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Original article

The relationship between perceived organizational support and work engagement: The role of self-efficacy and its outcomes



La relation entre le soutien organisationnel perçu et l'engagement au travail : analyse du rôle du sentiment d'efficacité personnelle et de ses conséquences

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 January 2013

Received in revised form 9 May 2014

Accepted 13 August 2014

Keywords:

Perceived organizational support

Work engagement

Self-efficacy

Performance

ABSTRACT

Introduction/objective. – The objective of this study was to investigate the relationship between perceived organizational support and work engagement. On the one hand, we examined an underlying mechanism of this relationship, i.e. self-efficacy. On the other hand, we studied the outcomes of this relationship in terms of employees' job satisfaction, psychological strains and performance.

Method. – An online questionnaire was administrated to employees of two private companies. Employees' performance was then evaluated by their direct supervisors. In total, 265 employees and 112 supervisors participated in the study.

Results. – Our results indicated that self-efficacy partially mediates the relationship between perceived organizational support and work engagement. Furthermore, work engagement increased job satisfaction, reduced psychological strains and enhanced extra-role performance.

Conclusion. – This study contributes to the development of both work engagement literature and organizational support theory. The implications and limitations of this research are discussed in detail.

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R É S U M É

Introduction/objectifs. – L'objectif de cette étude était d'étudier la relation entre le soutien organisationnel perçu et l'engagement au travail. D'une part, nous avons examiné un mécanisme explicatif sous-jacent de cette relation, i.e., le sentiment d'efficacité personnelle. D'autre part, nous avons étudié les conséquences de cette relation pour la satisfaction au travail, les tensions psychologiques et la performance des employés.

Méthode. – Un questionnaire électronique a été administré aux employés de deux entreprises privées. La performance de ces employés a par ailleurs été évaluée par leurs supérieurs hiérarchiques. Au total, 265 employés et 112 supérieurs ont répondu effectivement à l'étude.

Résultats. – Les résultats ont montré que le sentiment d'efficacité personnelle jouait un rôle médiateur partiel dans la relation entre le soutien organisationnel perçu et l'engagement au travail. En outre, les analyses statistiques ont indiqué que cet engagement au travail augmente ensuite la satisfaction au travail, diminue les tensions psychologiques et améliore la performance « extra-rôle » des employés.

Conclusion. – Cette étude contribue au développement de la littérature relative à l'engagement au travail et également de la littérature relative à la théorie du soutien organisationnel. Les implications et les limites de l'étude sont abordées dans la discussion.

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Mots clés :

Soutien Organisationnel Perçu

Engagement

Sentiment d'efficacité

Performance

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Work engagement is defined as a “positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzales-Roma, & Bakker, 2002, p. 74). Vigor refers to high levels of energy, mental resistance, a willingness to put effort into one’s work and tenacity even in the face of difficulties (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Dedication refers to “a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge” in one’s job (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74). Absorption describes the extent to which an employee is fully concentrated and deeply engrossed in his or her work (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Several empirical studies have shown that employees with high levels of work engagement display positive work-related attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Del Libano, Llorens, Salanova, & Schaufeli, 2012; Salanova, Agut, & Peiro, 2005; Schaufeli, Taris, & Van Rhenen, 2008).

For these reasons, fostering employees’ work engagement is an important asset for organizations. In line with this perspective, many scholars have tried to identify its antecedents. Based on the job demands and resources model (JD-R) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008), some prior studies showed that job resources, and particularly social support, play an important role in the development of work engagement (Llorens, Bakker, Schaufeli, & Salanova, 2006). In line with this idea, Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011) have suggested that perceived organizational support (POS) has a positive influence on work engagement, amongst others by reinforcing employees’ intrinsic interest in their tasks. POS is defined as employees’ general beliefs regarding the extent to which “the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being” (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986, p. 501). Surprisingly, few studies have empirically tested the positive relationship between POS and employees’ work engagement (e.g., Kinnunen, Feldt, & Makikangas, 2008; Sulea et al., 2012).

While a few studies have thus demonstrated this positive relationship, to the best of our knowledge, none has investigated its underlying mechanisms. The first aim of this present research was to fill this gap in the literature by examining the mediating role of self-efficacy in the positive relationship between POS and work engagement. The second aim of this research was to examine the consequences of the relationship between POS and work engagement on employees’ job satisfaction, psychological strains, and in-role and extra-role performance.

In doing so, our study contributes to the work engagement literature and, more specifically, to the identification of the levers that organizations can act on to foster employees’ work engagement. This study also contributes to the development of the organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Indeed, few studies have investigated the role of self-efficacy in the relationship between POS and its consequences. Additionally, while some studies have demonstrated the mechanisms underlying the positive relationship between POS and performance, few empirical studies have identified the processes underlying the positive influence of POS on employees’ subjective well-being (Baran, Rhoades, & Miller, 2012). Our study is in line with this latter perspective, as it investigates a new underlying mechanism of the influence of POS on both employees’ job satisfaction and psychological strains, and their performance.

1. The mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between POS and work engagement

As explained above, POS refers to employees’ beliefs regarding the extent to which their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). According to organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986), POS is encouraged by employees’ natural tendency to ascribe humanlike characteristics to their organization (Eisenberger et al.,

1986). Based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) and the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), POS would induce an obligation to contribute to the development and general efficiency of the organization (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Thus, employees who feel supported by their organization would feel obligated to reciprocate the positive treatment they received by developing favorable attitudes and behaviors towards their organization (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Accordingly, many empirical studies have demonstrated the positive consequences of high levels of POS for both organizations (e.g., increasing affective commitment, trust, and performance) and employees (e.g., increasing employees’ job satisfaction, decreasing employees’ stress; Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011).

According to the extended JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008), job resources, and particularly social support, may reinforce employees’ work engagement by increasing their intrinsic motivation (i.e., by fostering growth and development) as well as extrinsic motivation (i.e., by offering instrumental assistance to employees to help them attain their professional goals). Surprisingly, within the literature on the JD-R model, few scholars have examined the positive influence of POS (i.e., a job resource) on work engagement. Nevertheless, Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011) suggested that by reinforcing employees’ intrinsic interest in their task, POS would increase work engagement. More precisely, according to Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011), POS would increase employees’ interests for their tasks in several ways:

- by creating among employees the belief and the expectation that their organization will provide them with the help and the material or emotional resources when needed;
- by creating among employees the expectation that they will be rewarded for high performance;
- by fulfilling their socio-emotional needs such as their need for self-esteem or for approval, and;
- by reinforcing their self-efficacy.

To the best of our knowledge, few studies have empirically investigated the relationship between POS and work engagement. Specifically, a study conducted by Kinnunen et al. (2008) showed significant positive correlations between POS and the three dimensions of work engagement. Additionally, another study (Sulea et al., 2012) demonstrated that POS had a positive impact on work engagement which, in turn, led to more organizational citizenship behaviors and less counterproductive behaviors at work.

Despite the fact that these studies demonstrated a positive and significant relationship between POS and work engagement, none has, to the best of our knowledge, empirically examined the mechanisms underlying this relationship. As we pointed out earlier, according to Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011), self-efficacy, defined as an individual’s beliefs regarding his ability to execute tasks with a certain level of performance (Bandura, 1997), would be one of these mechanisms. According to Bandura (2000), four sources of information contribute to the development of people’s sense of self-efficacy:

- active experiences of mastery;
- vicarious experiences;
- verbal persuasion, and;
- physiological and emotional states.

POS is likely to enhance employees’ self-efficacy by influencing several of these sources of information.

Indeed, by valuing employees’ contributions through positive evaluative feedback on their performance (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011), POS would encourage employees to engage more in mastery experiences. Furthermore, POS would influence

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