

The Future of Engagement: Thought Piece Collection

What is employee engagement and does it matter?: An evidence-based approach

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In this thought piece, Rob presents his fundamental criticisms of how employee engagement has developed as both a concept and a practice. Arguing from the point of view that management should be more evidence-based, he challenges the field of employee engagement to be clearer on what it is and how it is distinct from related concepts and measurement. As it stands, Rob contends that measurements of 'employee engagement' do not sufficiently stand up to scrutiny.

What is employee engagement and does it matter?: An evidence-based approach

'The purpose of this invited (by Engage for Success) paper is to stimulate deeper and more critical thinking about employee engagement from an evidence-based practice perspective. Five key challenges facing the field are considered:

- 1. Defining engagement*
- 2. Measuring engagement*
- 3. Engagement is nothing new or different*
- 4. There is almost no good quality evidence with which to answer the most important questions about engagement*
- 5. Over-claiming and mis-claiming the importance and role of engagement. I argue that in order to find out what employee engagement is and whether it matters each of these challenges needs to be tackled.'*

Imagine this, I approach a senior HR manager of a large organisation and ask if we can arrange a meeting to discuss a wonderful new and proven idea about how they can motivate and retain their employees. They are very busy, but agree. I start the meeting with a more truthful account of this idea. I tell them that in reality it has no agreed upon definition and that there is no evidence about whether it can be measured in a valid or reliable way. I then tell them that the idea is actually quite similar to if not precisely the same as a lot of other ideas that have been around for about 50 years. Finally, I let them know that there is at the present time absolutely no good quality evidence that shows that if you implement this idea it will produce the desired results – though there are plenty of people and organisations with vested interests who will happily tell you their neat anecdotes and 'success stories'. Very soon that HR manager will get pretty annoyed with me for wasting their time on this not-so-new and pretty unhelpful idea and quite rightly show me the door. Wouldn't you do the same?

The idea of employee engagement¹ (henceforth just engagement) shares exactly the same characteristics as the idea described above. However, rather than showing engagement the door, many HR practitioners (and some HR academics) have invited it in, sat it down, given it a nice cup of tea, asked it to stay for as long as it wants and given it a prominent role. What's going on? Whatever your personal

¹ The terms 'employee engagement' and 'engagement' as used in this article refer to the popular HR practitioner conceptualisation of engagement and not the very *different* psychological concept of 'work engagement' developed by Schaufeli, Bakker and colleagues (see for example Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010).

views about engagement my goals here are simple: To stimulate a more balanced, deeper, more critical and more evidence-based approach to how we think about and use engagement in organisations.

Problem 1: Defining engagement

The one thing everyone knows about engagement is that nobody agrees what it is. For example, McLeod and Clarke (2009) stated: *'There is no one agreed definition of employee engagement – during the course of this review we have come across more than 50 definitions'*. Not only are definitions numerous but, more importantly, they are very different (see Robertson-Smith and Marwick, 2009). Some definitions focus on employee behaviour (eg, discretionary effort), some on employee attitudes (eg, commitment), some on employee feelings (eg, enthusiasm), some on the conditions of work and what the organisation does (eg, provides support), some on various combinations of these, and yet others define engagement as a situation in which one of these things, such as attitudes, causes another, such as behaviour. In other words, when it comes to defining engagement it appears that almost anything goes.

From a practical (and academic) perspective the absence of agreement about what something means – and an absence of concern about that lack of agreement – is not funny or weird or cute or unfortunate or inconvenient. It's a confused, confusing and chaotic mess that is almost bound to lead to messy and undesired outcomes. It means that whenever we talk about or think about or try to measure 'engagement' we are almost certainly saying different things, understanding different things, measuring different things and doing different things but believing quite incorrectly they are all the same.

David Guest got it pretty much right when he said: *'...the concept of employee engagement needs to be more clearly defined (...) or it needs to be abandoned'* (McLeod and Clarke, 2009). Since that time, far from increased definitional clarity this definitional chaos has continued and perhaps even worsened. Several observers share this concern.

'This lack of continuity [in definition] contributes to a deep misconception of the complexities around the concept.'

Shuck and Wollard, 2010

'...if the meaning of engagement "bleeds" into so many other more developed constructs, then engagement just becomes an umbrella term for whatever one wants it to be.'

Saks, 2008

'The existence of different definitions makes the state of knowledge of employee engagement difficult to determine as each study examines employee engagement under a different protocol. In addition, unless employee engagement can be universally defined and measured, it cannot be managed, nor can it be known if efforts to improve it are working.'

Kular et al, 2008

'Over the last decade, engagement has become the most frequently used term to describe how employees relate to their work. Unfortunately, adding this term to our vocabulary when we talk about attitudes and behaviour has done more to confuse than to clarify.'

This mess should profoundly trouble all of us. Without a clear and agreed definition of engagement we *literally* do not know or understand what we're talking about or what we're doing.

Problem 2: Measuring engagement

In any area of practice or research if there is no agreement about the nature of a phenomenon and if it's various definitions overlap with other existing phenomena the chances of developing valid, reliable and meaningful measures are slim. And this is exactly the case for engagement. Although many measures exist the available evidence does not suggest these measures are of much value.

'...the most common way to measure engagement is by a group of survey items that include measures of satisfaction, effort, and commitment to the organisation; in other words, a potpourri of items looking at different types of attitudes that have different relationships to performance.'

Lawler, 2013

Not surprisingly such potpourri measures appear to correlate very strongly indeed with existing measures of other constructs. One of the most popular measures, Gallup's Q12, has been found to correlate .91 (the smallest correlation possible is zero and the largest 1) with a standard existing measure of job satisfaction at the unit (eg, office, factory, organisation) level (Harter et al, 2002) which means it is 'virtually identical with overall job satisfaction' (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010). The measure also correlates .8 with a standard existing measure of organisational commitment (Le, et al, 2007). The obvious question therefore is whether measures of engagement measure anything new or different? If they do not the measures are pointless and redundant.

One study (note – just *one* study to date) has found that measures of engagement to be somewhat related to (but not to *predict*) performance over and above traditional attitudes such as satisfaction and commitment (Christian et al, 2011). It should be noted that this meta-analysis mostly used data from the UWES work engagement measure which is not the same as employee engagement (the focus of this article see Footnote 1) and that most studies included were not capable of demonstrating cause and effect.

As a consequence of confused definition and overlap with other existing ideas there is currently little evidence that engagement measures are particularly valid or reliable. There is one crucial form of validity – predictive validity – for which there seems to be almost *no* evidence at all. This form of validity is essential as it explores whether measures, in this case of engagement, actually predict anything important in the future. At the present time therefore we do not have enough good quality evidence to allow us to draw even tentative conclusions about whether or how engagement can be measured in a valid and reliable way though this may change in the future.

'How can a concept so underdeveloped and still emerging in scholarly research have so little agreed-upon definition and have so few validated measures yet so widely accepted in application and practice as to be named the keystone to business success?'

Shuck and Reio, 2011

Problem 3: Engagement is nothing new or different

For any new idea for which big claims are made we not only need to examine the accuracy of those claims through examining the best available evidence (see later) but also to ask whether the idea adds anything to our existing toolbox of ideas. As discussed above, definitions of engagement are confused, they overlap considerably with definitions of other constructs and there is little evidence that *measures* of engagement tell us much more than measures of existing ideas: But what about the idea itself?

There is considerable debate about whether the engagement concept actually adds value.

'The employee engagement concept does not constitute new content but rather offers a particular blend of older, familiar constructs.'

'We agree...that state engagement constitutes a "new blend of old wines," but we disagree that the blend has "distinct characteristics and feel". Indeed, the themes of employee vigor/energy, dedication, and absorption are veritable classics within organisation science, and a relabeling of reshuffled items does not necessarily add conceptual or phenomenological clarity.'

Newman and Harrison, 2008

'There is nothing new with respect to how attitudes and performance are related. Article after article puts old wine in new bottles, in many cases this does more to confuse than clarify.'

Lawler, 2013

'...if the engagement concept is unique, it requires a distinct meaning...failure to make these distinctions and to continue to define and measure engagement in terms of older constructs is likely to muddy the engagement water even more and to perpetuate the belief that engagement is nothing more than old wine in a new bottle.'

Saks, 2008

Looking carefully across the many and various definitions and descriptions of engagement it is difficult if not impossible to identify how in any important sense it is new or different. Existing accounts of engagement describe it in terms of a whole range of very well-known and in some cases historic ideas including organisational commitment, job satisfaction, motivation, organisational identification, discretionary effort, citizenship behaviours, positive moods, emotions and job involvement.

Compared to these previous ideas, engagement does not seem new or different as it deploys the same terms, expressions, ideas, concepts, and linkages found in existing research on employee attitudes and employee performance. There are two simple possibilities.

- **Engagement is *not* a new and different idea:** If this is the case then the term and idea should be immediately discontinued because using a new term to describe existing concepts is confusing and unhelpful.
- **Engagement is a new and different idea:** If this is the case then there is a huge amount of work to be done first to *define* engagement in a way that shows precisely how it is new and different and second to gather good quality evidence to show that *measures* of engagement are measuring something new and different.

Proponents of engagement certainly *do* appear to strongly believe that it is something new and different. However, much work needs to be done to demonstrate that this is the case.

Problem 4: There is almost no good quality evidence with which to answer the most important questions about engagement

Given the strong claims made about engagement what do we really need to know first before we can decide whether or not engagement is something worth pursuing? While there are many interesting though less essential questions it is these two small, simple yet fundamental questions that lie at the heart of everything written, said and done in the name of engagement:

- **Fundamental Question 1:** ‘Do increases in engagement cause increases in performance?’
- **Fundamental Question 2:** ‘Do engagement interventions cause increases levels of engagement and subsequent increases in performance?’

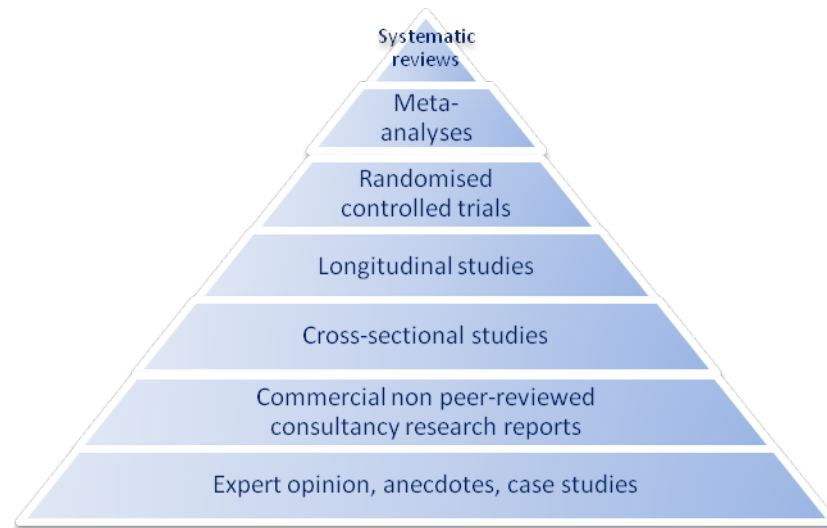
In other words, does engagement do anything and, if so, can organisations do anything about engagement? Each of these questions is clearly about cause and effect. In the field of engagement, and elsewhere in HR, there seems to be some uncertainty about what causality means. Correlational or cross-sectional or concurrent studies where everything is measured just at one point in time tell us nothing at all about cause and effect. To repeat, *correlational studies shed no light whatsoever on whether one thing causes another*. The results from such studies therefore provide no useful information with which to answer the two **Fundamental Questions** above.

But what does it mean to establish cause and effect? To show that changes in one thing actually causes changes in another? What types of studies allow us to infer causality with some degree of confidence? Generally speaking studies have to be designed to collect data that will meet these three conditions:

1. That the cause occurs before effect – in this case that increases in engagement happen *before* increases in performance.
2. That there is co-variation of cause and effect – in this case this means that as engagement goes up performance goes up *and* as engagement comes down performance goes down.
3. That there are no plausible alternative explanations such as reverse causality (that performance increases engagement) or other factors which might be the causes of changes in both engagement and performance.

At the present time and to the best of my knowledge – *there are almost no publically available studies of engagement that meet the conditions for establishing cause and effect* – but more of this later. In other words there is virtually no published evidence that is capable of answering our two **Fundamental Questions**. So what kinds of evidence *do* we have about engagement in relation to the two questions? Within evidence-based practice in many fields including management (eg, Briner et al, 2009; Center for Evidence-Based Management, 2013) there has been much thought about how the *quality* of evidence can be judged in relation to the types of question being asked. This is because in order for evidence to be used effectively in decision-making it is essential to use the best available evidence – not just any evidence. To identify and use the best available evidence means that we also need to make clear judgements about the quality of the available evidence. Having a lot of evidence is not the same as having good quality and relevant evidence.

Figure 1: Evidence hierarchy



Source: Briner, 2014

This hierarchy represents the different types of evidence that might be used to answer our two *Fundamental Questions* about engagement. Evidence higher up in the hierarchy represents better quality evidence to answer these particular types of questions.

The poorest quality evidence is the opinion of experts, anecdotes and case studies while the best quality evidence is obtained from systematic reviews of all the available evidence relevant to the questions². So what evidence do we have? I have not conducted a systematic review (see later) though it is still possible to provide a reasonable overview of the better quality evidence that does exist simply because there is so little. As a reminder, here are the two fundamental questions about engagement

- **Fundamental Question 1:** *'Do increases in engagement cause increases in performance?'*
- **Fundamental Question 2:** *'Do engagement interventions cause increases levels of engagement and subsequent increases in performance?'*

Expert opinion, anecdotes, case studies (quality level 1/7)

Starting at the lowest level of quality there is a very large quantity of opinions, anecdotes and cases studies. In relation to our two questions this is the *weakest* or lowest quality evidence it is possible to have and therefore largely if not completely inadmissible. What experts or observers think or believe to

² Note that it is only possible to judge the quality of evidence in relation to the question being asked. This hierarchy is *only* relevant for the types of question addressed here.

be the case is possibly interesting and may be useful of other purposes but is not relevant to these questions. Individuals and organisations who are engagement advocates or who have undertaken engagement interventions are also naturally likely to be biased and have vested interests. What is important is what the *evidence itself tells us* not people's opinions or experiences.

Commercial non peer-reviewed consultancy research reports (quality level 2/7)

There is also a very large quantity of commercial and non-peer reviewed research evidence. Again, this is considered to be of low quality as it is more likely to be biased and has usually not been made publically available or subject to external or objective scrutiny. As Schaufeli and Bakker (2010) put it: *'Instead of presenting scientific evidence it is merely stated in (consultancy) reports that a positive relationship between employee engagement and company's profitability has been established'*.

In other words, it is impossible to independently establish the validity of this type of research and, as in any field of practice, the claims commercial organisations make about their products and services need to be externally checked and verified otherwise they cannot to be trusted.

Cross-sectional studies (quality level 3/7)

One more level up, there are quite a few published peer reviewed cross-sectional studies which because they collect all the data at one point in time are not, as discussed above, capable of identifying cause and effect and do not therefore provide evidence relevant to our two questions. It is worth noting here that one of the few published studies examining links between engagement and performance, the Rich et al (2010) research on fire-fighters, is also not capable of addressing cause and effect nor answering our Question 1. As the authors themselves put it, *'...our research was cross-sectional, and so any inferences regarding causality are limited'*. In other words, this study does not provide any evidence that increases in engagement *cause* increases in performance.

Longitudinal studies (quality level 4/7)

Further up the hierarchy of evidence quality, there are to the best of my knowledge, there are *no* longitudinal studies of employee engagement that would answer the two questions. That is, there are no studies that measure engagement over time and performance over time or changes in engagement and performance before and after interventions.

Randomised controlled trials or experiments or interventions (quality level 5/7)

Again, to the best of my knowledge there are *no* randomised controlled trials of engagement though this would be very useful particularly in relation to the *Fundamental Question 2* about whether engagement interventions increase engagement and in turn performance. In a randomised controlled trial or experiment or intervention, individuals or teams or different departments could be selected for an engagement intervention while other would not receive the intervention. Any changes in levels of engagement and performance and possible differences in the intervention and no-intervention groups could be observed.

Meta-analyses (quality level 6/7)

A meta-analysis is a way of combining the results of multiple studies to provide a better overall picture of the links between variables. There are several meta-analyses relevant to engagement though most of these are actually about work engagement not employee engagement, the focus of this article. They are however still worth mentioning because research on work engagement is generally methodologically stronger than research on employee engagement (the focus of this article).

While meta-analyses are useful they can only ever be as good, in terms of the quality of evidence they provide, as the quality of each study they include. As discussed earlier, almost all studies of engagement are cross-sectional and, therefore, these meta-analyses do not tell us anything about causality and cannot therefore answer our two *Fundamental Questions*. These are taken from the limitations sections of the three main meta-analyses of engagement:

- In this article, there has been no discussion regarding possible causal relationships (Harter et al, 2002).
- I cannot infer causality between engagement and the variables studied (Halbesleben, 2010).
- ...the vast majority of the studies that we found assessed variables using concurrent methods (Christian et al, 2011).

So although there are some meta-analyses, which are useful in that they pull together existing data about correlations, they of course exhibit the 'garbage in-garbage out' principle in that even a very large quantity of data from cross-sectional studies will still tell us nothing about causal relationships and thus not be relevant to our two *Fundamental Questions*.

Systematic reviews (quality level 7/7)

To the best of my knowledge there are currently no systematic reviews of engagement research. Systematic reviews pull together in a systematic and objective way *all* the best quality available evidence relevant to a given problem or question (eg, Briner and Denyer, 2012). They are now commonly used in many fields including medicine, policy-making, policing, education and, to much a lesser extent, in management. Such reviews allow us clearly identify what is known, what the gaps are, the quantity and the quality of the available evidence. This is important as it makes the basis of our claims explicit and verifiable. A systematic review conducted on our *Fundamental Question 1* about whether increases in engagement cause increases in performance would *exclude* cross-sectional studies as these cannot answer and are therefore not relevant to this question. It would also *exclude* most if not all evidence of lower quality in the hierarchy – particularly expert opinion, anecdotes and case studies. It would however *include* longitudinal studies and rate them in terms of their quality. This process would produce a review that would allow us to identify exactly how many appropriately designed studies had addressed this question and what the results indicated. So, for example, it may show that there are eight well-conducted studies, five of which found a positive though weak causal relationship between engagement and performance and three of which found no relationship. Such a review would do much to clarify the confusion that so clearly exists around what we know and do not know about engagement.

'Although seemingly voluminous, most of the existing literature is opinion, rather than evidence-based scholarship.'

Shuck and Wollard, 2010

In general, then, it appears that at the current time there is a large quantity of poor quality evidence and very little or no good quality or high quality evidence with which to answer the two basic questions: Does engagement *do* anything and, if so, can organisations do anything about engagement?

Problem 5: Over-claiming and mis-claiming the importance and role of engagement

The four challenges discussed above, defining engagement, measuring engagement, establishing whether engagement is anything new, and the lack of good quality evidence are each fairly serious. Taken together, they raise questions about the potential value of engagement to practitioners. However, there is one further significant challenge which is, in part, a natural consequence of the previous four: That the proponents, supporters and advocates of engagement both *over-claim* by exaggerating the quantity and quality of evidence and *mis-claim* by making statements about engagement that, on closer inspection, seem to be about something else.

Such over- and mis-claiming can be found in many places – particularly in popular management and consultancy writing. Here I will focus, *as an example*, on some of the claims made by *Engage for Success* partly because this article was commissioned by *Engage for Success* and also because the *Engage for Success* movement is a prominent advocate for engagement and thus makes many claims such as the following.

‘Despite there being some debate about the precise meaning of employee engagement there are three things we know about it: it is measurable; it can be correlated with performance; and it varies from poor to great. Most importantly employers can do a great deal to impact on people’s level of engagement. That is what makes it so important, as a tool for business success.’

Engage for Success, 2013

Such statements are fairly typical of the claims made by *Engage for Success* and others. But what do these claims mean? The first claim made is that engagement measurable. It’s true that engagement, like anything else, can be measured. However, the point, as discussed above, is whether such measures are valid and reliable and of any practical value. There is little publically available good quality evidence to suggest that this is the case. While there is some evidence for the second claim, that engagement is correlated with performance, correlations do not, as discussed earlier, provide valuable information in this context as what we need to know are the answers to cause-effect questions. I am unable to examine the third claim that ‘it varies from poor to great’ as I do not know what this means. Scores on any measure tend to vary from high to low. Again, the question is, do higher or lower scores matter? The final claim made here is that it is possible to intervene to increase engagement. This is **Fundamental Question 2** about engagement identified earlier. As discussed, while there is much unverifiable anecdotal evidence and expert opinion to support this there is no good quality evidence.

Apart from making these rather vague claims, *Engage for Success* has gone further by publishing a report produced by the ‘*Nailing the Evidence*’ workgroup of the *Engage for Success* Task Force (Rayton, Dodge and D’Analese, 2012) which aims to present ‘*the evidence for the effectiveness of employee engagement in raising performance and productivity*’, p i). This report reviews many different forms of evidence ranging from expert opinions to meta-analyses and considers evidence for several aspects of engagement. It claims to: ‘*provide an evidence base that places the performance benefits of employee engagement, as broadly defined by its usage by practitioners, beyond reasonable doubt*’. (p 2)

And further states that: *'The evidence in this document supports a strong link between employee engagement and performance'*. (p 4)

It is not possible to verify the claims made in this report that are based on expert opinions, anecdotes and case studies – which is part of the reason why, from an evidence-based practice perspective, such evidence is generally considered to be low quality. As discussed, we need to be able to examine evidence and critically appraise it to understand the extent to which it is good quality evidence and how much it can be trusted. However, this report also makes much use of public domain peer-reviewed evidence in supporting some of its claims. Such claims are therefore relatively easy to verify.

Rather than consider all the claims made in the report and all the public domain peer-reviewed evidence used to support them I have focused on one of the most important sections of the report headed *'Engagement Precedes Performance'*. This claim directly addresses *Fundamental Question 1: 'Do increases in engagement cause increases in performance'*? It also describes exactly one of the conditions for causality discussed earlier – that the cause must precede the effect.

What types of research can in principle produce evidence that is relevant to the claim made in the section heading and other seven more specific claims made in this section and described below? What qualities or properties should this research have? First, any evidence presented here should be capable of demonstrating that engagement is a *cause* of performance or that *increases* in engagement lead to *increases* in performance. In other words, to be relevant, all the evidence presented here therefore needs to be longitudinal not cross-sectional. Second, in order to be relevant all the evidence presented here also needs to be about employee engagement and not about something different. As stated above, the report focuses on *'employee engagement, as broadly defined by its usage by practitioners'* (p 2). But when practitioners use the term *'employee engagement'* how *do* they define it? The short answer is that we don't know. However, it does seem clear that practitioners do not define it in terms of work engagement (see Footnote 1) as this idea is relatively unknown amongst practitioners. It also seems reasonable to assume that practitioners do wish to define employee engagement as something new and different. After all, if practitioners want to refer to existing ideas such as job satisfaction or the psychological contract or organisational commitment it seems very likely they would use those existing terms and not employee engagement. Or, to put it another way, if employee engagement is *not* defined by practitioners as something new and different then why are they attracted by the concept?

To summarise, we would expect all the evidence presented in this section headed *'Engagement Precedes Performance'* to meet two criteria: That it is taken from studies with (i) longitudinal designs that are (ii) specifically about employee engagement.

In order to examine whether or not all the public domain peer-reviewed evidence used in this section has these characteristics each of the seven claims presented in this section are directly repeated below.

1. Several recent academic studies have investigated exactly this issue, providing a large amount of evidence of the links between engagement and performance at the level of the individual employee, and exciting new evidence of these relationships at business unit and organisational levels.
2. The combined weight of academic meta-analytic evidence supports the view that employee engagement is linked to a wide variety of individual performance measures.
3. The meta-analysis of Michael Rickett of Aston University on the links between the engagement and performance at the individual level identified a robust significant link from engagement to performance, but not the other way around.

4. Analysis of data from the retail branch networks of one Irish and three UK banking organisations showed that increases in the average level of employee engagement generated increases in customer satisfaction.
5. Research on service profit chains in other sectors has also demonstrated a longitudinal linkage between engagement and performance.
6. ...engagement and performance are mutually reinforcing, leading to the opportunity to initiate synergistic feedback over time between employee engagement and performance.
7. ...employee engagement predicted subsequent business unit performance over a three-year horizon and that business unit performance predicted engagement only over a single year.

What, in general, are the characteristics of the studies used? Eleven studies are cited to support these seven claims³. None of them meet the two criteria described above. While seven of the 11 cited studies are longitudinal none of the cited studies is specifically about employee engagement and most do not even use the term 'employee engagement' anywhere in the article. It is certainly the case that each study provides evidence about *something* but apparently not evidence relevant to the general claim made in the section that 'Engagement precedes performance' or the seven more specific claims.

For example, Claim 2 above is that 'The combined weight of academic meta-analytic evidence supports the view that employee engagement is linked to a wide variety of individual performance measures.' Four studies are cited to support this claim. Only one of these studies is longitudinal and this particular study does not measure or discuss employee or any other form of engagement and the terms engagement or employee engagement do not appear in the article. In other words, no specific causal evidence about links between employee engagement and performance is provided.

As another example, Claim 3 above states that the Ricketta meta-analysis 'identified a robust significant link from engagement to performance' yet this meta-analysis does not measure or discuss employee or any other form of engagement. The terms *engagement* or *employee engagement* do not appear in the article. The meta-analysis is not about engagement but about job satisfaction.

Of course, if we choose to define employee engagement as being exactly the same as older pre-existing job attitudes such as organisational commitment or job satisfaction then the approach adopted here – to cite studies which do not mention or measure employee engagement to support the claim that 'engagement precedes performance' – makes sense up to a point. However, this raises many questions. If employee engagement *is exactly the same* as these older pre-existing concepts what value is it adding? Why is there so much interest in it? What is the *Engage for Success* movement about if it isn't about a new idea?

In addition, it is very important to note that although the report cites a few studies which do demonstrate links between job attitudes (eg, commitment and satisfaction) and performance taken as a whole the body

³ For space reasons only the *general* nature of the cited evidence can be discussed here. As most practitioners cannot get access to the original articles a supporting document containing detailed descriptions of each of the studies cited in this section is available from the author (r.b.briner@bath.ac.uk).

of available evidence does not show strong or important links between, for example, job satisfaction and performance:

'The search for a relationship between job satisfaction and job performance has been referred to as the 'Holy Grail' of organisational behaviour research...The relationship (or lack thereof) has fascinated organisational scholars for decades...study after study failed to produce the expected strong relationship.'

Fisher, 2003

'...the satisfaction-performance relationship is largely spurious...'

Bowling, 2007

'Organisational psychologists conducted many studies that correlated job satisfaction with performance. The results consistently showed low or no correlation between the two. In some cases, there was low correlation only because performing well made employees more satisfied, not because employees worked harder because they were satisfied.'

Lawler, 2012

What appears to be the over- and mis-claiming found in the *Engage for Success* report is, as discussed earlier, an example of a characteristic found more widely in the literature produced by engagement advocates that has also been identified by other commentators.

'The relationships among potential antecedents and consequences of engagement...have not been rigorously conceptualized, much less studied.'

Macy and Schneider, 2008

'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 repackaging of workplace issues from burnout to retention to commitment and loyalty.'

Shuck and Wollard, 2010

'Although researchers have argued that engagement, as a motivational variable, should lead to high levels of job performance...we know little about engagement's uniqueness as a predictor of job performance.'

Christian et al, 2011

In general then, many of the claims made by proponents of employee engagement appear to be exaggerated and use supporting evidence which seems to be about something else.

Where does this leave us and what should we do next?

At the present time we simply do not have enough good quality evidence to allow us to answer to the two *Fundamental Questions* about employee engagement we need to answer.

Although this is not a systematic review it is fairly clear from the analysis above that there is little high quality evidence but plenty of low quality evidence about the effects of employee engagement and employee engagement interventions.

Table 1: Quality of evidence

Type of evidence	Quality of this type of evidence low(1) to high(7)	Quantity of this type of evidence
Expert opinion, anecdotes, case studies	1	A vast quantity
Commercial non peer-reviewed consultancy research reports	2	A very large number
Cross-sectional studies	3	Some
Longitudinal studies	4	Perhaps one or two
Randomised controlled trials or experiments or interventions	5	None
Meta-analyses	6	Three (but do not show causality)
Systematic reviews	7	None

Source: Briner, 2014

And, of course, an absence of evidence for an effect is not the same as having evidence for the absence of an effect. It may well be that in the future good quality evidence will be produced which shows that increasing employee engagement *does* have important effects on performance *and* it is possible to increase engagement which in turn increases performance.

So what should we do next? One place to start is to think through your personal or organisational responses to the five problems identified here.

Problem 1: Defining engagement

Definitional problems are serious not trivial. It is not nit-picking or being pedantic to be as clear as possible about what we mean. So what, exactly, do *you* mean by employee engagement? Can it be defined precisely? Is there a single 'it' or does it mean many different things? Is your definition clear or vague? Does it sound like lots of other things thrown together? Does your definition confused cause and effect? Can employee engagement ever be 'bad'? How does using the term 'employee engagement' help? Do we need it? Saying 'you know it when you see it' or 'we all know what it means' is not enough.

Problem 2: Measuring engagement

Measures of employee engagement also seem to be a mess. They often consist of items from different and pre-existing surveys thrown together to form something apparently 'new'. But how valid and reliable are our measures of employee engagement? How valid and reliable are *your* measures and how do you know? In particular, do they have *discriminant validity*? In other words do they measure in any meaningful way anything different from existing measures of, say, satisfaction and commitment? Also, do your measures have *predictive validity*? That is, do scores on these measures predict something important and meaningful in the future? If engagement is a clear, unique and distinct construct then a goal may be to develop a standard measure.

Problem 3: Engagement is nothing new or different

Definitions, models and measures of employee engagement are remarkably similar to, if not exactly the same as, pre-existing concepts. So it's crucial we ask and try to answer this question: Exactly how and in what ways is employee engagement something new or different? I do not recall reading or hearing an even semi-plausible answer to this question whether from practitioners, consultants or academics. What do we lose and what do we gain by inventing and getting enthused about apparently new and different ideas that turn out to be not so new and not so different? It may be the case that in the future it is possible to show clearly and convincingly that employee engagement is new and different. But why aren't we doing it? It is now time to decide. If employee engagement is new and different then we need to clearly demonstrate this using good quality evidence. If the evidence shows it is not new and different then it is only counter-productive and confusing to continue to use the term.

Problem 4: There is almost no good quality evidence with which to answer the most important questions about engagement

When we think about the body of evidence about employee engagement or indeed the body for anything it is absolutely essential we distinguish between and have ways of judging the quantity and quality of evidence. In the case of employee engagement there is a huge quantity of lower quality evidence. Opinions, anecdotes and case studies do have their place but they simply cannot provide reliable or valid evidence about the two *Fundamental Questions*: Is there a causal link between employee engagement and can you intervene to increase employee engagement and subsequent performance? How much evidence do you have? How would you rate its quality? What do you believe it is reasonable to conclude on the basis of that evidence?

Problem 5: Over-claiming and mis-claiming the importance and role of engagement

This is a common problem found in both practitioner and academic contexts. Lower quality evidence about employee engagement is used to make very strong general claims. And evidence which is about something else which in some way might be possibly related to employee engagement is reported as support for employee engagement. Are the claims you make about employee engagement exaggerated? Are they accurate?

Conclusion

From an evidence-based practice perspective there is something odd going on. Employee engagement proponents hold strong views and offer definitive practical suggestions which do not appear to be informed by a reasonable quantity of good quality relevant evidence. But why? My best guess is that because proponents and advocates of any cause want to change things for the better and to do it fast, they prioritise getting things done over doing things in an evidence-based way. The question is whether in the longer-term this approach changes things for the better in a sustainable way. My guess is that it does not.

In the end we need to make a choice. Do we want to take employee engagement seriously or not? There are two contrasting approaches. The first is to closely examine definitions, check out the validity of measures, question whether it is new and different, carefully identify the quality of the available evidence and what it is capable of telling us, and to be accurate and explicit about what we know and do not know about the importance and role of employee engagement. The second approach is to be relaxed about definitions, not get too involved in considering the validity of measures of employee engagement, claim it's something new and different without really backing it up, ignore the fact that there is at the

present time little good quality evidence, and over- and mis-claim the importance of employee engagement. What's your choice?

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This paper forms one in a collection of thought pieces by the Engage for Success special interest group on 'The future of employee engagement'. A white paper on the same theme is being published separately. The full collection is available (as will be the white paper) at: www.engageforsuccess.org/futures