The engageable personality: Personality and trait EI as predictors of work engagement

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Abstract

Work engagement is seen as a critical antecedent of various organizational outcomes such as citizenship behavior and employee productivity. Though defined as a state, recent research has hinted at potential individual differences in engagement, meaning that employees differ in their tendencies to engage at work. This study investigated the effects of the Big Five personality traits, work-specific personality, and trait emotional intelligence, on work engagement among a sample of 1050 working adults. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses identified trait EI, openness to experience, interpersonal sensitivity, ambition, extraversion, adjustment, and conscientiousness as predictors of engagement. Trait EI predicted work engagement over and above personality. Practical and theoretical implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing interest in exploring the link between personality and a construct known as work engagement (defined as “a fulfilling work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption”; p. 702, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). The construct has been found to hold a positive relationship with a variety of organizational measures of performance (Saks, 2006), despite evidence to suggest that up to 70% of the workforce are not engaged (Gallup Employee Engagement survey; 2011). As a result there is a practical and theoretical need to better understand how and why individuals become engaged with their work in order to improve employee well-being and organizational performance (Robertson & Cooper, 2010).

An increasingly popular approach to understand the antecedents of work engagement involves examining the differences in personality traits possessed by more or less engaged employees, however a comprehensive understanding of a wide range of traits seems to be lacking, in particular, the role of trait emotional intelligence (TEI; Petrides & Furnham, 2003) and contextualized measures of personality, with researchers favoring broad personality traits such as the Five Factor Model (FFM). For example, Halbesleben’s (2010) meta-analysis of work engagement found few studies that reported the effects of narrow traits.

According to the FFM, stable patterns of behaviors are characterized by five higher order personality traits. Although the FFM is extensively researched, its broad nature may conceal important relationships when it comes to the prediction of work engagement, thereby demonstrating an example of the bandwidth-fidelity problem (Ashton, 1998; Griffin & Hesketh, 2004). Therefore, contextualized and narrow personality traits (for example, trait EI & the Hogan Personality Inventory; Hogan & Hogan, 1997; HPI) may offer incremental validity. In line with this, the present study explored the predictive validity of narrow and contextualized measures of personality on work engagement, over and above broad traits. Demonstrating such a relationship would have practical implications surrounding talent management, recruitment and organizational change.

1.1. Big Five as predictors of engagement: Past studies

Given that the definition of work engagement consists of activation and energy, it has been argued that certain personality dimensions reflect a propensity for engagement due to their behavioral characteristics (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009). Specifically, preliminary evidence suggests that high extraversion, agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness, as well as low neuroticism, relate to high levels of work engagement.

1.1.1. Neuroticism and extraversion

Langelaan, Bakker, van Dooren, and Schaufeli (2006) examined the relationship between Eysenck’s Big Two and work engagement. They characterized burnout and work engagement in terms of personality and temperament, using the two-dimensional activation and pleasure model of affect proposed by Schaufeli and Bakker
predicted employee engagement. It can be expected that this relationship will be stronger and mediated its effect on job satisfaction and even interpreted by their own and other's emotions; Salovey & Meyer, 1989) have successful interactions with their peers, and consequently collect more emotional resources from these successful interactions. Thus it motivates them to exert more effort and energy at work, making EI a personal resource that facilitates engagement (Duran, Extremera, & Rey, 2004).

Brunetto, Teo, Shacklock, and Farr-Wharton (2012) further support this narrative, where they conclude that EI predicts one's perceptions of well-being and job satisfaction, which in turn, influences engagement. Similarly, Ravichandran, Arasu, and Kumar (2011) concluded that higher levels of trait EI predicted higher levels of overall engagement. In line with the COR theory, this study emphasizes EI as a personal resource that is associated with positive emotional and behavioral responses to work-context stressors. Duran et al. (2004) further supported these findings by demonstrating a correlation between mood regulation and all engagement dimensions.

More specifically, two meta-analyses (O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, & Story, 2010; Van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004) found trait EI to predict a wide range of job performance outcomes after controlling for personality and IQ. Therefore despite its overlap with the Big Five personality factors, studies have suggested that trait EI explains additional and unique variance to outcomes such as happiness (Chamorro-Premuzic, Benett, & Furnham, 2007), life satisfaction (Saklofske, Austin, & Minski, 2003), and competency to support (Petrides & Furnham, 2003). In particular trait EI is distinct from ability EI in its measurement and discriminant validity (Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2014). Given the above arguments, the following is hypothesized:

H4: Trait EI will demonstrate incremental validity over the FFM of personality.

H5: Trait EI will demonstrate incremental validity over and above the seven HPI traits.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of $N = 1050$ adults workers (Females = 527, 50.2%; Males = 523; 49.8%) and the ages ranged from 19 to 81 years ($M = 45.2, SD = 12.53$). Participants worked in
a wide range of sectors (Education = 69.1%, Technology = 7.8%, Health = 3.5%). Most participants worked full-time (79.5%).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form (Petrides & Furnham, 2006)

Trait emotional intelligence was measured using Petrides and Furnham’s (2006) 30-item self-report scale. The scale used a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = completely agree), requires respondents to indicate the extent to which they agree with statements concerning their ability to manage and identify their own emotions and those of others (e.g. “I can deal effectively with people”).

2.2.2. The Ten Item Personality Inventory (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003)

TIPI is a brief measure of the FFM. It consists of 10-items with 2 items representing each factor (extraversion, neuroticism, openness, agreeableness, & conscientiousness). The questionnaire starts with the statement “I see myself as” followed by 10 items, each of which includes a pair of trait descriptors (e.g. “I see myself as anxious, easily upset”). Using a 7-point Likert-scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), respondents rate the degree to which the descriptors apply to them.

2.2.3. Hogan Short Personality Inventory (Short HPI; Hogan & Hogan, 1997)

The short HPI is a form of the longer 182-item HPI. This measure emphasizes constructs pertinent to job and occupational performance. The measure consists of 21 questions representing 7 primary scales: “adjustment” (neuroticism) refers to one’s ability to remain calm under pressure. Together, “ambition”, one’s competitiveness and desire for leadership roles, and “sociability”, one’s need to interact with others, represent extraversion. “Interpersonal sensitivity” (agreeableness) refers to one’s tactfulness and ability to maintain relationships with others. “Prudence” (conscientiousness) refers to one’s self-discipline and responsibility. Finally, “inquisitive”, one’s creative potential and curiosity, and “learning approach”, the degree to which one is achievement-oriented and keeps up with business and technological topics, represent openness to experience (Hogan & Hogan, 1997). Participants respond using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

2.2.4. The Utrecht work engagement survey-9 items (UWES-9; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003)

The UWES-9 is a 9-item scale measuring work engagement. It is a shorter version of the original 17-item UWES that characterizes work engagement by three subscales: vigor, dedication, and absorption. The items are presented in a form of questions (e.g. “I am immersed in my job”) and participants are asked to respond using a frequency 7-point Likert-type scale (0 = never to 6 = always).

2.3. Procedure & data analysis

Participants were recruited through the internal network of the Academic Conferences International Company. Participants provided their answers via online questionnaires. Participants received immediate feedback on their personality and emotional intelligence scores.

Descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations and hierarchical multiple regressions were computed.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations and estimates of internal are shown in Table 1. Generally, both HPI and TIPI have similar correlation effect sizes with respect to engagement. Among the hypothesized predictor variables, EI had the strongest correlation with work engagement. Given these results, the incremental validity of trait EI in the prediction of engagement beyond that of the personality variables was then tested.

3.1. Regression analysis

A four-step hierarchical multiple regression were employed to explore the predictors of engagement. In the first step of the regression, age and gender were entered. In the second and third steps, TIPI and HPI dimensions were entered respectively. Finally, trait EI was entered in the fourth step. The statistical assumptions for the model (i.e. ratio of cases to IVs, normality, independence of errors, homoscedasticity, linearity, & absence of multicollinearity) were all met.

Table 2 displays the results for all steps of the regression. The significant predictors (in order from strongest to weakest) were: trait EI, openness to experience, interpersonal sensitivity, ambition, extraversion, adjustment and conscientiousness (hypotheses 1, 2 & 3 partially supported, & hypothesis 4 & 5 supported). In model three, it is important to highlight how neuroticism and agreeableness became non-significant once contextualized alternatives of the traits (i.e. the HPI’s Adjustment & Interpersonal Sensitivity) were included in the model. Similarly, broad traits such conscientiousness and extraversion demonstrated incremental validity over contextualized measures. Model three accounted for 25% of the variance in engagement scores. When trait EI was included in the model, the amount of variance accounted for rose to 26%.

4. Discussion

Our results demonstrate that personality factors are valid predictors of work engagement. Since there was a slight overlap between the operationalization of the HPI and TIPI factors, not all HPI and Big Five dimensions were significant predictors as they competed for variance in engagement. The broad Big Five personality predictors were openness, extraversion, and conscientiousness, while the work-related personality predictors were interpersonal sensitivity, adjustment, and ambition.

Though studies have identified personality as determinants of engagement (see Inceoglu & Warr, 2011; Kim et al., 2009; Langelaan et al., 2006; Wefald et al., 2011) findings have been mixed as to which dimensions best predict engagement. This is mainly because most research on engagement and personality has focused on extraversion, emotional stability and conscientiousness as the psychological states experienced by those high on these traits can be related to engagement by definition (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008). Though studies have excluded openness to experience because it is perceived as a weak predictor of work outcomes (Griffin & Hesketh, 2004), it emerged as the second strongest predictor (after EI) in this study. One explanation for this relationship is through openness to experience’s link with the personal resource, resiliency. Resiliency is a main driver of work engagement as resilient individuals are able to successfully control their environment, which gives them intrinsic motivation to pursue their goals (i.e. goal self-concordance; Bakker et al., 2008). Given the link between openness to experience and resiliency, it is not surprising that employees high on openness to experience acquire the motivation and energy to be engaged at work.
The salience of extraversion and neuroticism as predictors of work engagement is documented in this study thereby supporting the affective-motivational state of work engagement (Langelaan et al., 2006). Moreover, this study is in line with previous findings that link conscientiousness with work engagement. Since the components of work engagement describe internal drives to achieve a goal, conscientiousness affects work engagement through internal motivational process. This means that conscientious individuals are more likely to have high levels of achievement orientation and are less affected by external interferences (e.g. family), and thus exhibit more energy at work (Halbesleben et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2009). Both TIPI and HPI personality measures were proven significant predictors since they explained similar unique variances in engagement. Although the HPI dimensions fully explained the variance of neuroticism on engagement, the TIPI fully explained the variance of prudence, sociability, and learning approach, suggesting that their corresponding broad Big Five factors better explain the variance in engagement.

Despite the slight overlap between HPI and TIPI dimensions, this study indicates that some situational specific personality traits (HPI) account for variances which broad traits (TIPI) do not tap into. For example, interpersonal sensitivity, but not agreeableness, emerged as a significant predictor of engagement. Therefore there was no relation between employees who reported strong desire to help others at work, that avoid hurting others’ feelings, and are not seen as confrontational, exhibit higher levels of engagement at work. Thus, a distinction between contextualized and broad behavior is apparent when it comes to work engagement.

### Table 1

Descriptive statistics & bivariate correlations.

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### Table 2

Results of a hierarchical regression.

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*Correlation significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).
**Correlation significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).
***Correlation significant at the .001 level (2-tailed). N = 1050.
This distinction was further demonstrated given that ambition remained significant over and above TIPI’s Big Five variant, suggesting that it has predictive validity that Big Five does not account for in engagement. This is unlike sociability, whose relationship with engagement was fully accounted for by TIPI (i.e., extraversion). This result highlights the need to measure broad and narrow personality traits to get a comprehensive understanding of behavior at work.

Finally, when looking at each predictor alone, Trait EI predicted engagement even after controlling for the variance of personality factors (and age), supporting H3. Despite only accounting for an extra 1% in the variance, Trait EI’s unique contribution in predicting work engagement beyond that of demographics and personality was demonstrated. This finding suggests that emotionally intelligent employees are more likely to be engaged at work regardless of their age, gender, and Big Five and HPI profiles. This provides support for the theoretical explanation of emotional intelligence as a personal resource that facilitates engagement. According to Duran et al. (2004) employees high on emotional intelligence have successful interactions with coworkers, which in turn motivate them to be more engaged.

Our results provide an insightful prospective towards a hierarchical integration of dispositional determinants for work engagement, especially highlighting the independent contribution of Trait EI in the prediction of engagement. Broad measures of personality, along with work-specific measures and Trait EI appear to be important contributors to work engagement. Although previous studies have highlighted the importance of broad personality in work engagement, none have examined the unique contribution of emotional intelligence beyond other personality measures. These findings are important because they provide empirical evidence for stable individual differences in engagement, an unstable state.

4.1. Limitations and future research

Although this study further expands knowledge on employee engagement, its findings should be considered within the methodological limitations. Firstly, future research should seek to include a more representative sample, given that the majority of the sample worked within the education sector. Secondly, this study measured work engagement as a one-dimensional construct. Future analyses should also examine the relationships between its different dimensions (vigor, dedication, and absorption) and personality, to detect potential differences. Future research should also examine incremental validity of personality and Trait EI beyond demographics; specifically over and above other factors that strongly related to work engagement such as job resources, which has been shown to influence work engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Finally, since this study supports a horizontal relationship between different personality traits and engagement of the same employee, future research could investigate a vertical relationship between these traits and engagement, specifically how EI of a direct leader affects the engagement of his/her subordinates.

4.2. Implications

The results of this study have both theoretical and applied implications. On a practical level by understanding dispositional predictors of engagement, organizations can select employees high on the personality traits examined in this study, specifically EI, openness, extraversion, conscientiousness, adjustment, ambition, and interpersonal sensitivity. By including these personality characteristics in their selection criteria, organizations can improve the likelihood of finding high-performing job candidates that other selection systems may exclude. Second, the results of this study can be used to enhance engagement-related interventions. Most organizations are increasing engagement by focusing on changes related to job demands and resources. Though these job characteristics are also pertinent, organizations can maximize their resources by being able to predict engagement earlier on (i.e., in the selection process), as opposed to continuously spending resources on engagement interventions at a later stage. Therefore, this study supports a selection-based approach to engagement, which could be more effective than an intervention-based one. Thus, the empirical knowledge allows organizations to gain competitive advantage by improving the engagement of their employees.

References


