Umbrella Summary

Employee Engagement

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is employee engagement?

Consensus on the exact definition of employee engagement is still evolving, but commonalities involve attitudes and behaviors related to high personal investment in one's work. One definition is "a relatively enduring state of mind referring to the simultaneous investment of personal energies in the experience or performance of work" (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011, p. 95). The most commonly used measure of engagement, the _Utrecht Work Engagement Scale_, assesses engagement through three factors: vigor (high energy levels and persistence), dedication (enthusiasm and inspiration), and absorption (high concentration and engrossment) (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006).

Why is employee engagement important?

Engagement is important because it is positively associated with job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and it is a relatively strong predictor of job performance, including both task performance and contextual performance (discretionary extra-role behaviors, such as volunteering or helping others, that contribute to the social and psychological context of the work environment; Christian et al., 2011). It is also negatively related to turnover intentions (Goering, Shimazu, Zhou, Wada, & Sakai, 2017) and turnover (Rubenstein, Eberly, Lee, & Mitchell, 2017).

What contributes to employee engagement?

Consensus is also lacking on the underlying theoretical model for employee engagement, with one prominent approach being the Job Demands–Resources model, which argues that engagement is a function of job and personal resources (e.g., social support, autonomy, feedback, self-esteem) in the face of job demands (i.e., the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained effort) (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Research into such factors shows empirical connections between engagement and aspects of employee disposition (e.g., conscientiousness, positive affect), job attributes (e.g., task variety and significance), and work environment characteristics (e.g., leadership, social support; Christian et al., 2011). A second perspective considers engagement to be a positive antithesis of burnout. Although there is clear evidence of a strong correlation between engagement and burnout, there is disagreement about whether they are opposites of the same construct or distinct constructs (Cole, Walter, Bedeian, & O'Boyle, 2012; Goering et al., 2017).

How can employee engagement be improved?

Because of the relationship between employees' personality and engagement, one suggested approach to improve engagement is to hire employees who are predisposed to be more engaged. Research shows that employees who are low in neuroticism or high in positive affectivity, proactive personality, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience are more likely to be engaged than employees who do not have those characteristics (Young, Gleram, Wang, & Joseph, 2018). Research on the use of this approach is not available at this time, however, and to be justified, the selection process would also have to show differences in job performance, in addition to engagement.

Efforts to systematically improve and evaluate employee engagement through other means, however, are beginning to emerge. Because job demands and resources are very broad categories, interventions to improve engagement are very diverse; the interventions that have been rigorously tested and quantitatively reviewed thus far fall into four categories: personal resource building (e.g., activities to improve skills, self-efficacy, and awareness of resource), job resource building (e.g., activities to improve autonomy, social support, and feedback), leadership training, and health promotion (e.g., mindfulness, cognitive behavioral therapy, yoga, and aerobics) (Knight, Patterson, & Dawson, 2017). Across all types, there is evidence of a positive effect on employee engagement, with no differences between intervention types (Knight et al., 2017), potentially due to the limited number of studies and the diversity of intervention components. This research did not examine the extent to which changes in engagement led to changes in performance or turnover.

QIC-WD Takeaways

► Employee engagement is moderately predictive of performance and less predictive of turnover.
► Employee engagement is thought to be a function of job and personal resources in the face of job demands.
► Practitioners or researchers who would like to assess employee engagement should consider the _Utrecht Work Engagement Scale_. There is a 17-item version and a 9-item version.
► Several interventions have been successful in improving employee engagement; thus far, they fall into the categories of personal resource building, job resource building, leadership training, and health promotion.
► Given the broad nature of resources and demands, it is likely that there are many other interventions that have the potential to improve engagement; further research is needed to test alternatives.
► Research is also needed to test whether improving engagement improves performance and/or reduces turnover.

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