The energizing nature of work engagement: Toward a new need-based theory of work motivation

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

We present theory suggesting that experiences at work that meet employees' expectations of need fulfillment drive work engagement. Employees have needs (e.g., a desire to be authentic) and they also have expectations for how their job or their organization will fulfill them. We argue that experiences at work that confirm employees' need fulfillment expectations yield a positive emotional state that is energizing, and that this energy is manifested in employees' behaviors at work. Our theorizing draws on a review of the work engagement literature, in which we identify three core characteristics of work engagement: (a) a positive emotional state that (b) yields a feeling of energy and (c) leads to positive work-oriented behaviors. These key themes provide the foundation for further theorizing suggesting that interactions at work confirm or disconfirm employees' need fulfillment expectations, leading to different levels of engagement. We extend our theorizing to argue that confirmation, or disconfirmation, of different need expectations will yield emotional experience of varying magnitudes, with confirmation of approach-oriented need expectations exerting stronger effects than the confirmation of avoidance-oriented need expectations. We close with a review suggesting that organizational contextual features influence the expression of these needs, sustaining or undermining the positive emotional experiences that fuel work engagement.

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The popular business press has grown increasingly enamored with the idea that the modern workplace is, in some structural and meaningful way, inadequate (Hamel, 2009, 2012; Laloux, 2014). Popular articles point to alarming statistics suggesting a meaningful proportion of employees in U.S. organizations report a complete lack of engagement, and even report knowingly engaging in behaviors harmful to their employer (O'Boyle & Harter, 2013). This same literature points to myriad prescriptive measures, often in the form of case studies depicting organizations where employees seem so passionate and enthusiastically motivated at work that they seem to approach euphoria (Fortune, 2016; Hamel, 2011; Laloux, 2014; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010).

These case studies vary in the ways by which organizations purport to motivate their employee population. Numerous lists of great companies to work for have emerged, most leveraging measures of employee engagement and organizational performance as evidence of the efficacy of the various practices these organizations implement to motivate employees. The Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For (Fortune, 2016), for example, points to companies whose practices include paying higher than standard wages, providing free health coverage for employees, and offering flexible and autonomous work arrangements. These companies offer various perks and benefits, ranging from bringing pets to work, offering on-campus dining and childcare, wellness programs, and even in-office recreational activities. Employees at some of these companies report that inclusive practices that embrace their distinctive characteristics make their work motivating. At some level, these organizations all engender a highly motivated workforce by creating an environment that provides fulfillment of their employees' needs.

The various practices in the organizations described in these case studies help to fulfill fundamental human needs. Some speak to enhanced safety and security through higher wages and family health coverage. Others speak to the need for self-actualization or authentic self-expression (e.g. inclusive workplaces that celebrate differences). These stories suggest that the ongoing fulfillment of needs at work is a source of motivation.

Indeed, employees come to work with a set of needs, and those needs influence their behavior at work in significant ways. Organizational scholarship has long theorized some relationship between human needs, which are generally thought to be fundamental and universal, and employee behavior, most notably in the domain of work motivation (Alderfer, 1969, 1972; Argyris, 1957; Kanfer & Heggestad, 1997; Maslow, 1943; McGregor, 1960). In fact, many existing theories of work motivation have assumed that individuals work in order to fulfill fundamental needs. These theories build on the basic logic of "humans as wanting," as Pinder (2014: 67) suggested in his review of needs and motivation. Maslow (1943: 370) went so far as to postulate that "Any motivated behavior, "must be understood to be a channel through which many basic needs may be simultaneously expressed or satisfied." Most subsequent need-based theories of work motivation also have begun with the basic proposition that needs are a motivational force—and often, with an emphasis on the idea that pain or displeasure associated with unmet needs leads to motivation (e.g. Alderfer, 1972; Locke, 1991; Maslow, 1943; McGregor, 1960; Pinder, 2014). For example, McGregor (1960) argued that "a satisfied need is not a motivator for behavior."

But the case studies reported above point to need fulfillment, rather than unmet needs, as the source of employee motivation. More fulfilling environments seem to be a major source of motivation in these cases. Further, these case studies seem to suggest that organizational practices that go beyond providing safety and security for employees, and also fulfill needs for self-expression and authenticity, have particularly powerful motivational potential. The overarching implication behind these lines of study is that positive experiences, in addition to the relatively negative experiences associated with unfulfilled or obstructed need pursuits, carry motivational power. That is, need fulfillment (as opposed to unsatiated needs) may also have motivating power.

A central question presented by these case studies is how do positive experiences at work, or, more specifically, need fulfillment experiences, lead to increases in motivation? This paper offers a foundation for a new approach to