The Mitigating Effect of Employee Engagement on Work Alienation: A Literature Review

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Abstract: *The most recent studies on employee well-being have unceasingly shown some clear indications of employee dissatisfaction or even alienation in the work places. Even though the general discussions of work satisfaction are mainly concentrated on the negative aspects and problems at work, simultaneously employees are feeling joy, happiness and felicity at work, in addition to sensing pride in working productively as a part of a team. Consequently, the theories of self-determination theory was implemented in this study, as it carry notable importance on finding the right track after being alienated from one's job and by helping to review the effect employee engagement has on workers' alienation through engaging employees' to being healthy and efficient in their own work position and pleased members of a work team. The main purpose for this paper is to present a conceptual review of the well-known and respected theoretical frameworks of alienation and engagement; and their association with each other. More importantly, this paper aimed to examine the concepts and dimensions of employee engagement as well as work alienation, consequences of work alienation and the effect of employee enlightenment on work alienation. The review findings disclosed that the studied employees are not aware of the sensation of work alienation, or are more likely, feeling particularly engaged into their work. The employees can be said to easily find enthusiasm towards to their meaningful work, with a great deal of enjoyment and motivation. All in all, this paper concluded that work well being among employees is much more than lack of alienation, as in this case, it occurs as high levels of engagement instead.*

Keywords: *Employee Engagement, Work Alienation, Powerlessness, Meaninglessness*

INTRODUCTION

In today's business world, increasing recognition of the necessity to maximize the potential of an organization's human resources, in the pursuit of the goals of increased productivity and innovative capacity, has led to effectiveness in the management of the employment relationship consequently becoming a priority aim for managers in organizations. (Nelson & O'Donohue, 2006) Also, the increasing worldwide phenomenon of employee alienation, a state where an employee faces separation from one's job (Kanungo, in Mikko 2015), and overall dissatisfaction towards work has made it clear that "keeping employees healthy and efficiently working over a long working life is becoming a central challenge for human resource

management", as Harper (2012) notes in her article. Ever since alienation was introduced as a concept in management theory, it has been variously linked to issues such work engagement and satisfaction at work. (Hallberg and Schaufeli, 2006) This has made professionals realize, that preventing employee alienation and improving employee engagement are crucial in making the workforce to operate on highest possible level without sacrificing ethical boundaries.

Nowadays managers and business owners expect their employees to put in their maximum effort for the team, to show and take responsibility in their day-to-day work tasks; and to develop their skills and expertise on a daily basis. Simultaneously, employees are required to tackle enormous workloads at an intensive phase that can fortunately be more manageable with the help of work life innovations including satisfaction control and understanding of happenings. Yet, everything generating well-being is not essentially producing instant pleasure. Defeating the most difficult and challenging work tasks are usually considered to be the most satisfying and rewarding experiences by many employees. In other words, it is fair to say that work engagement primarily is not just fun, as in reality; the feeling of enjoyment is merely an outcome of coping and overcoming struggle, ultimately leading to success. (Hakanen, 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundation
Self-Determination Theory
The theory of work engagement, SDT, was formally introduced in the mid-1980s by Deci and Ryan (2004) to examine employee motivational factors. Deci and Ryan developed the SDT, which has been used in professional and academic research that relate to employee engagement. SDT relates to natural or intrinsic tendencies to behave in healthy and effective ways. Employee engagement and human behaviors have a connection to the SDT and the essence of work engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2004). An employee's level of engagement derives from his or her being able to control personal behaviors and goals.

Disengagement and personal engagement are related to the SDT in that an employee's behavioral state is a key driver of motivation to demonstrating behavior at the professional and personal levels. The engagement level of employees affects the productivity of an organization. The motivation level of an employee is related to job satisfaction. The emotional state of an employee also relates to motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2004). When employees begin to withdraw, and hide their identities, ideas, and feelings, they become disengaged and defensive, resulting in an adverse effect on work performance (Deci & Ryan, 2004).

Employee engagement strategies implemented by business leaders result in higher levels of employee engagement (Blattner & Walter, 2015), customer satisfaction, productivity, and profit (Bowen, 2016), and lower levels of employee accidents and turnovers (Barrick, Thurgood,

Smith, & Courtright, 2014). Business leaders adopt the concept of SDT to enable employees to hold positive attitudes toward their organization (Mowbray, Wilkinson, & Tse, 2014).

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is critical to any organization. Deci and Ryan conducted the most influential study on employee engagement in 2004 (Berens, 2013). Deci and Ryan (2004) expanded on early work by differentiating between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Competence, autonomy, and psychological relatedness which are psychological needs, motivate the individual to initiate behavior essential for psychological health and well-being of an individual and if satisfied may lead to optimal function and growth (Deci & Ryan, 2004). The basic needs of satisfaction have been found to directly relate to dedication of employees (Vandenabeele, 2014).

Dedicated and meaningful work enables employees to realize how valuable they are within the organization and makes them engaged. Bolman and Deal (2014) suggested there is an opportunity for employees' autonomy when SDT is leveraged, and furthermore, employees can influence those around them. This influence transcends to the benefits of intrinsic rewards. Meaningful work will allow for an increase in employees' participation; however, it does not guarantee that the employee will be engaged. The need for autonomy, intrinsic rewards, and influence are required to achieve employee engagement (Bolman & Deal, 2014).

Employee motivation is attributed to the concepts of the SDT. La Guardia (2009) suggested that psychological needs form a sense of development of identity by intrinsic motivation, which results in the outcomes of interest and engagement. Using potentials and commitment can influence an individual's value, behavior, and goals, which are healthy factors for an individual's identity (La Guardia, 2009). Fullagar and Mills (2008) found a significant relationship between intrinsic motivation and flow experiences. Flow is the holistic sensation that employees feel when they are totally engaged within their work (Fullagar & Mills, 2008). The relationship between intrinsic motivation and flow supports considering engagement as the psychological need of autonomy.

Assessing demographic characteristics as they relate to employee engagement provides knowledge of demographic trends within the labor force (Buttner, Lowe, & Billings-Harris, 2012). Business leaders can engage younger workers by monetary compensation. Younger workers leave their organizations for lack of monetary compensation even when the occupation is consistent with their needs and desires (Butler, Brennan-Ing, Wardamasky, & Ashley, 2014). Millennials are not willing to make personal sacrifices for a career and are less loyal to their organizations (Festing & Schafer, 2014). Baby Boomers are less prone for monetary reward and more to processes and loyalty to their organization (Saber, 2013). Business leaders can engage Baby Boomers by ensuring a long-term contract and a process-oriented organization (Saber, 2013). Millennials are more likely to turnover when they feel there is no opportunity for promotion or increases in pay within the organization (Hayes, 2015).

Therefore, when considering dismissal or disengagement strategies, human resource practitioners may better serve their organizations by dismissing a Millennial rather than a Baby Boomer (Hayes, 2015).

The failing global economy has created a huge shift in the way business takes place (McCuiston & DeLucenay, 2010). Employee engagement matters to both the employee as well as the organization. Employees can utilize contract agreement provisions to impede the attainment of the organizational goals and objectives. Management's capability to leverage employee engagement strategies is essential in an organization. Cooper-Thomas, Paterson, Stadler, and Saks (2014) establishing that high levels of expectations and frequent performance reviews can increase employee participation and cooperation. The scarcity of resources has lead organizations to think more about reducing costs and increasing productivity and efficiency. Reduced variation in processes can reduce cost over time as it relates to process improvement (Emrouznejad, Anouze, & Thanassoulis, 2010); however, an organization must continue to incorporate processes that enhance employee engagement. McCuiston and DeLucenay (2010) noted short-term cost cutting processes are not uniformly successful.

Employee engagement has emerged as one of the greatest challenges in today's workplace. With complexities and stringent regulations in many organizations, employee engagement will continue to challenge organizations in the future (Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014). This aspect challenges management because engagement is a critical element in maintaining the organization's vitality, survival, and profitability (Albercht, Bakker, Gruman, Macey, & Saks, 2015; Breevaart et al., 2013; Farndale & Murrer, 2015). Organizations that have highly engaged employees have greater profits than those that do not (Society for Human Resource Management [SHRM], 2014). Organizations with highly engaged employees experience increased customer satisfaction, profits, and employee productivity (Ahmetoglu, Harding, Akhtar, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2015; Carter, 2015; Cooper-Thomas et al., 2014; Vandenabeele, 2014).

Bakker and Schaufeli (2002) define work engagement as a three-dimensional emotion describing the feelings employees are dealing in their work life. According to their theory, the three positive sensations are vigour, dedication and absorption. First dimension vigour is defined as a state where employee experiences high energy levels and mental strength at work, is keen on devoting itself to the tasks and persistence when dealing with challenges and difficulties. (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Dedication, as an engagement dimension, represents the employees' feel of significance, inspiration, pride, challenge and enthusiasm towards his/her work. Kanungo (1992) used the term involvement, instead of dedication, in his psychological studies. Schaufeli and Bakker (2002) describe dedication having more depth in quantitative and qualitative sense, as dedication is stronger than normal level of involvement.

The final dimension of engagement, Absorption, is characterised by employees' full concentration and fixation in his/her work, where one finds difficulties detaching itself from

work. Previously mentioned, "flow-state" has some resemblance with absorption, as it has been explained as "a state of optimal experience that is characterized by focused attention, clear mind, mind and body unison, effortless concentration, complete control, loss of self-consciousness, distortion of time, and intrinsic enjoyment" (Schaufeli et al., 2002). However, as mentioned earlier, flow-state is merely a temporary state, in contrary to engagement.

All things considered, Woods and Sofat note, that all of the three dimensions reflect to the Kahn's (1990) proposal of engagement elements: physical-, cognitive- and emotional levels. Physical level is corresponded by vigour, absorption links with cognitive aspect, whereas dedication relates to the emotional aspect. (Woods & Sofat, 2013) Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina (2002) alternatively call attention to management possessing a remarkable responsibility of controlling these psychological conditions, in addition of asserting that employee engagement is variable and it does individually differ in every workplace.

Concept of Work Alienation

Hoy, Blazovsky, and Newland, in Ayşe, and Meltem (2016) define work alienation as "the reflection of individual's feelings created by disappointment experienced due to employment conditions at the work place". They also state that this concept expresses the dissatisfaction experienced by the individual as to the individual's status in terms of authority and the others in the organization, opportunities for professional development and change, recognition and acceptance by the superiors and doing his/her work consistently with career expectations. Blaunner in Ayşe, and Meltem (2016) defines work alienation as the result of an organization's inability to provide conditions and environments such as autonomy, responsibility, social interaction and self-realization that present the value of individuals as human beings.

According to Akgün in Ayşe, and Meltem (2016), there are modern dilemmas caused by the inability to create alternative solutions against the problems generated for the individuals by organizational and technological structures, by economic weaknesses, rapid life rhythms, responsibilities encumbered on the individual by the management and production styles and being isolated from management despite responsibilities. In light of these dilemmas, work alienation can be defined as the state of incapability, meaninglessness, inconsistency and insolubility created by the formation of unfavorable circumstances in place of ideal norms, internal dilemmas in place of external responses, passivity in place of activity and replacing the means with the ends.

It is apparent that work alienation can be caused by the things that the employees produce (the product), work relationships, the appearance that the organizational structure neglects humanism, administrative and inspectorial styles and technological constructs. In a general sense, work alienation can be affected by an individual's affective and cognitive moods. In general, it can be said that work alienation results from individual, social and cultural factors. In line with these explanations, work alienation can be defined as finding the current job meaningless, inability to receive satisfaction from work related relationships, feelings of

loneliness, incompetence, weakness, losing hope for the future and perceiving the self as a simple cogwheel in the system Elma (2003).

Alienation exists almost in all of the organizations of social life with different reasons, by emerging in different types and creating different results and it affects the system in which it exists. In school staff, students or parents, alienation in educational organizations generates disinclination towards and distancing from tasks that are required. Research shows that the bureaucratic structure of schools, crowded classrooms, dense curriculum, heavy work load, lack of democratic processes in administrative structures, teaching information that will be useless in life and external determination of teaching processes create alienation in education Erjem (2005). Development of feelings of alienation in teachers who strive to keep social existence and provide better life conditions negatively affects their behaviors in the teaching-learning process. Alienation hinders teachers' creativity, being role models for their students and the society, professional development, contribution to social development, efficacy in teaching-learning process, productivity in teaching services and cooperation with the school administration and other colleagues Bayındır (2003).

The term alienation, as itself, has many different use variations in several different fields or contexts. One example of alienation is "when a child expresses unjustified hatred or unreasonably strong dislike of one parent, making access by the rejected parent difficult or impossible", which is called parental alienation. (Warshak, 2003). Moreover, in performing art environments, alienation refers to "playing in such a way that the audience is hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. (Mikko, 2015). When turning our attention to human resource management, Mikko (2015) emphasizes that, it is critical for management to realize that the alienation of organizational members is a form of sickness that can, and should, be avoided. Work alienation as an experienced psychological state of the individual worker represents a cognitive separation from one's job and other work related contexts or a sense of frustration and the accompanying negative affect, resulting from the perceived failure to achieve one's objectives through job and organization related behaviours. It can also be a manifest behavioural state of apathy (Mikko, 2015).

At individual level alienation can be linked with psychosomatic illness (Kornhauser cited in Mikko, 2015), job dissatisfaction, job stress, anxiety, depression and other forms of psychosomatic illness. (Kanungo cited in Mikko, 2015). In comparison, at the organizational and societal levels, such human conditions are manifested in low productivity, low morale, high absenteeism and turnover, and various forms of social maladies such as increased crime rates, sabotage attempts, increased health care costs, depressed economy (Kanungo cited in Mikko, 2015).

Dimensions of Work Alienation

The first takes on alienation as a concept date back the 19th century, so it is fair to say the concept has a very long past. As Kanungo in Mikko (2015) states in his book, George Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel and Karl Marx can be considered the 'founding fathers' of alienation. Building upon Hegel and Marx, sociologists, psychologists and other social scientists have used the alienation concept in numerous studies. (Tummers and den Dulk, 2013) As a result, a number of different meanings have been attributed to the term, thus the Table 1 has been gathered up by Nair (2010) to summarize all the key definitions of alienation. Correspondingly, Fromm and Horowitz in Mikko (2015) suggest that alienation indicates to sense of separation from work, whereas Hirschfeld & Field (2000) calls it disengagement from work. As Nair (2010) identifies it, "the most basic understanding of alienation involves a separation or estrangement and given the varying targets of this separation, work alienation is defined here as *estrangement or disconnect from work, the context or the self*." (Nair, 2010). In an attempt to make the concept clearer, Seeman (in Mikko (2015) suggested five major variants of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement.

Powerlessness in the most general and social sense refers to a perceived lack of control over important events that effect one's life, according to Kanungo in Mikko (2015). This was also similar to Marx's view and main concern of work alienation. Second variant of alienation, meaninglessness refers to the individual's sense of understanding of the events in which he or she is engaged, according to Seeman in Mikko (2015). Meaninglessness may occur "when workers are not able to understand the complex system of goals in the organization and its relationship to their own work". In conclusion, when workers are required to work with simple tasks, which do not involve any responsibility, it often leads to losing the sense of purpose for the workers making the job become meaningless (Kanungo cited in Mikko (2015).

According to Mikko (2015) the third variant of alienation is derived from Durkheim's description of "anomie" and refers to a condition of normlessness. The fourth dimension of alienation is isolation. Isolation is associated with people 'who assign low reward value to goals or beliefs that are typically highly valued in the given society. Fifth and final dimension of alienation is *self-estrangement*, which, as the term suggests, refers to the sense of estrangement from self. Seeman in Mikko (2015) defines self-estrangement as "the loss of intrinsic meaning or pride in work. All the mentioned dimensions considered, alienation is a multidimensional concept, although placing key focus on powerlessness and meaninglessness. (Seeman, in Mikko 2015) All the other dimensions represent a more social variety of alienation, which do not carry as much value, as it can be seen as a too philosophical approach for being alienated from the world of work in general.

Consequences of Work Alienation

Work alienation can have some serious consequences on employees' attitudes towards work and is mostly negatively associated with job performance. (Clark, Halbesleben, Lester, & Heintz,

2010) The aforementioned study made by Hirschfeld and Field (2000) established a negative relation to passive performance at work, which can also be comprehended as organizational commitment. Work powerlessness and especially meaninglessness, have a significant negative influence on employees' organisational commitment. In other words, when an employee feels alienated it reflects harmfully on their work commitment. According Laskhmi (2013) the same perception was found in a study of manager's role on employee alienation. Employee alienation also has been proven to have a negative influence on employees' careerism, partially through career dissatisfaction. (Chiaburu, De Vos, & Diaz, 2013).

Meaninglessness also revealed to have a negative influence on work to family enrichment. For instance, when employees feel their work to be meaningless and not worthwhile, they experience less spillover effect from work to their family life. It also has been exposed that if these two dimensions, powerlessness and meaningfulness, are present at work, it will do harm on employees' work effort. Especially in cases where employees feel that their work has no meaning, they are less inclined to put effort in their daily work. All things considered work meaninglessness in particular has a strong influence on organizational commitment, work effort and work-to-family enrichment. (Hirschfeld & Field, 2000)

An alienated employee suffers several adverse ramifications. An alienated employee particularly suffers from low quality of work, production, cooperation, motivation, and organizational commitment. He/she would suffer deficiencies in organizational identification and job involvement. He/she would liable to excessive absenteeism, feeling of purposelessness, disruption of work activities, changes in job designation, more indulgence in immoral activities. He/she would suffer a sense of fatigue along with other health issues; they would feel distant from colleagues, they would have lack of interest in achieving organizational targets and unable to shoulder their responsibilities (Ceylan and Sulu, 2010; Valadbigi and Ghobadi, 2011).

Organizational Commitment
The employees' connection with, and attitude towards the organization is linked to the organizational commitment and its three dimensions that include affective, normative and continuance commitment (Salahudin et al., 2016). Work alienation is one of the key factors that has a major foremost effect on the commitment towards organization. Despite being a significant relationship in this scenario, the body of available research on this topic is quite limited. However, a research study was conducted in Istanbul's in health care context shows that work alienation acts as a mediator between organizational injustice and organizational commitment. According to the research results, among 383 healthcare professionals in public and private hospitals, the organizational commitment was found to be greatly affected by work alienation (Sulu et al., 2010). Similarly, the outcomes of research done by Tummers and Den Dulk (2013) showed that among the 790 of the national samples of midwives in the Netherlands, work alienation acted as the most important factor of organizational commitment.

Job Satisfaction

The term job satisfaction describes the general emotions an employee has towards his or her job, which can be either positive or negative in nature (Robbins, 2005). According to Locke in Ahmed, Mohammed, Omar, and Islam, (2019) job satisfaction is a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences". Cook and Heptworth in Ahmed, Mohammed, Omar, and Islam, (2019) perceive job satisfaction as the extent to which people enjoy their jobs. It is an effective response based upon the degree to which a job caters to various factors, both intrinsic and extrinsic, as valued by the individual employee (Henne and Locke, in Ahmed, Mohammed, Omar, and Islam, (2019). Intrinsic work values refer to the degree to which employees value immaterial aspects of their jobs that allow for self-expression as important (Taris and Feij, 2001). Extrinsic work values refer to the degree to which employees value material or instrumental work aspects, such as salary and opportunity for promotion, as important (Taris and Feij, 2001). In recent literature, a considerable negative relationship has been found between job satisfaction and the phenomenon of work alienation (Siron, Muttar, Ahmad, & Tarsipan, 2016). This relationship between work alienation and job satisfaction has also been analyzed by several other researchers like Siron, Muttar, and Ahmad (2015). The study results of these researchers have proven the presence of a major negative relationship between work alienation and both intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction. Sirin et al. (2011) has also confirmed the significance of negative relationship between work alienation and job satisfaction. Similarly, in their study, Fedi et al. (2016) proved the substantial link between work alienation and job satisfaction. Moreover, they also argued that work alienation affect job satisfaction.

Organizational Citizenship Behavior

Organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) are defined as the individual and open actions conducted by employees that are excluded from their formal job description (Campbell Pickford and Joy, 2016). Work alienation acts as a mediator variable in the relationship between employees' views of person-organization fit and organizational citizenship behavior. According to the findings, three dimensions of work alienation that are powerlessness, meaninglessness, and selfestrangement act as mediators between the person-organization fit and organizational citizenship behavior. This affirms that the organizational citizenship behavior is negatively affected by work alienation.

Job Performance

Yozgat *et al*. (2013) argues that due to global advancements, the economic and work environments are also changing rapidly and this has consequently resulted in an enhancement in the job performance of employees, and organizational performance has become more critical. Moreover, one of the most sought after organizational goals at managerial positions has been a high level of work performance given by the employees (Siron et al., 2015b). Identification of accurate metrics and indicators of performance is the main goal of various business organizations in today's times. This is done by providing accurate results that assist all employees in performing their roles that are helpful in the success of the organization. There

are extremely competitive business environments present today with leaders requiring reliable information to lead their companies with a clear vision (Aldulaimi and Obeidat, 2016).

Shantz *et al.* (2015) has argued that a negative relationship is present between job performance and work alienation, which can be better explained by the affective events theory (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). According to this theory, negative emotions developed by an employee makes him less dedicated to his work; thus resulting in low performance. Marx stated that work alienation results in the emergence of negative emotions because he does not feel any inspiration to work for the organization and has a sense of misery along with physical exhaustion and mental violation at work, as he feels out of place (Marx, in in Ahmed, Mohammed, Omar, and Islam, 2019). Very few researchers like Clark et al. (2010) conducted experimental studies regarding to the assessment of this relationship. Moreover, there has been a lack of accurate empirical studies that are related to the direct relationship present between the work alienation and job performance as has been stated by Muttar, Ahmad and Siron (2015).

CONCLUSION

Notably, human being is a social animal and if they do not accept each other, if they do not work with each other, and if they do not communicate well with each other, it can reveal the feeling of helpless, feeling that the world is empty or meaningless, feeling left out of conversations or events, feeling different or separate from everyone else. Work alienation can have some serious consequences on employees' attitudes towards work and is mostly negatively associated with job performance. Based on the reviewed literature work powerlessness and especially meaninglessness, have a significant negative influence on employees' organisational commitment. In other words, when an employee feels alienated it reflects harmfully on their work commitment and to reverse this employee engagement becomes a veritable tool in mitigating workplace alienation.

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