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Employee Engagement and HRD: A Seminal Review of the Foundations

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Abstract

The term *employee engagement* has gained considerable popularity in the past 20 years yet it remains inconsistently defined and conceptualized. Although much has been written on the subject, little rigorous academic research has been done. This gap has resulted in a disjointed approach to understanding and developing strategies around employee engagement within organizations. This article explores the development of employee engagement through a historical lens using an integrated literature review to define and situate the concept within the HRD field by systematically reviewing and organizing literature across various disciplines and fields of study. Seminal works on the topic were identified and reviewed to gain an understanding of the topic's development. A working definition is proposed and implications for theory, scholarship, and organizational practice are discussed.

Introduction

Employee engagement is becoming a popular term among human resource management and development consultants, internal communications practitioners, and business conference presenters, but questions persist regarding whether engagement is just a passing fad. A quick Internet search turns up more than half a million hits on the term, including a Wikipedia entry and several social networking sites. Practitioners have a lot of choices when looking to better understand the concept. For example, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) provides industry reports for their

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members that suggest various ways to influence engagement (Lockwood, 2007; Vance, 2006). In 2008, the official magazine of the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD) offered their readers the "10 Ms of Employee Engagement" (Wildermuth & Wildermuth, 2008), which proposed 10 words each starting with the letter *M* that seem to build an engaging culture. *Strategic Communications Management*, a journal for strategic communication professionals, offers their readers ideas and tips for driving an organization's engagement culture through surveys and newsletters.

In 1999, the popularity of the book *First Break All the Rules* (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999) helped the term *employee engagement* become an overnight sensation in the business consulting world. The Gallup data on which the book was based presented extensive research evidence on the foundational aspects of employee engagement. Professional societies and consulting groups (e.g., The Gallup Organization, Towers Perrin, the Corporate Leadership Council, ASTD, and SHRM) quickly staked their claims to expertise in the employee engagement arena, each with its own strategy and framework. As these groups have encouraged companies to survey their employees and correct their deficiencies, the mantra of employee engagement has been proliferating.

The term *employee engagement* is seemingly as attractive for organizations as it is for the professional societies and consulting groups who promote it. The outcomes of employee engagement are advocated to be exactly what most organizations are seeking: employees who are more productive, profitable, safer, healthier, less likely to turnover, less likely to be absent, and more willing to engage in discretionary efforts (Buchanan, 2004; Fleming & Asplund, 2007; The Gallup Organization, 2001; Wagner & Harter, 2006). Furthermore, claims have been made that engaged employees average higher customer satisfaction ratings and generate increased revenue (Vance, 2006; Wagner & Harter, 2006). Recent evidence even suggests a direct employee engagement–profit linkage (Czarnowsky, 2008; Ketter, 2008). It is not surprising that corporate executives are consistently ranking the development of an engaged workforce as an organizational priority (Ketter, 2008; The Ken Blanchard Companies [TKBC], 2008).

As professional societies, consulting groups, and organizations embrace the employee engagement concept, drawn to its potential to solve intractable problems, two major challenges have surfaced. The first challenge revolves around what employee engagement is and how it should be defined (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Questions are being asked about whether the concept of engagement is just a repackaging of employee satisfaction and commitment, or whether companies should seek active displays of engagement as part of their pursuit of organizational outcomes (Schneider, Erhart, Mayer, Saltz, & Niles-Jolly, 2005). Unfortunately, numerous consulting firms who claim to have developed interventions that aid organizations in creating employee engagement lack even a working definition of the concept, referring to engagement only as a "persistent positive state" (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p. 4). Others offer reinterpretations of the concept as work passion, organizational commitment, or job involvement (Zigarmi, Nimon, Houson, Witt, & Diehl, 2009), often in an effort to differentiate their offerings. This lack of continuity contributes to

a deep misconception of the complexities around the concept. Moreover, contemporary definitions and interpretations of the concept have come primarily from the business, psychology, and human resource consulting literatures (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2006), many of which lack the rigor of academic scrutiny. This first challenge has perhaps developed from the inconsistent application and lack of common language in use throughout organizations today. Organizations are seeking solutions to important organizational challenges (Saks, 2006) but Macey and Schneider (2008) suggest that before solutions are developed, the concept needs a consistent definition and clear interpretation that provides coordination and clarity across several academic and practitioner disciplines.

The second challenge facing those looking to embrace employee engagement is the lack of empirical research around the topic. "There [remains] a surprising dearth of research on employee engagement in the academic literature" (Saks, 2006, p. 600). It seems however that organizations are developing strategies with no solid research foundation on which to build those strategies. Although seemingly voluminous, most of the existing literature is opinion, rather than evidence-based scholarship. Without empirical research to rigorously test the assumptions and implications of employee engagement, and to differentiate it from related concepts, practitioners are especially vulnerable to positive-sounding repackagings of workplace issues from burnout to retention to commitment and loyalty. This is a serious challenge for theory building, scholarship, and practice as employee engagement may be related to such concepts, but is not synonymous with any (Macey & Schneider, 2008).

Problem Statement

As organizations pay more attention to employee engagement and HRD professionals are increasingly asked to play a role in the development of engagement strategies, research about employee engagement eludes the HRD professional. The gap in knowledge between the needs of organizations and the ability for professionals to respond effectively is problematic for HRD scholars, researchers, and practitioners as well as for the organizations that employ them. Organizations need HRD professionals who have well-researched, effective, and meaningful approaches to creating, building, and maintaining employee engagement, and practitioners are looking to scholars and researchers for tools and techniques that are well grounded.

To successfully respond to both problems and obtain a consistent definition that provides a clear interpretation of the concept, a historical understanding of the constructs surrounding employee engagement is a prudent way to begin developing a common understanding and language. Looking back at how the concept has evolved would help identify past and present states as well as provide a depth of understanding, context, and insight. This historical perspective will help develop informed strategies of practice as well as provide a solid foundation for future researchers to build on. There is a short window of opportunity for the HRD field to take a leading role in fostering employee engagement and to do so, the concept needs to be clearly

defined and structured in a way that helps practitioners, scholars, and researchers solve problems and offer solutions through a common language and understanding. It must be practical and usable; at present, this is not the state of engagement.

Fortunately, the successful development of employee engagement is expected to increase organizational performance, one of the crucial aspects of HRD research and practice (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000). The first step in the development of employee engagement is a definition and common language that situates the concept across relevant fields in a usable format.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this article is to explore the historical development of employee engagement in an effort to define and situate the concept across relevant fields of literature. Several questions guided our review of the literature, such as (a) What are the historical underpinnings of employee engagement? (b) How has the concept evolved? and (c) What definitions of employee engagement are cited in the literature? The expected outcome of this research was to identify the seminal works and empirical research and to then synthesize the many working definitions of *employee engagement* into a more widely useful and applicable definition.

This article is presented in four sections: (a) the method; (b) an analysis and presentation of the history and evolution of employee engagement; (c) synthesis of the findings into a working definition; and (d) conclusion and implications.

Method

The literature review method was chosen because it is an accepted strategy for summarizing literature around a concept or phenomenon (Chermack & Passmore, 2005). For the purposes of this article, an integrative literature review was the methodology followed. An "integrative literature review is a distinctive form of research that generates new knowledge" about an emerging topic of study (Torraco, 2005, p. 356). Integrative literature reviews are considered one of the best ways to capture data from various emerging fields (Torraco, 2005). Because employee engagement is an emerging topic being studied in various fields with differing conceptualizations, an integrative literature review was developed and implemented. In the following sections, the framework of the method is discussed, followed by a justification for the selection of literature across various fields, data organization, and analysis strategies.

Framework of the Method

The integrative literature review promulgated by Torraco (2005) involves identifying an issue, selecting the review as an appropriate research strategy, conducting a review of the relevant literature, then analyzing and critiquing the literature to arrive at some insight or synthesis of the issue. Several literature reviews of emerging and mature

topics were reviewed to provide a rigorous approach to the review (Cullen & Turnbull, 2005; Fornes, Rocco, & Wollard, 2008; Hoffman, 2000). These literature reviews shared common components: an effort to determine, analyze, and organize the existent literature across various disciplines and the determination of a definition drawn from a synthesis of the literature. This commonality among otherwise disparate literature reviews offered the framework for the approach that follows.

The data were determined to be the existing literature streams that needed to be drawn together to extract the essential meaning of employee engagement for HRD theory, research, and practice (Yorks, 2008). Furthermore, an effort was made to clearly define and build a common foundation on which to create effective engagement interventions for the HRD community. Both Yorks (2008) and Torraco (2005) emphasize the importance of clearly defining the contribution of the review to the understanding of HRD practice and scholarship.

Selection of Relevant Literature Streams

Based on the problem statement and guiding questions, the first determination was the selection of which fields and types of literature to search. Because an understanding of employee engagement has implications for practitioners and scholars, both practitioner and scholarly data sources were identified to ensure broad representation of the concept. The data sources identified included sources from the fields of human resource development, human resource management, business, and psychology. To ensure inclusion of the broadest collection of articles, the following databases and publications were selected: PsycINFO, ABI/INFORM, ASTD's Training & Development database, the Society for Human Resource Management database, the Academy of Management database, all four of the Academy of Human Resource Development journals (e.g., *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, *Human Resource Development Review*, *Human Resource Development International*, and *Human Resource Development Quarterly*), and Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) conference proceedings from the past 11 years. Conference proceedings prior to 1998 were not available to the authors per the AHRD.

Establishing Selection Criteria

The term *employee engagement* was identified as the only descriptor in the search. To ensure articles specifically addressed employee engagement, articles were limited to those with employee engagement appearing in the abstract or title, published in the English language, and peer-reviewed when a peer review option was available; when a peer review option was not available, articles meeting all other selection criteria were captured for review. Alternative keywords were not queried, as the purpose of the review was to search for articles that specifically contribute to the foundations of employee engagement. Although no time period was specifically selected, the first mention of employee engagement in the academic literature comes from Kahn's

Table 1. Number of Selected Articles by Database Source

Database	Employee Engagement	
	Hits	Abstracts
PsycINFO	19	19
ABI/INFORM	969	120
ASTD Database	10	10
SHRM Database	2	2
Academy of Management Database	3	2
AHRD Conference Proceedings (1998-2009)	5	5
Human Resource Development Review	0	0
Human Resource Development International	0	0
Human Resource Development Quarterly	0	0
Advances in Developing Human Resources	1	1
Total	1,009	159

NOTES: ASTD = American Society for Training & Development; SHRM = the Society for Human Resource Management; AHRD = Academy of Human Resource Development.

(1990) conceptualization. For that reason, we anticipated that no records would appear before 1990.

A total of 1,009 records were produced (see Table 1). A staged review method was then used to initially analyze all articles containing the phrase *employee engagement*. A staged review is the practice of initially reviewing only abstracts to determine relevancy and then reviewing relevant articles in depth (Torraco, 2005). Relevancy was determined by use of the selection criteria; any article meeting the selection criteria was selected for further review. PsycINFO produced 19 records; all 19 were selected for review. ABI/INFORM produced 969 records; 120 were selected for review. ASTD database produced 10 records; all 10 were selected for review. The SHRM database produced 2 records; both were selected for review. The Academy of Management database produced 3 records; 2 were selected for review. AHRD conference proceedings produced 5 records; all 5 were selected for review (3 of the 5 were authored or coauthored by the authors of this article). Advances in Human Resource Development produced one record; it was selected for review. *Human Resource Development Review*, *Human Resource Development International*, *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, produced no records. A total of 159 articles were selected for further review.

Data Organization and Analysis

Of the 159 articles, 10 were duplicates and 5 were found to be unrelated to the topic and were deleted. The remaining 144 abstracts were printed and reviewed by both authors. Initial efforts were made to identify all empirical and major theoretical articles within the data. Twenty-six of the 159 articles were empirical and only 12 articles were found to specifically mention possible origins of employee engagement. Of the 12 articles mentioning possible origins, 8 were selected for complete reading because

they were considered to be seminal works on the topic, either because the authors were known for their contributions in their areas of expertise, the articles were heavily cited in other literature, or because the abstract included mention of research specifically on the origin and development of employee engagement.

The articles were summarized, and all definitions of employee engagement were noted, along with the major contributions of each article to the overall development of employee engagement concept. A summary of the literature appears in Table 2. From the summary, a timeline was constructed to visually demonstrate the acceleration of the research literature from 1990 to the present (see Figure 1). Next, findings were discussed between the researchers and presented chronologically in an effort to help readers follow the development and progression of understanding of the concept. Finally, a proposed working definition of employee engagement grounded in the literature was developed.

Findings

In this section, the literature reviewed is used to construct a narrative timeline of the historical development of employee engagement highlighting seminal works as identified through the literature review. First, early conceptualizations of employee engagement will be examined. Second, contemporary conceptualizations of employee engagement will be explored followed by a synthesis of both sections. The development of a working definition of employee engagement concludes the section.

Early Conceptualizations of Employee Engagement

The first mention of employee engagement appears in an *Academy of Management Journal* article, "Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work" (Kahn, 1990). In this article, Kahn explains the underpinnings and major influences on his thought, beginning with the classic sociology text *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1961). In his book, Goffman (1961) suggested that a human's attachment and detachment to their life roles varied depending on a person's interactions during fleeting, face-to-face encounters. Although he agreed with Goffman (1961), Kahn (1990) suggested that a new perspective was needed for understanding organizational life. Kahn believed that "[employees] act out momentary attachments and detachments in role performances" at work (p. 694), which was a direct reference to Goffman's (1961) interactionist theory, but specific to the workplace. This conceptualization and others alluding to the roles played by humans are interwoven throughout Kahn's (1990) theory of personal engagement.

Kahn (1990) defined personal engagement as "the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence, and active full role performances" (p. 700). Developing from the works of a psychologist (Freud, 1922), sociologists (Goffman, 1961; Merton, 1957), and group theorists (Slater, 1966; Smith & Berg, 1987), Kahn

Table 2. Identified Seminal Works of Employee Engagement

Article Citation	Major Contribution to the HRD Field	Definition of *Engagement*	Research Type
Kahn (1990)	Published early theoretical framework of personal engagement and disengagement. First to define engagement as a separate concept using research. Conceptualized that the domains of meaningfulness, safety, and availability were important to understanding the development of engagement.	"Personal engagement is the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence, and active full role performances" (Kahn, 1990, p. 700).	Empirical: Ethnographic research with 16 summer camp counselors and 16 financial firm members
Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter (2001)	Was the first major work on employee engagement after Kahn (1990) and is the other of the two early developmental theories on employee engagement. Maslach et al. (2001) pioneered reaching across academic boundaries for definitions of *employee engagement*, conceptualizing the concept as the positive antithesis to burnout.	Maslach & Leiter (1997) defined employee engagement as positive scores on the Maslach Burnout Inventory, whereas Schaufeli defined *employee engagement* as "a persistent, positive affective-motivational state of fulfillment in employees that is characterized by high levels of activation and pleasure" (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 417).	Conceptual
Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes (2002)	Published first study looking at the business unit level between the employee engagement-satisfaction and business unit outcomes (profit). One of the first to mention a profit linkage to employee engagement.	"Employee engagement refers to the individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work" (Harter et al., 2002, p. 269).	Empirical: meta-analysis of 7,939 business units across multiple fields
May, Gilson, & Harter (2004)	First published empirical research testing Kahn's (1990) conceptualization of employee engagement.	Engagement is never explicitly defined although Kahn (1990) is referred to as saying that "in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively,	Empirical: survey of 199 employees in a large Midwestern insurance firm

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

| Article Citation	Major Contribution to the HRD Field	Definition of *Engagement*	Research Type
		and emotionally during role performances (May et al., 2004, p. 12).	
Saks (2006)	First explicit research to test antecedents and consequences to employee engagement in the academic literature. Prior to Saks (2006), practitioner research was the only body of work connecting employee engagement drivers to employee engagement consequences.	"A distinct and unique construct that consists of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components that are associated with individual role performance" (Saks, 2006, p. 602).	Empirical: survey of 102 employees working in a wide range of occupations in the Toronto, Canada, area
Vance (2006)	SHRM's first major publication on employee engagement and commitment.	Employee engagement and commitment are never defined although various definitions and conceptualizations are discussed throughout the article.	Conceptual
Czarnowsky (2008)	ASTD's first major publication on employee engagement.	"Employees who are mentally and emotionally invested in their work and in contributing to their employer's success" (Czarnowsky, 2008, p. 6) are defined as engaged.	Empirical: survey of 776 human resource and learning executives globally.
Macey & Schneider (2008)	The first to conceptualize trait, state, and behavioral engagement as separate but related constructs. Presented various organizational concepts that might feed the development of employee engagement within organizations	*Trait engagement* is defined as the "inclination or orientation to experience the world from a particular vantage point" (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p. 5). *Psychological state engagement* is defined as an antecedent to behavioral engagement (encompassing the constructs of satisfaction, involvement, commitment, and empowerment; pp. 5-6) *Behavioral engagement* is "define[d] in terms of discretionary effort" (p. 6).	Conceptual

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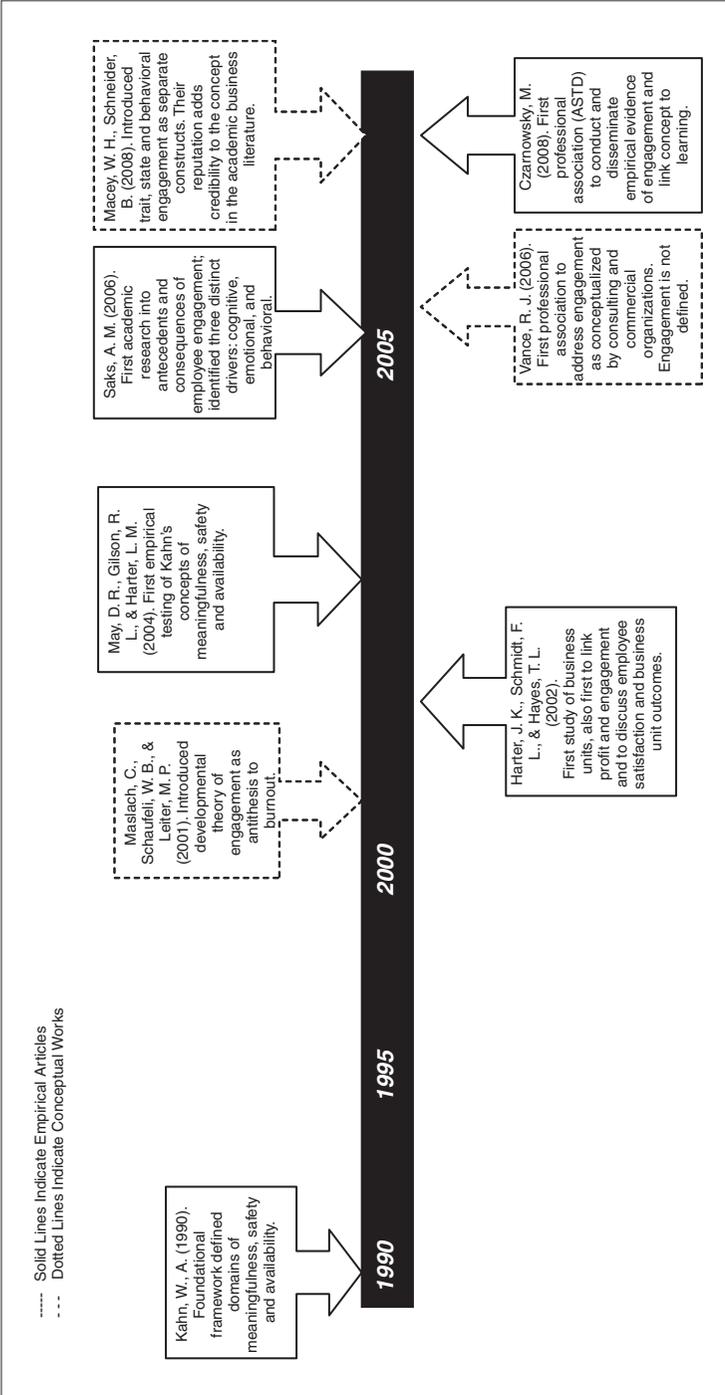
Figure 1. Historical timeline of employee engagement development

NOTES: ——, solid lines indicate empirical articles; - - , dotted lines indicate conceptual works.

(1990) posited that the domains of meaningfulness, safety, and availability were important to fully understanding why a person would become engaged in their work. Kahn defined *meaningfulness* as the positive "sense of return on investments of self in role performance" (p. 705). *Safety* was defined as the ability to show one's self "without fear or negative consequences to self image, status, or career" (p. 705). *Availability* was defined as the "sense of possessing the physical, emotional, and psychological resources necessary" (p. 705) for the completion of work.

Kahn's conceptualization of personal engagement would be the only literature on engagement until early 2001, when Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) began conceptualizing why employees developed job burnout. Conceptual in nature, Maslach et al. (2001) posited that employee engagement was the positive antithesis to burnout and defined *employee engagement* as "a persistent positive affective state . . . characterized by high levels of activation and pleasure" (p. 417). Together, Kahn (1990) and Maslach et al. (2001) provided the two earliest theoretical frameworks for understanding employee engagement (Saks, 2006).

The only study to date to empirically test Kahn's (1990) conceptualization of engagement found that all three of Kahn's (1990) original domains were "important in determining one's engagement at work" (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004, p. 30). This finding suggests that the framework Kahn (1990) used in his conceptualization is foundational for the scaffolding of the construct. Many of the contemporary conceptualizations of engagement build from Kahn's (1990) and Maslach et al's (2001) original works.

Contemporary Conceptualizations of Employee Engagement

Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes (2002) published one of the earliest and most definitive pieces of practitioner literature on employee engagement. Using a research foundation pioneered by the late Donald O. Clifton in 1985 as a part of the Gallup Strengths movement and popularized by the publication of *First Break All the Rules* (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999), Harter and colleagues (2002) pulled data from a meta-analysis of 7,939 business units across multiple industries. Harter et al. (2002) were the first to look at employee engagement at the business unit level and used an enormous database to link higher levels of employee engagement to increased business unit outcomes. In their conceptualization, *employee engagement* was defined as an "individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work" (Harter et al., 2002, p. 417). This definition added the expectation of an individual's satisfaction level, significantly altering the way engagement had been viewed. In addition, prior to Harter et al. (2002), employee engagement was seen as a broad-based variable organizations assumed they had or did not have—a concept that executive leaders assumed that they controlled. Harter et al. (2002) showed that organizational culture should be measured at the individual level by looking at separate business units, separate unit managers, and separate unit employees. In later works (Fleming & Asplund, 2007; Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2003; Wagner & Harter, 2006), Gallup researchers claimed that engagement develops one micro-culture at a time, highlighting the individual

view of engagement. In a recent update, Gallup researchers continued to drive empirical research from the practitioner perspective with a growing database of 10 million participants speaking 51 languages from 736 organizations in 144 different countries; their research continues to confirm their previous research findings (Fleming & Asplund, 2007).

Harter et al.'s (2002) article was a catalyst for the rapid expansion of interest in the employee engagement concept because it was the first widely disseminated publication to suggest an employee engagement–profit linkage. The Corporate Leadership Council (2004) and Towers Perrin (2003, 2007) as well as other similar firms followed Harter et al. (2002) by disseminating consulting literature on employee engagement geared toward proprietary consulting products. These for-profit organizations remain huge international players in driving the profitability of the employee engagement concept, although none share a common conceptualization or definition.

The first academic research to specifically conceptualize and test antecedents and consequences of employee engagement occurred in 2006 (Saks, 2006). Prior to Saks (2006), practitioner literature was the only body of work connecting employee engagement drivers to employee engagement and its consequences. Saks believed employee engagement developed through a social exchange model and was the first to separate job engagement and organizational engagement into separate types of employee engagement. Using 102 working employees enrolled in a gradate course at a large Canadian university, Saks defined *employee engagement* as "a distinct and unique construct consisting of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components . . . associated with individual role performance" (p. 602). This definition was inclusive of previous literature by introducing the idea that employee engagement was developed from cognitive (Kahn, 1990; Maslach et al., 2001; Maslow, 1970), emotional (Harter et al., 2002; Kahn, 1990), and behavioral components (Harter et al., 2002; Maslach et al., 2001). Through his research, Saks (2006) provided an important bridge between previous early theories of employee engagement, practitioner literature, and the academic community and was the first to propose an empirical model.

In 2006, SHRM commissioned a publication on employee engagement and commitment as an extension of their *Effective Practice Guidelines Series*. This report was hailed as a "clear, concise, and usable format" (Vance, 2006, p. v) for understanding employee engagement, hoping to make the concept of employee engagement more accessible to SHRM members. Although topic headings such as "Key Ingredients," "Job and Task Design," and "Designing Engagement Initiatives" were peppered throughout the pages, this publication was not clear and concise, lacked a single definition of *employee engagement*, and offered few research-based solutions for those struggling with developing engaged employees. This publication is noteworthy however because it marked the entrance of professional societies into the engagement conversation. Since the first SHRM publication, future SHRM studies have developed further conceptualizations around the employee engagement construct (see Lockwood, 2007).

Two years after the SHRM study, the ASTD commissioned a study in association with Dale Carnegie Training to look at employee engagement (Czarnowsky, 2008). This study focused on the role of learning in the employee engagement construct, marking the first major research publication by ASTD on employee engagement and the first look into the concept from an HRD perspective. Using data from 776 human resources and learning executives from around the world, ASTD defined *engagement* as "employees who are mentally and emotionally invested in their work and in contributing to their employer's success" (Czarnowsky, 2008, p. 6). The results of the study showed connections to the foundational work of Kahn (1990) and Maslach et al. (2001) by creating meaningful work environments, providing opportunities for learning and focusing on the experience of the employee. This study presented an important link to the academic community, as ASTD was the first professional society to use a research-driven framework to understand the employee engagement concept.

Building significantly on the work of multiple scholars, Macey and Schneider (2008) pioneered conceptual research in the area of employee engagement. Conceptualizing that employee engagement develops from (a) trait engagement, (b) state engagement, and (c) behavioral engagement (2008), they drew significant parallels from previous research and defined each as a separate engagement construct, similar to Saks (2006). From their perspective, employee engagement is defined by suggesting "(a) job design attributes . . . directly affect trait engagement, (b) the presence of a transformational leader . . . directly affect[s] state engagement, and (c) the presence of a transformational leader . . . directly affect[s] trust levels and thus, indirectly affect[s] behavioral engagement" (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p. 25). In this conceptual model, the preceding state of engagement builds on the next, each developing a piece of the overall employee engagement concept. This contribution to the field helped to clear the cluttered, scattered, and unfocused conceptual state of employee engagement by breaking the engagement construct into distinct parts and debunking "folk" definitions of engagement.

Toward a Working Definition of Employee Engagement

As evidenced by the literature reviewed, several definitions of employee engagement exist. Although each represents unique perspectives of the time and field, the disjointed approach to defining *employee engagement* has lent itself to its misconceptualization and to the potential for misinterpretation. This is especially challenging for the HRD field, a field that draws on a number of academic disciplines (Reio, 2009) and is often called on to develop interventions for the implementation of such a concept. Several definitions from both the practitioner and academic literature reviewed for this article are listed below, starting with the earliest specific definition and working forward in time.

- "Personal engagement is the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task behaviors that promote connections to work

and to others, personal presence, and active full role performances" (Kahn, 1990, p. 700).

- "A persistent, positive affective-motivational state of fulfillment in employees that is characterized by high levels of activation and pleasure" (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 417).
- "Employee engagement refers to the individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work" (Harter et al., 2002, p. 269).
- "A distinct and unique construct that consists of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components that is associated with individual role performance" (Saks, 2006, p. 602).
- "[Engaged] employees are mentally and emotionally invested in their work and in contributing to their employer's success" (Czarnowsky, 2008, p. 6).
- *Trait engagement* is defined as the "inclination or orientation to experience the world from a particular vantage point" (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p. 5). *Psychological state engagement* is defined as an antecedent to behavioral engagement (encompassing the constructs of satisfaction, involvement, commitment, and empowerment; pp. 5-6). *Behavioral engagement* is "define[d] in terms of discretionary effort" (p. 6).

In each of the definitions, several areas of consistency and inconsistency can be identified.

Inconsistently, it seems there is some confusion about where the decision to become engaged develops. For some researchers, being engaged is a personal decision; it concerns the individual employee, not the organization. Many definitions (Kahn, 1990; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2006) allude to this; however, Maslach et al. (2001) and Czarnowsky (2008) speak only of engagement in generalities, which leaves the reader to assume that engagement is an organizational-level variable. This underscores a common misconception that employee engagement is about the organization and explains why some scholars, researchers, and practitioners have trouble developing specific strategies. They simply start their planning too widely. Instead, when planning strategies, scholars, researchers, and practitioners should ask, "How will this affect our employees and what are the implications of the strategy for their work?" As Kahn (1990), Harter et al. (2002), Saks (2006), and Macey and Schneider (2008) suggested to their readers, engagement starts one person's experience of work at a time. Employee engagement concerns the individual, not the masses, and is a personal decision that cannot be mandated or forced. Engagement in work is a personal experience inseparable from the individualistic nature of being human.

Another inconsistency concerns types of engagement. In two definitions (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2006), different types of engagement can be identified: (a) cognitive engagement, (b) emotional engagement, and (c) behavioral engagement—each as separate, definable areas. Other definitions mention only one type of general engagement (Czarnowsky, 2008; Harter et al., 2002; Maslach et al., 2001). Saks (2006) empirically tested this idea and presented data that show support for different types of engagement. The idea according to Saks (2006) and further developed by

Macey and Schneider (2008) is that each type of engagement builds on the next, which is consistent with the early employee engagement framework (Alderfer, 1972; Maslow, 1970). According to Macey and Schneider (2008) and Saks (2006), there are different types of engagement, each with different antecedents and outcomes. Little empirical evidence exists for this delineation at present; however, looking at engagement from this perspective opens new possibilities for what and how organizations measure engagement as well as what engagement-enhancing strategies organizations should choose to invest in. From this emerging conceptual space, it seems unwise for an organization to start developing behavioral engagement when cognitive and emotional engagement may precede such an overt state of employee behavior.

Consistently and conceptually connected in consequence with the idea of different types of engagement, scholars agree that employee engagement has no physical properties but is manifested and often measured behaviorally (Kahn, 1990; Macey & Schneider, 2008). Behavioral manifestation of employee engagement is understood inconsistently as an employee's role performance, an employer's success and profit, or an employee's discretionary effort but consistently understood as an internal decision manifested outwardly and is best conceptualized as a positive or forward-moving emotive state (Maslow, 1970). By taking into context the historical foundations of the concept (Kahn, 1990; Schaufeli et al., 2002), it becomes clear employee engagement is rooted in the psychology of the employee and observed through behavior. An employee must decide if and when they are willing to engage. Although this thought process may not be an entirely overt one, the decision to disengage can be very conscious and overt.

Finally, scholars agree that *employee engagement* is about adaptive behaviors purposefully focused on meeting or exceeding organizational outcomes. This is not to be confused with extra-role behaviors such as organizational commitment behaviors (OCBs) outside of one's primary area of responsibility (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2006). Although engaged employees may be involved in OCBs, employee engagement is focused on an employee's main responsibilities of work (Kular, Gatenby, Rees, Soane, & Truss, 2008). Engaged employees excel at their work through a willingness to adapt their behavior toward communicated organizational outcomes.

Through the process of synthesizing definitions, understanding the historical contexts, and conceptual frameworks of employee engagement, we propose an emergent definition of the concept: Employee engagement can be defined as "an individual employee's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral state directed toward desired organizational outcomes." This definition, encompassing the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional aspects of the employee experience of engagement offers a clarity that has seemingly eluded practitioners, is comprehensible to business and organization leaders, yet robust enough for future scholarly research.

Implications for HRD Scholars and Practitioners

As a result of the literature review, synthesis of definitions, and proposed emergent working definition, this manuscript has situated the employee engagement concept

within the HRD field. The following section explores implications for theory, scholarship, and practice.

Implications for Theory

This manuscript has uncovered new knowledge by simultaneously exploring early and contemporary conceptualizations of engagement theory. This exploration has revealed new insights regarding the overlapping, often-disjointed approach practitioners and scholars have, often separately, taken to studying and conceptualizing the employee engagement concept. Although disjointed, the literature brought forth important perspectives to consider, indicative of each author's unique frame of reference. This historical review gives solid foundation to a concept that has the potential to influence HRD theory for the foreseeable future. Employee engagement is a growing force in the practitioner community (Ketter, 2008; TKBC, 2008). This contribution to theory building will aid HRD professionals in the future by gleaning new insights into the theoretical constructs surrounding employee engagement and building on a diverse and growing literature base.

In addition, this manuscript explored the foundational underpinnings of the employee engagement concept in a methodical way that has not previously been documented. Two positive outcomes result from this effort. First, the authors have attempted to define the research that is fundamental to understanding the evolution of the concept, giving future scholars an opportunity to add to or disagree with the choices, while creating the reading requirements for practitioners and scholars wishing to immerse themselves in the research literature. Second, and perhaps most important, the authors propose an emergent and working definition of the concept. The definition is grounded in and consistent with the early and contemporary literature, encompassing of the known definitions surrounding the concept to date, and comprehensible to the many and varied constituencies concerned with its conceptualization. Clarifying the definition of employee engagement is meant to encourage theories and models regarding the identified components. Further refinement and development of the definition may also be expected.

Implications for Scholarship

Exploring employee engagement through this integrative approach has provided new insights into the underlying and multifaceted dimensions of employee engagement. Exploring the seminal works around employee engagement informs scholarship and aids HRD professionals in a variety of ways. One of the most notable findings is the idea that according to the literature, employee engagement seems to occur on three distinct levels: (a) cognitive, (b) emotional, and (c) behavioral. Although not an original idea, the literature surrounding the idea was scattered, multidisciplinary, and in need of synthesis. This conceptual idea is consistent with the other multidimensional, multidisciplinary concepts such as commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Fornes et al.,

2008; Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001), psychological climate (Brown & Leigh, 1996), and learning (Dirkx, 2006; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

In addition, the scaffolding used to arrive at the working definition has implications for scholarship; mainly that more rigorous research is needed to better understand the many facets of employee engagement. Little is known empirically about how employee engagement develops or what factors enhance or detract from the concept in both theory and practice (Saks, 2006). Few models (e.g., Macey & Schneider, 2008; Maslach et al., 2001; Saks, 2006) currently exist to conceptualize antecedents and outcomes of employee engagement and currently, no model exists for understanding how HRD practice can influence the development of employee engagement. This manuscript has sought to situate the employee engagement concept within the purview of HRD scholars and organizational researchers by providing a solid and clearly defined foundation of literature for scholarship to begin developing.

With a solid foundation to work from, the hard work of building can begin. The concept now has a definition that makes it possible to create assessment tools to better understand how employee engagement is manifested in the workplace. Instead of the nebulous questions about whether employees are engaged, the definition is focused and suggests that research should investigate three specific aspects of the employee experience. Cognitive engagement assessment would be directed toward measuring how employees think about and understand their job, their company, their culture, and their intellectual commitment to the organization. The exploration of emotional engagement would look at the feelings and beliefs held by those who are engaged, perhaps determining how these feelings and beliefs are formed and influenced. Behavioral engagement research might look beyond the obvious surveying of employees to the development of objective measurement devices that ultimately offer HRD scholars and practitioners the tools to observe behavior rather than just question it. Currently, few statistically valid and effective tools are available to the HRD scholar. For-profit consulting conglomerates boast of highly reliable tools, though most are too expensive to obtain or not available for academic research, and few report reliability and validity data. One of the main purposes of proposing a working definition is to encourage conceptual work around the concept, especially the development of measurement and assessment tools that would then spur better and more extensive empirical study. Without a focus toward developing assessment tools, employee engagement will continue to be plagued by poor conceptualization, leading to questionable interventions.

Implications for Practice

According to the literature, employee engagement has often been looked at from the organizational level (Czarnowsky, 2008; Maslach et al., 2001); however, it is clear that employee engagement is an individual-level construct. The method of looking at engagement levels across an organization distorts the nature of the concept. This method is similar to averaging the rate of speed in a sprinting race and reporting the idea that everyone in the race ran at the same pace; it does not take into account the individuals

who are running, their differences, and the individual variables that affect their process or outcomes. Little can be learned about the best runner or the runner who placed last through an analysis of average speed. To implement strategic interventions, organizations want to know not only who is running the fastest and who is running the slowest but also what separates them and why. This is not to say that looking at employee engagement at the organizational level is unnecessary; certainly, it can give the current temperature reading of an entire organization. However, it is at the level of the individual business unit and the individual employee where the most insight can be gleaned for the HRD practitioner. Engagement is a personal decision chosen by the employee for his or her own reasons (Harter et al., 2002; Wagner & Harter, 2006); those reasons need to be better understood from the perspective of each individual, unit, and team.

Moreover, in this conceptualization, it is proposed that cognitive engagement occurs before the other two. Cognitive engagement happens on a silent, personal level, not yet behaviorally manifested, although it is the behavior that can actually be measured in most cases. We might argue that cognitive engagement acting as a catalyst for the next two levels is the most powerful of the three levels. This suggests that what practitioners have viewed as a consequence of an employee's making the decision to engage may actually precede the decision to engage. This must be further explored in empirical research but is not contradicted by current literature on the topic (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Zigarmi et al., 2009). This is important for practitioners to consider because it affects the type and level of interventions organizations should be using. Practitioners who start at the behavioral level are missing the essence of employee engagement.

In addition, this article is meant to help HRD practitioners become better consumers of employee engagement materials and literature. As a result of this research, practitioners should be better prepared to ask vendors and third-party consultants questions about their definition of engagement, approach to measurement, and conceptualization of the concept. Answers to these questions will help shed light on expected outcomes of measurement and intervention as well as clarify objectives for measuring engagement in the first place. Furthermore, to support the practitioner, this article provides an overview of scholarship around the concept as well as suggested readings to review and theory to consider. The ability to understand and analyze available offerings can save organizations from investing large sums in measurement devices that are simply repurposed from older research on turnover, burnout, or satisfaction. The definition of *employee engagement* clearly suggests that organizational researchers should consider the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of engagement; measure those they wish to know more about; and direct inquiries toward the right individuals. Furthermore, this article gives practitioners several directions to probe in assessing engagement levels. The first of these would be surrounding Kahn's (1990) concepts of meaningfulness, safety, and availability and the second would be whether measurement should happen at the individual, unit, or organization levels, or perhaps all three (Harter et al., 2002). Other applications might entail determining what behaviors support the development of and demonstrate engagement as well as how the organization defines *employee engagement* in theory and practice.

Practitioners are again directed to the question posed earlier: "How will this affect our employees and what are the implications of the strategy for their work?" When considering any investigation or intervention around encouraging employee engagement, HRD practitioners have to be aware of the consequences of their actions. The practitioner should ask, "Is this organization willing to make the workplace more psychologically safe, or are there reasons for maintaining a psychologically threatening environment?" Moreover, "Is this organization willing to address an outcome that says employees lack the resources to perform optimally?" The literature (Harter et al., 2002; Kahn, 1990; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2006) suggests that engaged individuals find positive ROI in doing their work, are unafraid to show their true selves, and feel they possess "the physical, emotional, and psychological resources necessary" (Kahn, 1990, p. 705) to complete their work. Furthermore, Harter et al. (2002) suggested that organizations that scored 0.43 standard deviations above the median on validated and reliable employee engagement measures enjoyed a 103% higher success rate at the business unit level than those on the lower end of the median. Clearly, the business case for developing employee engagement is strong; however, probing levels of engagement without consideration of the consequences of asking these questions may undermine any effort to encourage the concept's development. Organizations must ask the right questions, to the right people, and be willing to receive answers to the questions they ask.

Lastly, one area of practice that has not been explored in this article is that of the antithesis of engagement, or employee disengagement or nonengagement. The literature of employee sabotage, employee burnout, work slowdowns, poor employee–job fit, and turnover may all be indicative of organizational policies that are barriers to employee engagement (Maslach et al., 2002; Resick, Baltes, & Shantz, 2007; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Roma, & Bakker, 2002). Although nonengagement has not been considered as part of this study, it offers tantalizing options for practitioners to consider and certainly promises to be an important direction for future research.

Concluding Thoughts

This historical perspective of employee engagement is an attempt to put a foundation under a concept that has potential to improve the lives of individuals in organizations. Too many people go to work every day actively disengaged from their work (Harter et al., 2002). For human resources in organizations to contribute productively and even passionately to the success of their organizations is an outcome that every HRD practitioner and scholar has concern for. The employee engagement concept has captured so much attention because it suggests that it is possible, desirable, and attainable for workplaces to be positive, energizing places. For much of the people who are tied up in their working lives (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009), employee engagement suggests that work can be a place of motivation, commitment, success, and even self-actualization (Maslow, 1970). If organizations can appreciate the potential of a fully engaged workforce, and HRD scholars and practitioners can demonstrate the strategies, tools, and resources to move toward that goal, work in the 21st century may be a very different experience from what today's disengaged workforce reports.

This article has offered a starting point toward building a solid foundation for how employees and organizations define their relationship. The definition of employee engagement should be just barely a starting point for a crucial and long-overdue conversation.

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