

WORK ENGAGEMENT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CAREER RESOURCES: AN INDUSTRIAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL OUTLOOK

Rebecca Tladinyane*

*Department of Industrial and Organisational Psychology, University of South Africa

Abstract

This study examined the relationship dynamics between employees' psychological career resources (measured by the Psychological Career Resources Inventory) and their work engagement (measured by the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale). A quantitative survey was conducted involving a non-probability purposive sample of adults (N = 318) employed in the field of industrial and organisational psychology. A multiple regression analysis indicated that psychological career resources constructs positively and significantly predicts work engagement.

Keywords: Behavioural Adaptability, Career Development, Psychological Career Resources, Retention, Vigour, Work Engagement

1. INTRODUCTION

Employee retention is a critical issue facing many organisations today as they compete for talent in a recovering economy. Employees are more likely to remain with the organisation only if they consider that their organisation shows more interest and concern for them, know what is expected of them, and are given a role that fits their capabilities, (Samuel and Chipunza, 2013). Employees feel comfortable remaining longer in positions where they are well informed on relevant issues concerning the organisation and their well-being (Selesho and Naile, 2014).

The loss of valuable knowledge and experience because of staff turnover increases the importance of staff retention for organisational sustainability and competitiveness (Burge and Ng, 2006). Organisations that intend to become competitive rely on dedicated staff and this poses a huge challenge for employing organisations to ensure that their dedicated staff is retained for them to gain competitive edge in the market (Birt, Wallis and Winternitz, 2004).

An understanding of the sources and antecedents of turnover is a first step for taking action to reduce turnover rates. To retain employees effectively, employers must know what factors motivate their employees to stay in the field and what factors cause them to leave. Employers need to understand whether these factors are associated with worker characteristics, or with the nature of the work process, over which they may have some control (Horvat, 2004).

The retention of employees seems to be influenced by psychological attributes that include individuals' ability to adapt to and deal proactively with the changing and uncertain nature of their careers in the contemporary world of work (Ferreira, 2010, 2012; Savickas, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte and Guichard, 2009). In an increasingly unstable and unpredictable world of work, people

are becoming more dependent on their psychological and social capacities (human capital), and less dependent on organisational career arrangements because of the more frequent experiences of career transitions, and the demands for adaptability and greater individual agency in career decisions (Arthur, Khapova and Wilderrom, 2005; Baruch, 2004; Rossier, Zecca, Stauffer, Maggiori and Dauwalder, 2012; Savickas, 2011; Savickas and Porfeli, 2012).

In this regard, (Converse, Pathak, DePaul-Haddock, Gotlib and Merbedone, 2012) suggest that the development of personal career-related capabilities and dispositions has become more important in the contemporary work of world because individuals have to rely heavily on these capabilities and dispositions to effectively influence their career environment and regulate their behaviour to succeed in work settings. Savickas and Porfeli, (2012) also indicate the development of psychological career resources as vital in negotiating the person-environment fit harmonics in a more uncertain and turbulent career context.

Positive psychological resource capacities have been shown to have an impact on the desired work-related outcomes such as improved attitudes to work engagement (Youssef and Luthans, 2007). Research further suggests that people's personal career experiences, desires and their self-awareness of these are becoming important in the contemporary workplace because these could impact on their work engagement (Coetzer and Rothman, 2007). Therefore the current study determines whether psychological career resources predict work engagement.

Work engagement relates to employees' involvement in their jobs and assumes an energetic and efficacious connection with work activities (Coetzer and Rothman, 2007). Highly engaged individuals tend to experience high mental energy levels, are devoted to and immersed in their jobs and are more likely to remain with the employing

organisation because of lower turnover intentions (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). More engaged employees strengthen the organisations' competitive advantage and generates positive business results (Slatten and Mehmetoglu, 2011).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Psychological career resources

The psychological career resources framework of Coetzee (2008) is of relevance to this research. According to Coetzee (2008), people's psychological career resources comprise their career preferences, career values, career drivers, career enablers and career harmonisers. Individuals use their psychological career resources to proactively plan and manage their career development, influence their socio-occupational environments and self-regulate their behaviour in order to obtain career success in the contemporary work setting (Coetzee, 2008; Converse *et al.*, 2012; Hall and Chandler, 2005; Savickas and Porfeli, 2012).

Coetzee (2008) identified the four career preferences namely the stability/expertise, managerial, creativity/variety and autonomy/independence. *Career preferences* and *values* guide the decisions individuals make in terms of their long-term career choices (Coetzee, 2008). *Stability/expertise* refers to how an individual views careers that provide security and opportunity for development in a specialist field. *Managerial* refers to individuals who view vertical mobility with more responsibility, decision-making power and influence as career success. *Creativity/variety* career preference describes individuals who prefer a wide variety of tasks that require a wide variety of competencies (skills and knowledge) in original or novel ways. *Autonomy/independence* career preference refers to individuals who see the perfect work environment as one where they have freedom from disturbance from external sources.

Coetzee (2008) identified two career values, *growth/development* and *authority/Influence*. *Growth/development* refers to the importance that the individual places on personal and professional opportunities to grow and develop. *Authority/Influence* refers to the importance that the individual places on the responsibility for others, having authority over others and having influence on important organisational events or projects.

Career drivers are regarded as the inner forces that determine what an individual wants or needs from his or her employment (Coetzee, 2008). Career drivers consist of people's career purpose, career directedness and career-venturing attitudes. These attitudes energise people and motivate them to experiment with new or alternative careers and employment possibilities that are based on their views of the possible selves they could become or the possible working roles they could experience (Coetzee, 2008).

A *career enabler* is a set of skills (practical, creative or self/other skills) that allows an individual to perform tasks relating to his or her career development well and helps him or her to achieve the desired and expected career outcomes. According to Sternberg (1985) practical skill is the ability to apply theoretical knowledge in a real-life

situation and creative skill is the ability to apply one's mind to a problem and find a novel way of dealing with it. Self/other skills is the ability to understand others and to understand oneself (Coetzee (2008).

Career harmonisers comprise people's self-esteem, behavioural adaptability, emotional literacy and social connectivity. These psychological career resources act as promoters of flexibility and resiliency, and as controls by keeping the career drivers in balance so that people do not go overboard (or burn themselves out) in the process of pursuing and reinventing their careers (Coetzee, 2008). Coetzee and Bergh (2009) describe self-esteem as individuals' self-assessment regarding their competence, value and efficacy compared with others and compared with their own standards. Behavioural *adaptability* refers to the person's competence to recognise attributes that are necessary for future career success and then make the changes that are required (Coetzee and Bergh, 2009).

Emotional literacy is described by Coetzee (2008) as the ability of an individual to manage the variety of emotions that can be received and conveyed. Coetzee and Schreuder (2009) define *social connectivity* as the ability of the individual to build and preserve healthy and mutually supportive relationships. People who possess a wide range of these psychological career resources have been shown to be adaptable to changing career circumstances (Converse *et al.*, 2012; Griffin and Hesketh 2005; McArdle, Waters, Briscoe and Wall, 2007; Savickas and Porfeli, 2012), and are also likely to be more engaged in their work.

2.2. Work engagement

Work engagement has been acknowledged as the business initiative associated with organisational success (Geldenhuis, Laba and Venter, 2014). In the context of this research, work engagement refers to a positive fulfilling state of mind characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli, Bakker and Salanova 2006). *Vigour* (a physical component) is characterised by high levels of energy and mental resilience, and being sufficiently willing to invest effort in one's work, despite any obstacles (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006). *Dedication* is characterised by experiencing a sense of importance in one's work, feeling passionate and proud of the job and being inspired and challenged by work (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006; Storm and Rothmann, 2003).

Absorption (cognitive component) refers to being completely and happily absorbed in one's work, unable to detach oneself from it and not noticing how quickly time flies (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006; Storm and Rothmann, 2003).

Employees need to have physical, emotional and psychological resources to be able to complete and identify with their work (Simons and Buitendach, 2013). Work engagement relates to employees' psychological experiences of their work. Research has shown that disengagement from work may result in employee turnover, absenteeism and poor performance (Coetzee and Rothmann, 2007), while work engagement may result in lower turnover intention (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004).

2.3. Psychological career resources and work engagement

In line with Coetzee (2008), the researcher proposes that individuals with well-developed psychological career resources are able to plan their careers, make certain decision based on this planning, explore new opportunities and have the confidence to implement these decisions in order to perform the activities needed to successfully accomplish their career objectives. People who have access to personal (psycho-social) resources at work tend to have a greater sense of self-worth, which places them in a better position to invest significant time and effort in pursuing their work activities, and they are thus more likely to achieve career success (Hobföll, 2002), which in turn may enhance their levels of work engagement.

People with high levels of psycho-social resources may be willing to seek more feedback from their supervisors, create social networks in the organisation which may help them to access relevant information and obtain social support in the successful pursuit of their careers (Vandenberghe and Panaccio, 2012). Employees who feel strongly engaged may define their relationships with their employers as long term, and have lower intent to quit, as opposed to employees who have lower levels of engagement to their organisations (Mallol, Holtom, and Lee, 2007; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004).

Since the psychological career resources include the positive and negative self-appraisals individuals make in planning and managing their career development, one would expect their psychological career resources profile to predict their work engagement. An individual with a well-developed psychological career resources profile may show stronger engagement towards the work. Strong feelings of work engagement may ensure that the individual will remain with the organisation owing to the perceived psychological contract between the employer and the employee.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The aim of this research was to determine whether individuals' psychological career resources positively and significantly predict work engagement. An understanding of the variables relating to the internal career such as people's psychological career resources and work engagement may influence their turnover intentions and be essential for organisations to consider in the retention of their staff. Although some research has been done on the relationship between psychological career resources and organisational commitment (Ferreira, 2010; 2012), there is little theoretical and empirical information on how employees' psychological career resources influence work engagement in the South African employment equity context.

The current study thus potentially adds to the retention and career literature by fostering an understanding of how people's psychological career resources and work engagement influence the retention of employees in the South African organisational context.

This research aims to answer the following research question: *employees psychological career resources significantly and positively predicts work engagement?*

4. METHOD

4.1. Research approach

A cross-sectional quantitative survey design was used to achieve the research objective.

4.2. Participants

The participants comprised of non-probability purposive sample of 318 adults employed at managerial and staff levels in the field of industrial and organisational psychology. Majority of the participants were blacks (76%) and females (77%) in the early adulthood life stage and establishment phase of their careers (26-40 years). The participants occupied staff level (57%) and managerial level (43%) positions in the South African services industry.

4.3. Measuring instruments

The Psychological Career Resources Inventory (PCRI) developed by Coetzee (2008) was used to measure the participants' self-perceived career meta-capacities. The PCRI (Coetzee, 2008) is a self-rated multi-factorial measure containing 64 items and five subscales (career preferences, career values, career enablers, career drivers and career harmonisers). The inventory measures 15 constructs in total: career preferences (stability/expertise, managerial, variety/creativity and independence/autonomy); career values (growth/development and authority/influence); career drivers (career purpose, career directedness and career venturing); career enablers (practical/creative skills, and self/other skills) and career harmonisers (self-esteem, behavioural adaptability, emotional literacy and social connectivity). A six-point Likert-type scale was used for subject responses to each of the 64 items. Cronbach alpha coefficients for each subscale range from .71 to .88. Studies conducted by Coetzee (2008), Coetzee and Bergh (2009) and Ferreira (2010; 2012) confirmed the internal consistency reliability and construct validity of the PCRI in the South African context.

The participants' work engagement was measured by means of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003). The UWES is a self-report questionnaire which includes 21 items. It is divided into three subscales (vigour, dedication and absorption). A six-point Likert-type scale was used for subject responses to each of 21 items. For two different samples, the Cronbach alphas for vigour were .68 and .80 respectively. The Cronbach alpha coefficient obtained for dedication was .91 for both samples and for absorption, .73 and .75 respectively. Coetzer and Rothmann (2007) confirmed the internal consistency reliability and construct validity of the UWES for the South African context.

4.4. Procedure

Permission for the research was obtained from the institution's research ethics committee. Participation was voluntary and the respondents gave their permission for the results to be used for research purposes only. The anonymity and confidentiality of all the participants was ensured. A sample of 318 usable questionnaires was returned, yielding a response rate of 51%.

4.5. Statistical analysis

Descriptive (means, standard deviations and reliability analyses) and inferential (multivariate) statistics were performed to achieve the objective of the study. Standard multiple regression analysis was considered appropriate and useful because the statistical analyses involved examining the extent in which psychological career resources positively predicts work engagement.

The F-test was used to test whether there was a significant regression between the independent

(psychological career resources) and the dependent variable (work engagement).

5. RESULTS

5.1. Descriptive statistics

Tables 1 and 2 present the descriptive statistics for the study data important for clarifying the relationship for prediction. Acceptable internal consistency reliability coefficients were obtained for the two measuring instruments.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics: means, standard deviations and reliability summary statistics (PCRI and UWES) (N = 318)

Variables	M	(SD)	α
PCRI (psychological career resources)			
Career preference			
Stability/expertise	5.30	.64	.67
Managerial	4.48	1.16	.85
Variety/creativity	5.05	.85	.83
Independence/autonomy	4.74	.91	.70
Career values			
Growth/development	5.49	.66	.71
Authority/influence	4.97	4.97	.76
Career enablers			
Practical/creative skills	4.63	.91	.76
Self/other skills	4.93	.79	.78
Career drivers			
Career purpose	5.34	.72	.78
Career directedness	4.68	.86	.72
Career venturing	4.76	.94	.68
Career harmonisers			
Self-esteem	5.09	.81	.77
Behavioural adaptability	4.92	.79	.83
Emotional literacy	4.52	.96	.76
Social connectivity	5.04	.76	.77
UWES			
Vigour	4.28	1.19	.89
Dedication	4.11	1.61	.92
Absorption	3.97	1.34	.90

Table 2. Pearson Product-Moment Correlations: PCRI and UWES (N=318)

Variables	Vigour	Dedication	Absorption
Career preference			
Stability/expertise	-.03	-.04	-.02
Managerial	.04	.00	.04
Variety/creativity	.12*	.07	.12*
Independence/autonomy	+	.05	+
Career values			
Growth/development	.13*	.07	.13*
Authority/influence	+	.02	+
Career enablers			
Practical/creative skills	.22***	.21***	.21***
Self/other skills	.26***	.20***	.24***
Career drivers			
Career purpose	.14*	.11	.11
Career directedness	.32***	.28***	.26***
Career venturing	.16*	.08	.13**
Career harmonisers			
Self-esteem	.11	.07	.08
Behavioural Adaptability	.27***	.20***	.21***
Emotional literacy	.18**	.13*	.13*
Social connectivity	.14*	.08	.08

*** $p \leq .001$ ** $p \leq .01$ * $p \leq .05$

+++ $r \geq 0.50$ (large practical effect size) ++ $r \geq 0.30 \leq 0.49$ (medium practical effect size) + $r \leq 0.29$ (small practical effect size)

5.2. Standard multiple regression analysis

Standard multiple regression analysis was performed to assess the PCRI psychological career resources variables that provide the best explanation of the proportion of the total variance in the scores of the UWES work engagement. The F-test was used to test whether there was a significant regression between the independent (psychological career resources) and dependent variable (work engagement).

Table 3 summarises the significant results of the multiple regression analyses performed on the PCRI, UWES. Three models each are suggested for the UWES and OCQ variables by the regression analysis ($p \leq .05$). Table 3 indicates that the regression of the PCRI variables on the UWES vigour variable produced a statistically significant model ($F = 3.97$; $p \leq .01$), accounting for 12% ($R^2 = .12$) (small practical effect) of the variance in the vigour variable. The PCRI career directedness variable

($\beta = .27$) contributed the most in explaining the variance in the vigour variable. The PCRI stability/expertise variable ($\beta = -.14$) contributed negatively in explaining the variance in the vigour variable.

Table 3 further indicates that the regression of the PCRI variables on the UWES dedication variable produced a statistically significant model ($F = 3.04$; $p \leq 0.01$), accounting for ($R^2 = .09$) 9% (small practical effect) of the variance in the dedication variable. Only the PCRI career directedness variable ($\beta = .29$) contributed in explaining the variance in the dedication variable. The regression of the PCRI variables on the UWES absorption variable produced a statistically significant model ($F = 2.92$; $p \leq .001$), accounting for ($R^2 = .08$) 8% (small practical effect) of the variance in the absorption variable. Again, the PCRI career directedness variable ($\beta = .23$), followed by the self/other skills ($\beta = .19$) variable contributed the most in explaining the variance in the absorption variable.

Table 3. Significant Results of the Multiple Regression Analyses: PCRI AND UWES

Variable	Unstandardised coefficient		Standardised coefficient	t	p	F	Adjusted R square	R
	B	SE B	β					
UWES vigour (constant)	21.24	5.38		3.95	.000**	3.97	.12** +	.41
Career preferences: stability/expertise	-.41	.21	-.14	-1.10	.05*			
Career drivers: career directedness	.75	.19	.27	3.99	.000**			
Career harmonisers: behavioural adaptability	.31	.16	.15	1.91	.05*			
UWES dedication (constant)	14.26	4.63		3.08	.002**	3.04	.09** +	.36
Career drivers: career directedness	.67	.16	.29	4.15	.000**			
UWES absorption (constant)	20.12	6.22		3.24	.001***	2.92	.08*** +	.36
Career enablers: self/other skills	.53	.25	.19	2.10	.04*			
Career drivers: career directedness	.70	.22	.23	3.23	.001***			

*** $p \leq 0.001$ ** $p \leq 0.01$ * $p \leq 0.05$

+ $R^2 \leq 0.12$ (small practical effect size) ++ $R^2 \geq 0.13 \leq 0.25$ (moderate practical effect size) +++ $R^2 \geq 0.26$ (large practical effect size)

6. DISCUSSION

Overall, the results indicated that career directedness positively predicted the participants' work engagement (vigour, dedication and absorption). An individual with career directedness has a sense of clarity about future career directions and goals and knows how goals will be achieved and where to obtain support for achieving goals (Coetzee, 2008). The results of the present study confirms the findings of Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti and Schaufeli, (2007) that individuals with goal self-concordance are intrinsically motivated and this motivation may increase their level of engagement leading to a higher probability of retaining these staff members.

The results further suggest that when participants have a clear understanding of where they are heading with their careers and are able to adapt even when obstacles are present, they will

have higher levels of energy and mental resilience while working. Behavioural adaptability often generates a zest for facing up to difficult experiences because these are seen as opportunities for personal growth rather than as potential threats to security (Coetzee, 2008; Maddi, Khoshaba, Persico, Lu, Harvey and Bleecker, 2002).

Behavioural adaptability involves an individual's ability to identify qualities that are critical for performance and the ability to make personal changes to meet career-related needs (Coetzee, 2008). The results suggest that making personal changes and dealing with setbacks and failures seemingly increase the participants' levels of energy while working, suggesting that they may be willing to invest in their efforts and persist in the face of difficulties. Individuals with high behavioural adaptability have also been shown to have the capacity to engage proactively in the process of goal setting and achieving psychological success (Hall

and Chandler, 2005). The results could also be an indication that the participants strive towards being adaptable to work situations so that they can prosper career-wise irrespective of negative experiences in their organisations.

The career preference variable stability/expertise negatively predicted vigour. This implies that a job or career that offers stability/expertise lowers an individual's vigour. Individuals who have a preference for stability/expertise prefer structured work environments and a career that will give them a sense of security and stability (Coetzee, 2008), hence they might have less vigour.

The career enabler self/other skills (self-management and interpersonal skills) seem to have significantly increased the participants' levels of absorption. For an individual to function effectively in a social context, the development of self/other intelligence is important, because careers are regarded as social processes (Coetzee, 2008). Job resources that include social support from colleagues and supervisor performance feedback, skill variety, autonomy, co-worker support, supervisor support, decision latitude, and learning opportunities have been found to be positively associated with work engagement (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007, 2008; Korunka, Kubicek, Schaufeli and Hoonaker, 2009; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004).

The results of the present study suggest that when individuals have confidence in their self-management and interpersonal relation skills in terms of managing their career development, they are likely to be more highly engaged in their jobs. The association between the participants' self/other skills and their overall level of work engagement appears to be significant in the retention context because interpersonal relationship skills are viewed as critical for retention purposes (Kukano, 2011).

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The overall findings of the study add to the retention and career literature through the identification of the psychological career resources that significantly and positively influence employee's work engagement. The results suggest that when individuals have a clear understanding of where they are heading with their careers and are able to adapt even when obstacles are present, they will have higher levels of energy and mental resilience while working. The results also suggest that making personal changes and dealing with setbacks and failures seemingly increase people's levels of energy while working, suggesting that they may be more willing to invest in their efforts and persist in the face of difficulties.

A job or career that offers stability/expertise lowers an individual's level of vigour. For an individual to function effectively in a social context, the development of self/other intelligence is important. Organisations that provide their workers with valued resources and opportunities for learning and development will have employees who are highly engaged individuals. It is recommended that organisations should work on becoming the employer of choice and develop clear career paths and career mobility (venturing) opportunities for individuals entering the workplace.

Career development should also assist these employees to develop the practical and creative skills they need to envision and plan their careers, and the personal and interpersonal management skills they need to manage their careers successfully in the organisation.

Since the present study was restricted to respondents predominantly employed in the service industry in the field of industrial and organisational psychology, the findings cannot be generalised to other occupational contexts. Given the exploratory nature of this study, associations between the participants' psychological career resources and work engagement were thus interpreted instead of being established.

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