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ABSTRACT

As people spend an increasing percentage of their waking hours of their day at work, it becomes ever more important to understand the connections that people have to their work. In addition to being the source of their economic livelihood, work can be an important part of people's identity (Ibarra, 2002). Recent work suggests that Generation X and Millennial employees (Fields, Wilder, Bunch, & Newbold, 2008; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 1999) seek much more out of their work than a paycheck. They want something more – they seek to thrive and to be fully engaged in their work (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003). For all of these reasons, we need a clearer conceptual understanding of how people connect to their work.

In this chapter, we bring together literatures on two related constructs regarding employees' connection to work, which, to date, have been largely disparate: thriving and engagement. It is critical to examine the two constructs in relation to each other to determine their distinctiveness and unique contributions in order to avoid contributing to the proliferation of constructs in the field of organizational behavior. To this end, we first define each construct and then demonstrate how the two constructs are distinct but have some conceptual overlap. We then examine key antecedents and outcomes of each construct. In looking at the different outcomes of each construct, we make the case that each has a different time orientation regarding work: while work engagement is focused on dedication to the present, thriving is focused more on learning as a pathway to the future. In this way, we also suggest that the constructs will be predictive of different outcomes that align with each time orientation (i.e., present versus future). Finally, in the conclusion, we also discuss some of the leadership implications for how organizations can enable more engagement and thriving at work.

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Engagement and Human Thriving: Complementary Perspectives on Energy and Connections to Work

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LEADING IN THOUGHT AND ACTION

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**Engagement and Human Thriving:
Complementary Perspectives on Energy and Connections to Work**

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As people spend an increasing percentage of their waking hours of their day at work, it becomes ever more important to understand the connections that people have to their work. In addition to being the source of their economic livelihood, work can be an important part of people's identity (Ibarra, 2002). Recent work suggests that Generation X and Millennial employees (Fields, Wilder, Bunch, & Newbold, 2008; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 1999) seek much more out of their work than a paycheck. They want something more – they seek to thrive and to be fully engaged in their work (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003). For all of these reasons, we need a clearer conceptual understanding of how people connect to their work.

In this chapter, we bring together literatures on two related constructs regarding employees' connection to work, which, to date, have been largely disparate: thriving and engagement. It is critical to examine the two constructs in relation to each other to determine their distinctiveness and unique contributions in order to avoid contributing to the proliferation of constructs in the field of organizational behavior. To this end, we first define each construct and then demonstrate how the two constructs are distinct but have some conceptual overlap. We then examine key antecedents and outcomes of each construct. In looking at the different outcomes of each construct, we make the case that each has a different time orientation regarding work: while work engagement is focused on dedication to the present, thriving is focused more on learning as a pathway to the future. In this way, we also suggest that the constructs will be predictive of different outcomes that align with each time orientation (i.e., present versus future). Finally, in the conclusion, we also discuss some of the leadership implications for how organizations can enable more engagement and thriving at

work.

Defining the Two Constructs

What is engagement at work?

There are two main perspectives on studying engagement. The first is the more developed empirically and focuses on work engagement – more than 20 empirical articles have been published to date. Schaufeli, Bakker, and colleagues define work engagement as the positive opposite of burnout (e.g., Bakker, Van Emmerick, & Euwema, 2005; Schaufeli, Martinez, Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002). They have conceptualized engagement as a positive affective-motivational state of fulfillment as manifested in three dimensions:

- Vigor (exhaustion as the polar opposite dimension of burnout) (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004): high levels of energy and mental resilience while working; the willingness to invest effort in one's work; the ability to not be easily fatigued; persistence in the face of difficulties
- Dedication (cynicism as the polar opposite dimension of burnout): strong involvement in one's work, accompanied by feelings of enthusiasm and significance; a sense of pride and inspiration (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2005)
- Absorption: being fully engrossed in one's work and having difficulties detaching oneself from it (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

Some of the more recent research on work engagement focuses exclusively on the first two dimensions of engagement – leaving absorption out of the analyses (e.g., Gonzalez-Roma, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Lloret, 2006; Rothmann & Jordaan, 2006). This development may be due to the relatively weak construct validity of the absorption construct as well as the fact that

it is not the polar opposite of the third dimension of burnout – negative self-efficacy.¹

The second perspective on engagement is the more qualitative research by Kahn (1990) focused on role engagement. He defines role engagement as “the harnessing of organizational members’ selves to their work roles where employees express themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally during role performances” (p. 694). Additional empirical work by Rothbard (2001) builds on Kahn’s work and specifies two critical components of role engagement: attention (cognitive availability and the amount of time one spends thinking about a role) and absorption (being engrossed in a role and the intensity of one’s focus on a role).

The two perspectives both include an absorption dimension but differ in the mechanism regarding the connection to one’s work – Kahn and Rothbard talk about a more cognitive and attentional connection to work while Schaufeli and colleagues refer to a more emotional and energetic connections to one’s role. While each has its own strengths and weaknesses, because the book we are contributing to is focused primarily on the first perspective on engagement, we will focus most of our attention on it.

What is Thriving?

Drawing on the theoretical work of Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, and Grant, (2005: 538), we define thriving as a psychological state focused on “a sense of progress or forward movement in one’s self-development” captured in two dimensions of personal growth:

¹ In addition, Shirom (2004) has questioned whether Schaufeli et al’s (2002) conceptualizations of the vigor and fulfillment are too broad. He suggests that vigor should be distinct from resilience and that dedication should be distinct from involvement. Shirom further suggests that vigor should include cognitive, emotional and physiological components.

learning and vitality. *Learning* refers to the sense that one is acquiring and can apply knowledge and skills to one's work (Dweck, 1986; Elliott & Dweck, 1988). Additionally, learning is about how individuals develop and continually improve. *Vitality* refers to the positive feeling of having energy (Nix, Ryan, Manly, & Deci, 1999), involving a sense of spirit, feeling alert and awake, and looking forward to each new day. Both learning and vitality are theorized as essential components of thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005). If one is learning, but feels depleted and burned out, that individual is not thriving. Conversely, if one is energized, but finds his or her learning to be stagnant, that person is also not thriving. Thriving, then, is the joint experience of learning and vitality.

Why learning and vitality? We point to several factors. First, the two dimensions encompass both the affective (vitality) and cognitive (learning) dimensions of the psychological experience of personal growth (e.g. Carver, 1998; Ryff, 1989). Ryff (1989), for example, suggests that when individuals grow, they consider themselves to be expanding in ways that reflect enhanced self-knowledge and effectiveness (i.e., learning). Likewise, Carver (1998) conceives of thriving as the psychological experience of growth in a positive capacity, or a constructive and forward direction, that energizes and enlivens (i.e., vitality). Thus, prior research in psychology has also highlighted the affective and cognitive foundations of thriving. Second, evidence from preliminary empirical qualitative research on narratives of growth (Sonenshein, Grant, Dutton, Spreitzer, & Sutcliffe, 2007) points to learning and vitality as pathways for human growth and development.

We also highlight several other key definitional components of thriving. Thriving is theorized to be a continuum where people are more or less thriving at any point in time

(Spreitzer & Sutcliffe, 2007). Individuals can experience a range of thriving experiences rather than experiencing discrete states of either thriving or not thriving. Additionally, thriving is theorized as a psychological state capable of being shaped by the work context and not as an individual disposition. There may be personality traits that predispose individuals to experience more (or less) thriving at work—for example, someone with a learning orientation would be predisposed to opportunities for learning—but our conceptualization is that of thriving as a state. As the joint experience of learning and vitality, thriving reflects a continuum of the key cognitive and affective components of human growth.

Recent empirical work has provided preliminary support for the construct validation of the two dimensional conceptualization of thriving at work (Spreitzer, Cobb, & Stevens, 2008). Spreitzer and colleagues found that the subdimensions of learning and vitality contribute to a second order construct of thriving. In addition, they empirically distinguish thriving from related constructs such as resilience, flourishing, and core self-evaluations.

What are the similarities and distinctions between thriving and engagement?

Clearly, thriving and engagement have some conceptual overlap (see figure 1). Both are positive affective-motivational states. Neither is conceptualized as a more stable personality trait. Both have a dimension that is focused on energy (vigor in engagement and vitality in thriving). However, the engagement definition of vigor is broader than vitality because vigor also includes notions of resilience and persistence amidst difficulties while vitality is strictly about energy at work.

Despite these similarities, thriving and engagement also have important distinctions. We

suggest that work engagement may be more present-oriented while thriving may be more future-oriented. To be more specific, beyond vigor, the other two dimensions of engagement are focused on dedication (pride and significance) and absorption (being deeply engrossed in work). These two dimensions capture the fulfillment and intensity of one's involvement in the work at hand – in the here and now. It is about one's relationship with work in the moment.

In contrast, beyond vitality, the other dimension of thriving is about learning. Learning is about getting better, about growing and developing into who we want to become. In this way, thriving represents progress or forward movement in one's development over time. Thriving is about one's trajectory of development into the future. Rather than being focused primarily on one's experience in the moment as is true of the dedication and especially the absorption components of engagement, thriving has a learning component which is more future oriented.

In summary, the conceptualizations of engagement and thriving are complementary but distinct. Both involve positive energy – vigor in engagement and vitality in thriving. Yet, the dedication and absorption dimensions of engagement reflect the present or current connection people have with their work. In contrast, the learning dimension of thriving captures an orientation towards forward progress and growth. More specifically, a person can be engaged at work and not thriving - and vice versa. For example, an employees can feel engaged at work – energized, dedicated to the purpose of their work, and highly absorbed (maybe even in flow) – but may not necessarily be learning and growing. This might be individuals in a long-term job where they feel a real sense of purpose and involvement as well as experience a high level of competence and efficacy. They may still feel rather plateaued or stagnant in their opportunities for learning and personal growth. Conversely, one can be

thriving - energized and learning/growing in new directions – but not necessarily engaged. Such individuals might be growing and developing in ways that reduce their dedication to their current jobs as they explore new avenues for their personal or career development, their work or even new positions. These may even be those people seeking significant career changes (Ibarra, 2002).

In summary, while engagement and thriving are complementary, they are also distinct in terms of their orientation to time. In the next section, we examine the similar and differential antecedents and consequences of engagement and thriving.

Antecedents and Consequences of Engagement and Thriving

Do different antecedents predict thriving versus engagement?

In the literature on work engagement, the most examined predictors in empirical research have been job demands and job resources (which contribute to work engagement). The majority of studies on job demands indicates that demands like time pressure (Demerouti, Bakker, de Jonge, Janssen, & Schaufeli, 2001), job insecurity (Mauno, Kinnunen, & Ruokolainen, 2007), shift work (Demerouti et al., 2001), and work overload (Llorens, Bakker, Schaufeli, & Salanova, 2006) as well as work-family conflict (Mauno et al., 2007) have been found to deplete energy, create stress, and contribute to burnout. They can reduce the dedication inherent in work engagement because job demands can be so cognitively and physically taxing. They can cause people to disengage from work rather than be absorbed.

Job resources like job control (Hakanen, Bakker, & Demerouti, 2005; Mauno et al., 2007), social support (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), supervisory coaching (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004),

and performance feedback (Demerouti et al., 2001; Llorens et al., 2006), in contrast, are found to fuel energy and provide fortifications against stress to manage job demands. They help build dedication to and identification with work. In short, while job demands detract from engagement, job resources contribute to more engagement at work.

We suggest that the influence of job demands and resources may operate a bit differently for thriving. While job demands and job resources are found to have divergent effects on work engagement, we expect that they may have convergent effects on thriving at work. Like their effect on the vigor component of work engagement, job resources are expected to fuel the vitality inherent in thriving at work. These resources protect against the depleting effects of stress (Hobfoll, 1989). In this realm, prior research has found that job resources such as trust and connectivity (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2008) and decision-making autonomy, broad information sharing, and a climate of trust and respect (Porath, Spreitzer, & Gibson, 2008) contribute to thriving at work. However, quite different from their negative effect on work engagement, job demands may have a positive affect on thriving. Job demands may create opportunities for the learning component that is also manifest in thriving. Job demands that stimulate cognitive and emotional arousal, create opportunities for people to try new things, take risks, and be challenged at work – all phenomena that may contribute to learning and growth at work.

One might hypothesize there is a curvilinear relationship between job demands and thriving. Too few job demands may impede learning. But too many job demands (e.g., jobs with extreme time pressure or with extreme high levels of emotional labor) may deplete resources to a degree that the person does not feel energized anymore and thus reduce thriving.

In summary, job demands may have quite divergent effects on engagement in comparison to thriving.

We also point to another distinction in the contextual antecedents of thriving versus engagement. While much of the engagement literature assumes that the work environment is fairly exogenous (i.e., external) to the employee, the thriving model assumes that the work environment is more endogenous (i.e., interdependent) to the employee (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005). In the engagement literature, job demands and resources are modeled as outside influences which affect employees. They are characteristics of the context in which the individual is embedded.

When employees are thriving, on the other hand, they actively work to co-create their work environment. Rather than just being influenced by their work environment, thriving employees also shape and influence their work environment to meet their needs for energy creation and learning opportunities. This may take the form of job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) where employees make small or large changes in their way they do their work so that it is more attuned with their needs. This co-creation may also take the form of issue selling (Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, & Lawrence, 2001) where individuals proactively persuade the organization to value initiatives that are of importance to them. The theoretical development on thriving sees the environment both influencing but also being influenced by individuals at work. In this way, the antecedents in the literature on engagement are modeled in a more deterministic way while the antecedents in the thriving literature are modeled as more malleable by employees. In this way, employees have a chance to build the resources

and systems, structures, and processes that can fuel and sustain their thriving. In the next section we turn to the differential outcomes that may be predicted by engagement and thriving.

How do engagement and thriving add value to employees and their organizations? Key outcomes of the two constructs

Given the complementary but distinct aspects of engagement and thriving, we believe that the two constructs may predict some of the same, but also some different, outcomes. In terms of similarity, both constructs have been found to be related to high job performance. More specifically, engagement has been found to be related to higher employee performance and customer loyalty (Salanova, Agut, & Peiro, 2005). Thriving has been found to be related to career role performance (Spreitzer et al., 2008). Because of their energetic roots, both constructs provide the motivation necessary to perform.

Consistent with the time orientation distinction we alluded to earlier in the chapter, there are also some important differences in what each construct predicts. Prior empirical research has found support for engagement as a significant predictor of organizational commitment (Llorens et al., 2006), reduced intention to quit/turnover (Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006; Schaufeli et al., 2004), career satisfaction (Koyuncu, Burke, & Fiksenbaum, 2006), and reduced burnout and health problems (Bakker et al., 2006; Koyuncu et al., 2006). These outcomes tend to be relatively present-oriented and focused on the current state of time. In other words, work engagement concerns about how we are feeling at this moment: Am I satisfied? Committed? Healthy?

Since empirical research on thriving is more nascent, we expect that thriving will be a

stronger predictor of more future-oriented outcomes or constructs that are less about the current state of things and more about possibilities. Prior empirical research has demonstrated that thriving is predictive of outcomes such as creative and innovative behavior (Carmeli and Spreitzer, 2008) as well as organizational citizenship behaviors which focus employees beyond their current role requirements (Porath et al., 2008). This may be because engaging in OCB may itself be rewarding from a learning perspective. In other words, employees learn something from engaging in proactive behaviors.

We also find that thriving is related to other future oriented outcomes like resilience (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003) - the ability to be able to bounce back and learn from problems and obstacles (Spreitzer, Cobb & Stevens, 2008). Furthermore, we would expect that thriving would be related to proactive future oriented outcomes like job crafting to create work which is more energizing and meaningful (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), exploration and experimentation with new endeavors, and transformational leadership focused on change toward a new vision (Bass, 2005). We expect that the focus on learning and personal development will link thriving to these future- or change-oriented forms of outcomes.

What are the mechanisms that enable thriving to have these kinds of future-oriented effects? One possible mechanism is sense-making (Weick, 1993). Sense-making is the process of creating situational awareness and understanding in situations of high complexity or uncertainty in order to make decisions. The learning and energy manifested in thriving may enable more sense-making of the work environment. The learning inherent in thriving may enable people to be more mindful (Langer, 1990) in their work about what is working and what could be improved. People may also be more mindful about their work context resulting

in a clearer idea about threats and opportunities (Jackson & Dutton, 1988) for growth and development in the future. Through enhanced sense-making, employees monitor their moment-to-moment activities, anticipate problems in advance, and respond promptly to adverse events in a flexible rather than rigid way. By operating "mindfully" and making critical adjustments in a timely manner, employees are better able to manage the unexpected and keep a future orientation in a challenging, highly competitive environment. In short, they can better manage the unexpected as they move toward the future (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007).

A second possible mechanism is the development of behavioral repertoires. As employees learn, they gain more job specific knowledge. As a result, they “gain possession of a deep and broad range of possible actions that one can apply to resolve challenges” (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003: 107). Further, when one’s behavioral repertoire is expanded, the person is able to recombine existing knowledge to solve novel challenges in the future – this is often referred to as bricolage (Weick, 1993). As a result, employees feel more self-efficacious about their work. Self-efficacy in turn facilitates resilience by reducing a sense of defense perception, or the experience that one becomes self-defensive when facing crises or failures. By reducing a sense of defense perception, individuals are more likely to decentralize control over decision making to those who are experts in solving the problem; reduced defense perception also encourages one to utilize slack resources (cognitive, emotional, and relational), all of which increases resilience (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). Thus, thriving may enhance the creation of behavioral repertoires which enable people to be resilient in the face of adversity or unexpected events.

In the next and final section, we discuss issues for leaders as they seek to develop followers who are both engaged and thriving at work. We also seek to understand under what conditions leaders may want to focus on one or the other.

Key Issues for Leaders in Developing Engaged and/or Thriving Followers

In our discussion of the key outcomes of engagement and thriving, a key assumption is that both constructs are something desirable for leaders to pay attention to and aspire for in their employees. In this section of the chapter, we address some key issues for leaders to consider for developing their followers to be engaged and thriving. We also offer some cautions for leaders in creating optimal amounts of engagement and thriving at work.

Leaders must emulate what they expect from their followers

In order for followers to be engaged and/or thriving at work, it is important that the leader role models those positive affective motivational states. If leaders lack energy in leading followers, it is likely that followers will emulate their low energy approach. Similarly if leaders lack dedication or absorption, followers will also likely take a more lackadaisical approach to doing their own work. In terms of thriving, if leaders themselves are not trying new things, risking failure with new approaches, it will be difficult for followers to feel psychologically safe (Edmondson, 1999) to do so. Leaders need to be a role model for the thriving of their followers. Of course, some people may have a predisposition to learning or a predisposition to positive emotions or high energy. In these cases, it may matter less what behaviors the leader emulates. But for the great majority of employees, they will look to the leader to see the kind of behaviors and approaches that are valued and legitimate.

Leaders build the foundation for engagement and thriving

Leaders create the context in which their followers work. As noted above in our discussion of the antecedents of work engagement, to enable more employee engagement, leaders must develop a very specific context that provides job resources but moderates jobs demands. Workers will be more engaged to the extent that they have the physical, political, and social resources necessary to feel energized and dedicated to their work. But leaders who want to engage their employees must also protect their employees from too many job demands.

Like the leader who wants to engage followers, the leader who wants to help followers thrive will also want to provide physical, political, and social resources to help employees feel energized and be in a learning mode. However, moderation of job demands may be less important for the leader who is interested in enhancing possibilities for thriving. Job demands may be precipitous for employees to learn. They may provide the challenges that prod people out of their comfort zone into taking risks and trying new things (Quinn, 1996).

Leaders may also play a less visible or deterministic role in enabling thriving. As discussed above in the section on antecedents, when individuals are thriving at work, they seek to co-create their work environment. Followers have different needs and priorities. What energizes one employee may be de-energizing to another. So to thrive, followers must have input in the development of their own work context. They must be empowered to shape and influence their work context. This may involve creating opportunities for job crafting, issue selling or other proactive behaviors at work (Grant & Ashford, in press).

Leaders may need to regulate optimal levels of engagement and thriving

What kind of regulation of engagement or thriving is necessary? Since both constructs have an energy dimension one may ask: Is it possible to ever have too much energy? Certainly too much energy can contribute to hyperactivity or distractions. However, given how much job demands and stressors at work can deplete energy, we believe that in the real world, it would be a rare and unusual circumstance to have too much energy.

With regard to the other dimensions of engagement, it seems that too much dedication or absorption could create negative dynamics for employees as well as for work organizations. For example, too much dedication to the leader or the organization might create “yes” people who fail to question or challenge the status quo. Too much absorption might create so much intensity in the work at hand that people may fail to scan and sense changes in their work environment. The intensity can lead to mindlessness rather than the mindfulness that is so important for high performance (Langer, 1990). In addition, too much absorption can contribute to work/family conflict because people are so absorbed in their work that they have a hard time separating at the end of the day. Thus, leaders should watch and moderate their followers’ level of engagement. The decision about the right amount of engagement may vary based on the follower.

Regarding the second dimension of thriving – learning – it is also possible that too much thriving may be problematic for individuals and their organizations. If people are in a constant learning mode, they may have trouble developing the competence necessary to do their normal day-to-day work. Too much learning may be over-stimulating to followers because they are always adapting to something new and never get the opportunity to become productive at work. Clearly, some people who have a stronger learning-orientation (Dweck,

1986) may be able to tolerate a higher level of learning exposure. On the other hand, those with more of an achievement orientation may benefit from a more moderate level of learning at work. Therefore, leaders should learn to regulate learning so that it is not overwhelming to followers.

Conclusion

Because both engagement and thriving are positive affective motivational states, as we conclude, we ask, is one more important? Do we need both constructs? The comparisons and contrasts described above suggest that both are important and relevant. Both constructs emphasize energy at work. Yet, each offers something unique beyond an understanding of how people are energized at work. Engagement focuses on one's connection to work in the moment. Beyond energy, it focuses on the dedication and absorption people have with regard to their work. It refers to building a closer connection to the work at hand in a way that builds rapt, captivated attention (i.e., absorption). Thriving, in contrast, takes the connection to work into a more future-oriented direction. It is more concerned with how people learn, grow, and develop into the future. In this way, the two constructs are complementary. In most cases organizations must be concerned with how to help people feel more connection (i.e., be engaged with) to work in the present, but also be focused on how to help people grow, develop, and learn their way into the future (i.e., thrive). Thus, we conclude this chapter by reaffirming the relevance and necessity of both constructs. We encourage future research to study the two in tandem to flesh out more of the distinctions proposed in this chapter.

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FIGURE 1
The Juxtaposition of Thriving & Engagement

