have been used in the literature to cover written guidelines and regulation that have safety implications (Hale and Borys, 2013a). The critical role of procedures is demonstrated by the reoccurring finding that a lack of compliance with procedures is one of the most important factors that contribute to accidents (Dekker, 2005; Hopkins, 2011), and both scholars and practitioners share a deep interest in understanding employees' compliance behaviour (Clarke, 2006). Griffin and Neal (2000) conceptualised compliance with procedures as a core safety behaviour. Based on this conceptualisation of safety compliance, a number of follow-up studies have been conducted to understand the personal and organisational factors that promote this behaviour (Bronkhorst, 2015; Christian et al., 2009; Cui et al., 2013; Dahl, 2013; Dahl and Olsen, 2013; Hu et al., 2016; Li et al., 2013; Nahrgang et al., 2011; Neal and Griffin, 2006).

Although the importance of procedure compliance is well established, researchers also recognize that procedures have limitations in and of themselves. As Praino and Sharit (2016) summarised, procedures can be difficult to understand and interpret, effortful to carry out, and may be inappropriate to use when work conditions are different from anticipated. Acknowledging these limitations of procedures, Hale and Borys (2013a) proposed that the management of procedures should be a continuous and dynamic process, through which procedures are implemented, monitored, evaluated and improved. In their procedure management model, employees' efforts in applying procedures in the local task environment are essential for safe operations. Furthermore, employees are believed to possess valuable experience and knowledge and thus can contribute to the monitoring and improvement of procedures by speaking up about their experience using procedures.

Despite the recognition that employees can take an active role in their use of procedures, existing safety research has not investigated the nature of this role or its antecedents. In the broader organisational psychology literature, researchers have investigated employee engagement in relation to positive psychological states and active behaviours

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of employees that are particularly important for organisational effectiveness (Macey and Schneider, 2008). The term “engagement” was first applied by Kahn (1990) to describe the extent to which employees invest themselves in their work role performance. He defined engagement as “the harnessing of organisational members’ selves to their work roles” (pp. 694). When employees are engaged, they are likely to perform a range of behaviours that are beneficial for the organisation, including putting effort into their work role performance, voice (speaking up), and advocating for their organisation, among others (Macey and Schneider, 2008). Following their work, we argue that employees can invest their psychological self in the use of procedures, in the same way as they invest their psychological self in their job roles. When employees are engaged in their use of procedures, they are expected to expend the effort required to comply with procedures properly (rather than just ticking the box) and contribute to the organisations’ procedure management system by voicing any ideas they have for improving the quality of procedures. By incorporating the work engagement theory (Kahn, 1990), our study contributes to the safety literature by providing a theoretical framework that captures important employee behaviours related to the use of procedures in safety critical industries, beyond the traditional focus on compliance. Also, it serves to unveil the organisational and psychological processes that drive those positive behaviours.

In the following section, we begin by conceptualizing two constructs which are behavioural manifestations of engagement in the context of procedure use: effort towards compliance, defined as the degree to which employees direct their personal effort towards complying with procedures, and procedure-related voice, defined as the degree to which employees voluntarily raise suggestions or concerns about the procedures they use. We then draw from Kahn’s theory to develop and test a model in which supervisor helping behaviour facilitates effort towards compliance and procedure-related voice behaviour via its influence on three psychological states: perceived usefulness of procedures, job self-efficacy, and psychological safety. We then test the model in an empirical study using a sample of maintenance personnel working in a mining company.

1.1. Engaged behaviour in the context of procedure use

According to Kahn (1990), there are two fundamental characteristics of engagement: self-employment and self-expression. Self-employment refers to the investment of personal effort into performing work tasks. When people are engaged in their work roles, they work hard and expend effort, and strive to complete the task to the best of their ability. The second characteristic of engagement is self-expression, which relates to individuals’ expressions of genuine thoughts and feelings about their work. This idea of self-expression is similar to voice behaviour, defined as the discretionary expression of suggestions, ideas, and concerns regarding work issues with intent to positively contribute to the organisation or work unit (Van Dyne and LePine, 1998). Interestingly, researchers who have adopted Kahn’s (1990) framework have tended to omit voice from their research model (Christian et al., 2011; Luksyte et al., 2015; May et al., 2004; Rich et al., 2010). On the other hand, researchers who examine voice (usually within the proactive behaviour literature) rarely conceptualize this behaviour from an engagement perspective (Morrison, 2014). In our study, we follow Kahn’s (1990) original work suggesting that voice is an important behavioural manifestation of engagement, and draw on voice research from the proactive behaviour literature to develop our hypotheses.

In this study, we draw on the two characteristics of engagement to describe the actual behaviours that employee perform when they are engaged in the context of procedure use. We first draw on the effort investment characteristic of engagement to forward the construct “effort towards compliance”, defined as the investment of one’s effort to comply with procedures. This definition of effort towards compliance is similar to the concept of safety compliance as described in Griffin and

Neal (2000). Recently, Nahrgang et al. (2011) draw on the work engagement literature and theorised that individuals’ compliance with safety rules and procedures could be considered as a representation of employee engagement in the context of workplace safety. In this study, we following Nahrgang et al. (2011) and views compliance with safety procedure as an engaged behaviour, and investigate how antecedents of engagement in the context of procedure use might facilitate this behaviour.

Second, drawing on the self-expression characteristics of engagement and the definition of voice (Van Dyne and LePine, 1998), we define procedure-related voice behaviour as the discretionary expression of constructive suggestions and concerns regarding the use of procedures, with the intention to improve the quality of procedures. Given its sole focus on procedures, procedure-related voice is distinct from safety voice (Conchie et al., 2012; Tucker et al., 2008), which involves discretionary acts to speak up about safety-related issues, such reminding colleagues of procedural steps if they fail to comply with procedures, and the reporting to one’s supervisor about potential safety hazards, among others. Procedure-related voice is also distinct from near-miss and/or accident reporting, which involves the reporting of actual safety incidents using formal forums (Wright and van der Schaaf, 2005).

Although procedures are meant to represent the best practice of carrying out work tasks, formal written procedures are not always applicable to the local task environment, or when there are changes in the task environment. As Hale and Borys (2013b) argued, frontline employees tend to have first hand experience of the job task and local task environment, which allow them to cope well with the variability and complexity of reality. Through sharing their thoughts and experiences with the use of procedures, employees could help leaders and procedure designers to identify problems with current procedures and to develop new procedures to adapt to the changing work environment. Given the positive roles that effort towards compliance and procedure-related voice might serve, it is important to understand how these behaviours might be facilitated.

1.2. Proposed model of engaged behaviour

According to Kahn (1990), engagement is influenced by people’s experience of themselves and their work contexts. In his original ethnographic study, Kahn (1990) found that engagement was generated when three psychological conditions are met: meaningfulness, safety, and availability. These three psychological conditions are further influenced by individuals’ perception of their tasks and job roles, the social system and themselves, respectively. Follow up studies provided empirical evidence to support the model (May et al., 2004). In the present study, we consider three psychological states: perceived usefulness of procedures, psychological safety, and self-efficacy in one’s job, as context-specific indicators of meaningfulness, safety, and availability respectively. Furthermore, we investigate supervisor helping behaviour as an organisational antecedent that influences engaged behaviour in the context of procedure use via the proposed three psychological states. The theoretical model is shown in Fig. 1. In the following section, we first define the three psychological states and discuss how they are related to effort towards compliance and procedure-related voice. We then describe how supervisor helping behaviour affects the two engaged behaviours via those three mediating states.

1.3. Psychological states and engaged behaviour

1.3.1. Perceived usefulness of procedures

According to Kahn (1990), the feeling of meaningfulness involves a sense of return on one’s investments of his/her personal energy. People experience meaningfulness when they feel their investment of themselves is worthwhile and valuable. In the context of procedure use, we argue that the sense of meaningfulness derives from the perception that

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