



# Work engagement during life-span: The role of interaction outside the organization and task significance



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## ABSTRACT

Growing proportion of older employees in the workforce has pushed scholars and managers to examine the changes of individual work-related attitudes and behavior during the life-span and accordingly reconsider work design to sustain the engagement of aging workforces. This study contributes to ambiguous previous findings by investigating age–work engagement linkage and moderating effects of such job characteristics as employees' perceived task significance and interaction outside organization. Survey of bank employees revealed an overall positive linear effect of age on work engagement; task significance was further positively related to work engagement. Although the direct impact of interaction outside the organization to work engagement was not found, the interaction outside the organization moderated the relationship between age and work engagement: older employees with more external interactions reported higher engagement levels than older employees with fewer interactions. Work engagement was highest for older employees who experienced more interaction outside the organization, or perceived their work as significant or both. There was no positive effect of age on work engagement for employees with both lower levels of interaction outside organization and lower task significance.

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## 1. Introduction

Many developed countries and emerging economies are facing population aging leading to increasing employment rates of older workers, and this trend is most likely to continue (Chand & Tung, 2014; Goštautaitė & Bučiūnienė, 2015; Kulik, Ryan, Harper, & George, 2014). This situation poses a challenge for organizations as older workers are often associated with reduced performance, decreasing engagement, and unwillingness to adapt to work-related changes or learn new things (Bal, Reiss, Rudolph, & Baltes, 2011; Billett, Dymock, Johnson, & Martin, 2011; Posthuma & Campion, 2009; Pupienienė, 2013). This is also a challenge for individual workers: such negative views held by employers are considered to be one of the main reasons people aged 55 and over stop working (Eurobarometer, 2012). In order to sustain work engagement of older employees, organizations need research-based evidence about the changes of individual work-related attitudes and behaviors during a life-span (Schwoerer & May, 1996; Sturman, 2003; Zacher, Heusner, Schmitz, Zwierzanska, & Frese, 2010).

Due to positive work-related outcomes of work engagement for both employees and employers (Attridge, 2009; Bakker, 2009; Bakker, Albrecht, & Leiter, 2011; Halbesleben, 2010; Schaufeli, 2012; Shuck, 2011; Shuck & Wollard, 2010; Truss et al., 2013), the concept has gained enormous popularity among HR practitioners with the “potential to become the ‘new best practice’ HRM approach” (Truss et al., 2013, p. 2661). However, empirical evidence about the changes of work engagement during a life-span has been scarce and ambiguous. A small to medium positive effect of age on work engagement has been observed in previous studies that have included age as a control variable (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004b; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006; Siu et al., 2010).

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James, McKechnie, and Swanberg (2011) observed a positive curvilinear age–engagement relationship which was characterized by a linear increase in engagement up to the age of 55 and a stable pattern afterwards. Finally, Avery, McKay, and Wilson (2007) found a negative bivariate correlation between age and employee engagement. This study will contribute to the research already done in this area by investigating age–work engagement linkage and adding more evidence to existing controversial findings.

Another important issue we found is the readjustment of work design in order to raise the work engagement of older employees. Previous findings revealed multiplicative effects of various work characteristics and age on such work-related attitudes as work motivation (Boumans, de Jong, & Janssen, 2011), job satisfaction (Bos, Donders, Bouwman-Brouwer, & Van der Gulden, 2009; Lindström, 1988; Menguc & Bhuian, 2004; Voydanoff, 1980), commitment (Finegold, Mohrman, & Spreitzer, 2002), willingness to change companies (Finegold et al., 2002), and future perspectives (Zacher & Frese, 2009). The needs associated with helping people or contributing to society have been found to increase with age (Kooij, De Lange, Jansen, Kanfer, & Dikkers, 2010). For the purposes of the current study we examine task significance and interaction outside the organization as work characteristics that help to satisfy the above-mentioned needs of older employees.

This study aims to provide theoretical grounding and empirical evidence to reveal the linkage between age and work, and to evaluate the influence of employees' perceived task significance and interaction outside the organization to work engagement during a life-span, and thus contribute to the knowledge about the remodeling of work nature to respond to the concerns of the society, organizations, and older workers (Chand & Tung, 2014).

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Age and work engagement

Although several different definitions of engagement exist, most of the scholars agree that engaged employees are those active agents in organizations, whose values are congruent with organizational values, who have a high self-efficacy, generate positive feedback for themselves, and are also engaged in other areas outside work (e.g., Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004b). In this paper we rely on probably the most popular definition of work engagement proposed by Schaufeli and colleagues (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004a,b; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002): “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004b, p. 4). According to some popular beliefs, older employees are sometimes associated with diminishing motivation and enthusiasm for work (Billett et al., 2011). Conversely, the prevailing theoretical assumptions suggest an age-related increase in work engagement. First, as suggested by the Socio-emotional Selectivity Theory (SOC) (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999), due to the shift in the time-perspective in the later adulthood, older individuals not only prefer emotional information over the non-emotional information, but also tend to prefer positive emotional information and avoid the negative one (Carstensen & Mikels, 2005); they describe their experiences in a more positive manner (Pennebaker & Stone, 2003) and forget negative information more easily than the positive one (Charles, Mather, & Carstensen, 2003). This supports the idea that older employees may focus more on the positive aspects of their job rather than on the negative ones and thus experience higher work engagement.

Secondly, as predicted by the SOC theory (Baltes, 1997; Baltes & Baltes, 1989; Baltes, Staudinger, & Lindenberger, 1999), successful development over the life-span depends on the selection of goals and priorities (because only a limited number of goals may be attained due to limited resources), the optimization of personal resources to obtain these goals, and compensation for the experienced losses with alternative goal-relevant means (Baltes et al., 1999). Moreover, selection and optimization behaviors have been related to various ratings of career success via specific self-management strategies such as career planning (Abele & Wiese, 2008). According to the Person–Environment Fit Theory (Edwards, 2008) it may be that older individuals select themselves into jobs (or out of jobs or even out of the labor market; Warr, 1992) that better fit with their personal characteristics and needs (Kalleberg & Loscocco, 1983; White & Spector, 1987; Wright & Hamilton, 1978), and this P–E-fit in turn leads to a more favorable attitude toward one's job (Edwards, 1991; Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Indeed, older employees seem to perceive a higher person–organization-fit than their younger counterparts (Ng & Feldman, 2010).

Finally, according to the Motivational Theory of Life-span Development (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010), due to age-related declines in the primary control capacity (Lachman & Firth, 2004), older employees need to strengthen their secondary control strategies (Bailly, Joulain, Herve, & Alaphilippe, 2012; Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002). These are behaviors that are aimed at achieving changes directly within the individual, e.g., enhancing the value of the chosen goal (e.g., current job), disengagement from unattainable goals (e.g., other career aspirations), or adjusting expectations (e.g., expectations toward work-related rewards) (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Heckhausen et al., 2010). Thus, as employees grow older, they perceive their limited perspectives in career advancement or job change and adjust their expectations so increasing their engagement in the current job.

Although Avery et al. (2007) found a low negative correlation between age and work engagement, an overview of recent empirical studies reporting on the correlation between age and work engagement provide some positive age–work engagement relationships (see Table 1); and small to medium positive effect of age on work engagement can be observed in previous studies that have included age as a control variable (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004b; Schaufeli et al., 2006; Siu et al., 2010). Furthermore, James et al. (2011) observed a positive curvilinear age–engagement relationship which was characterized by a linear increase in engagement up to the age of 55 and a stable pattern afterwards. Unfortunately, numerous studies on work engagement did not include age as a control variable or did not report on the correlation between age and work engagement (e.g., Biggs, Brough, & Barbour, 2014; Brough et al., 2013; Hakanen, Perhoniemi, & Toppinen-Tanner, 2008; Halbesleben, Harvey, & Bolino, 2009; Matthews, Mills, Trout, & English, 2014; Schaufeli &

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