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Work engagement in Europe: Relations with national economy, governance and culture

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is the first to analyze differences in work engagement across countries using a well-validated measure and representative samples from thirty-five European countries. Rather than *individual* levels of work engagement, mean levels of work engagement of the *country's* workforce are analyzed. So far, only international consultancy firms performed such national comparisons. However, these comparisons are either based on proprietary measures of engagement with unknown reliability and validity or on non-representative national samples, and mostly on both. Yet there is a great need for such cross-national comparisons since employee engagement is a priority in many internationally operating businesses. A deeper insight into cross-national differences in work engagement is therefore conducive for establishing and evaluating corporate engagement policies.

The current paper uses work engagement data from the *6th European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) – 2015*. The EWCS assesses and quantifies the working conditions of workers and the self-employed, analyses relationships between different aspects of working conditions, identifies groups at risk and issues of concern, and monitors progress and trends. A European agency called Eurofound carries out the EWCS and a market research company did the fieldwork between February and December 2015. In total 43,850 workers were interviewed in thirty-five countries, which include the twenty-eight member-states of the European Union, the five candidate countries for EU membership – Albania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Turkey – as well as Norway and Switzerland. The target population for the EWCS consists of all residents from these countries aged above 15 or older and in employment at the time of the survey. A multi-stage, stratified, random sample was drawn in each country.

The aim of the current paper is to link work engagement at country level to economic and governance indicators, as well as to cultural values. To this end, data of multiple sources were used. For instance, economic and governance indicators were taken from the *World Bank*, *EUROSTAT*, and the *United Nations* and cultural values from the *European Values Survey* and from Geert Hofstede's national culture database.

The most often used definition of work engagement in the scientific literature is '*... 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, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence also in the face of difficulties. Dedication refers to being strongly involved in one's work, and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge. Finally, absorption is characterized in terms of being fully concentrated on and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work. In short, engaged workers work hard (vigor), are deeply involved (dedication) and happily engrossed (absorption) in their work.

Multiple studies suggest that work engagement is beneficial for workers as well as for organizations. For instance, work engagement has been associated with better mental and physical health of workers in terms of low levels of depression and anxiety, healthy cardiac autonomic activity, lower systolic blood pressure, better sleep quality, and less psychological distress. In addition, research also suggests that work engagement is beneficial for employee performance, and hence for organizations. For instance, work engagement is related to low sickness absence frequency, low risk of long-term sickness absence, task- and contextual performance, innovativeness, proactivity, creativity, financial returns, service quality, workplace safety, and last but not least, superior business outcomes, such as high productivity and profitability, and business growth.

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Work engagement is usually measured with the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), which has excellent psychometric properties. Originally, it included 17 items, but recently, an ultra-short version has been introduced with only three items: (1) *'At my work I feel full of energy'* (vigor); (2) *'I am enthusiastic about my job'* (dedication); (3) *'Time flies when I am working'* (absorption). The psychometric reliability of the three items in the EWCS database is good as in no country it dropped below its critical value. In conclusion, work engagement is measured in a valid and reliable way in the EWCS-2015. For the current paper, mean work engagement scores for each of the thirty-five countries were computed.

WORK ENGAGEMENT AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH HAPPINESS AND JOB SATISFACTION

It is expected that in countries where workers feel engaged, people are also more happy and satisfied with their jobs. But how strong is this positive relationship? It appears that work engagement is moderately positively related with happiness and job satisfaction at country level, with correlation coefficients (r) of .47 and .61, respectively. This means that work engagement overlaps less strong (22%) with happiness than with job satisfaction (37%). The reason for that is that happiness is a context-free measure that taps the subjective enjoyment of one's *life as a whole*. Clearly, this not only includes work but also other life domains, such as leisure and social relationships, as well as people's physical environment and financial situation. So happiness is a general, omnibus measure of well-being. Moreover, national levels of happiness were taken from the World Database of Happiness and refer to *all* inhabitants of a particular country and not only to the working population like work engagement and job satisfaction.

Job satisfaction, in contrast, is work-related and therefore stronger related with work engagement than happiness. Although job satisfaction and work engagement are both positive states of mind, they differ in levels of activation. Engaged workers are proactive, feel more challenged, and have a stronger drive than their satisfied colleagues, who are reactive, feel less challenged and more satiated. So work engagement is a high activation psychological state, whereas and job satisfaction is characterized by low activation. For that very reason work engagement is stronger related to work performance than job satisfaction, which particularly applies to extra-role performance.

Conclusion

In countries where workers feel engaged, people also feel happy and satisfied with their jobs. As expected, and in line with previous individual-level research, relations are strong, particular with job satisfaction, but not so strong that both concepts can be considered identical.

LEVELS OF WORK ENGAGEMENT ACROSS EUROPE

Do levels of engagement differ across Europe? Yes, they do, albeit that only a modest 3% of the variance in work engagement is explained at country-level. This means that many

other factors may also play a role as well, such as type of profession, industry, and working conditions. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider these factors in greater detail.

As can be seen in Fig. 1, Dutch workers feel most engaged, whereas Serbian workers feel least engaged at work. Because of their economic similarity, Norway and Switzerland are clustered together with the EU-countries, thus constituting the EU+ group. The level of engagement is much higher among EU+ countries than among non-EU candidate countries.

As displayed in Fig. 2 most countries with high work engagement scores (i.e., equal to or above 4) are located in Northwestern Europe (the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Ireland, Denmark, Norway) or in the Alpine region (Austria, Switzerland). Two exceptions exist: Malta (Southern Europe) and Lithuania (Eastern Europe) also have high engagement levels. In contrast, countries with low engagement scores (i.e., lower than 3.80) are located in Southern (Greece, Portugal) and Eastern Europe (Lithuania, Slovakia, Hungary), and on the Balkans (Croatia, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro). Also Turkish and German workers score relatively low on engagement. Particularly the low engagement score of Germany is puzzling, which might be caused by lower scores in eastern Germany, the former communist German Democratic Republic (GDR). Unfortunately this hypothesis cannot be tested because East German workers cannot be identified in the EWCS database. As most highly engaged countries are to be found in Western Europe and most little engaged countries in Southern and Southeastern Europe (particularly on the Balkans) it is likely that this has something to do with economic, governance and cultural differences. This will be explored below.

Another way of comparing work engagement between countries is to classify workers as 'engaged' or 'highly engaged'. Of course, any such classification is arbitrary as no objective and external criterion for high engagement exists. For our purposes we rank 'engaged' countries according to their proportion of workers with a score of 4.5 or higher, and 'highly engaged' countries according to the proportion of workers with the maximum score of 5. This means that 'engaged' workers indicate that they feel engaged *'most of the time'*, whereas the 'highly engaged' indicate that they *'always'* feel engaged.

Essentially the rank-order between countries does not change when percentages of (highly) engaged workers are used instead of mean work engagement scores. Notably, in both cases the top-3 and bottom-3 countries are quite similar. The Netherlands (33.4%), Ireland (33.3%) and Belgium (32%) boast the most 'engaged' workers, whereas the least engaged workers are found in Croatia (13.9%) Greece (13.6%), and Germany (11.4%). The most 'highly engaged' countries are the Netherlands (18.5%), Belgium (17.6%), and Slovenia (17.3%), whereas Sweden (6.1%), Greece (4.8%), and Germany (4.3%) have the least 'highly engaged' workers. Overall 21.1% of the EU+ workforce feels 'engaged' and 10.8% 'highly engaged', against only 16.2% and 9% in the EU-candidate countries, respectively.

Conclusion

Levels of engagement differ across Europe, they are highest in Northwestern Europe and the Alpine region, and lowest in

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