

Harnessing Employee Engagement in UK Public Services

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WORK IN PROGRESS

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Abstract

The paper explores the popular notion of ‘employee engagement’ through ongoing attempts to reform and modernize the UK public sector. It considers how employee engagement is gaining currency across many public services both as a measure of employee outcomes and as a workplace approach to improvement. We draw on survey data (n=2181) from three UK organizations – an NHS hospital Trust, a local government authority and a central government department – to assess how public sector employees’ perception of their job, their managers and involvement-oriented practices relate to their level of engagement with work. We find that, contrary to the prescriptions of recent government policies and initiatives, engagement is not strongly related to perceptions of organizational improvement but is closely linked to the more fundamental concerns of the fit between individuals and their jobs and having clear work objectives. The findings have policy implications about how best to inculcate an engaged public sector workforce and also managerial implications about where to target efforts to increase positive employee outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement has emerged as a popular organizational concept in recent years, particularly among practitioner audiences (Saks, 2006; Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008). Many organizations are now actively formulating engagement strategies in the belief that this will make them an ‘employer of choice’ and concurrently improve organizational performance. The concept has been endorsed by the UK’s professional body for human resource management (HRM), the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD), and has been the subject of a recent central government review conducted within the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).

Much of the recent interest has been led by management consultancy firms, who have created an extensive supply of engagement solutions encompassing employee attitude surveys, training programmes and improvement initiatives (Little and Little, 2006; Macey and Schneider, 2008). Take-up of engagement concepts has been widespread in both the private and public sectors. In the public sector, engagement has been promoted by the NHS Employers organization and efforts are in place to implement a national engagement policy across the civil service. This can be seen as part of the broader trend of New Public Management (NPM) across the UK public sector where public managers have been encouraged to adopt a style of management which reflects the private sector (Boyne et al., 1999; Gould-Williams, 2003).

The academic literature has shown heightened interest towards engagement over the last few years, partly in tandem with practitioner enthusiasm, but also within a more longstanding tradition of positive psychology (Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008). Various studies have found positive associations between engagement and meaningful organizational outcomes such as in- and extra-role behaviour (Schaufeli, et al., 2006), intention to quit and organizational commitment (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Kahn (1990; 1992) argues that psychological ‘presence’ and ‘engagement’ at work are important prerequisites for understanding employee behavior and performance. However, there is a growing expanse between academic and practitioner usages of the concept.

Bakker and Schaufeli (2008, p. 151) note “there is a large discrepancy between corporate interest in employee engagement and academic research and writing.”

The academic discussion of employee engagement also has close links with the debates in the HRM literature about employee commitment, involvement and performance linkages (Becker and Gerhart, 1996). In contrast to the substantial literature on HRM in private sector organizations, research in the UK public sector has been more limited (Farnham and Horton 1996; Boyne et al. 1999). Research into employee engagement has seen a similar trend with studies taking place almost exclusively within the context of private sector firms. Little is therefore known about the linkages between engagement and other organizational variables within public sector organizations.

This paper hopes to meet some of the challenges to the current understanding of engagement by conducting a study across the UK public sector. This study brings together the two dominant strands of interest in employee engagement by linking the practitioner interpretation of the term with the psychological theorization. The paper will progress as follows. First, we will consider the different interpretations of the concept in both the academic and practitioner literatures. We will show how engagement has increasingly featured in public sector workforce policies and strategies. Second, we will build on the literature review by picking out important features of organizations that can influence employee engagement levels. Three groups of variables are recognized as 1) those specific to job roles; 2) those linked to perceptions of line and senior managers; and 3) those related to initiatives geared to organizational improvement. Third, we will introduce a series of research hypothesis to assess the relationship between important work variables and employee engagement levels. Fourth, we will present the result of regression analyses and discuss the consequences of the findings. Finally, we will draw some conclusions from the study and make some recommendations about the future of engagement research.

DEFINING AND MEASURING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

This section reviews different attempts to define and measure employee engagement. Definitions vary widely across the applied psychological literature but Macey and Schneider (2008) summarise four main approaches to represent the concept: first, as a psychological state (e.g. commitment or attachment); second, as a disposition or trait (e.g. positive affect); third, as behaviour (e.g. helping colleagues); and fourth, some combination of the above. A common thread across definitions is the notion of ‘positive psychology’ (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), the idea that optimistic or pro-social employee activity can lead to desirable effects with mutual benefits for employees and organizations. This emphasis on positivity and well-being has provided the temptation for scholars to include an ever increasing range of psychological variables under the engagement banner and has stretched the concept to a point of ambiguity. In a recent review of the concept, David Guest argued that ‘employee engagement needs to be more clearly defined ... or it needs to be abandoned’ (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009, p. 8).

With little clarity in the academic literature it is not surprising to find an even more expansive and colourful patchwork of perspectives in the practitioner community. MacLeod and Clarke (2009) found over fifty different definitions when reviewing the concept. Many of these extend beyond a psychological focus on employee attitudes to cover broader managerial approaches to organizational change, culture and performance improvement. For example, one practitioner definition is “when the business values the employee and the employee values the business” (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009, p.7). Furthermore, management consultants, who have led much of the recent interest in engagement, tend to avoid defining the term all together and instead refer only to its apparent benefits (Macey and Schneider, 2008).

An important consideration is the level of analysis and focus of the concept. For example, Saks (2006) describes two levels of engagement - an employee may be engaged with their job and immediate work environment or they may be engaged with their organization as a whole. The most common approach in the literature is to focus on the immediate job and this is the approach we follow here. On the issue of focus, engagement

can be seen as either a group or individual phenomenon. For example, engagement could be seen to come about through group processes of shared mental models and collaborative work behaviours (Saks, 2006). However, the most common approach, by virtue of its psychological derivation, is to see engagement as an individual phenomenon and this is again the approach we will follow here.

While authors emphasise different aspects of employees' experience and behaviour, many agree that engagement is best understood as a multi-dimensional construct (Jones and Harter, 2005; Schaufeli, et al. 2006). For example, Schaufeli et al. (2006) describe the three interrelated dimensions of vigour, dedication, and absorption as creating an internal state of engagement. Dvir et al. (2002) provide the multi-dimensional definition of "activity, initiative and responsibility." (p. 737). Much of the confusion and criticism around the concept has been linked to its close resemblance to other more familiar and extensively researched attitudinal concepts such as employee satisfaction, motivation and commitment (Macey and Schneider, 2008). Critics argue that state or trait engagement is merely a relabeling of old concepts. For example, Newman and Harrison (2008) regard engagement as useful only if seen as a 'higher order behavioural concept'. They argue that its attitudinal usage is merely a 'logical tautology of confounding the concept with its antecedents ... positive job attitudes and personality traits lead to employee engagement; they are not identical to it'. (p. 35) However, advocates for attitudinal engagement within a multi-dimensional construct have outlined how engagement can be distinct from other variables. For example, Macey and Schneider (2008) contend that engagement is more than satisfaction because it implies activation and energy rather than merely satiation and contentment. The same authors also believe that research on engagement has gradually evolved to become more precise and conceptually appropriate. They suggest that clarity has come through an "increasing emphasis on absorption, passion, and affect and a lessening emphasis on satisfaction and perhaps also job involvement and organizational commitment" (Macey and Schneider, 2008, p. 7).

Kahn (1990) provides a well-known definition of engagement as "harnessing of organizational members' selves to their work roles" (p. 694). He later elaborated on this

perspective by describing the concomitant notion of psychological “presence” as the outcome of employees feeling attentive, connected, integrated and focused in their role performance (Kahn, 1992). Kahn (1990, 1992) suggests that employees can use varying degrees of their selves in three ways: cognitively, emotionally and physically. The cognitive dimension describes how interesting and absorbing employees find their work. The emotional dimension expresses how employees feel about their work and whether they are enthusiastic and affectively attached to their role. The physical dimension describes the extent to which employees demonstrate work-related effort and helping behaviour. May et al. (2004) build on Kahn’s work by defining engagement as a psychological state in which employees are completely immersed in their work. These authors draw on Kahn’s three dimensions and produce a survey-based measure which can be used to rate employees level of engagement according to these three aspects.

HARNESSING ENGAGEMENT IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

So far we have reviewed the attempts to define employee engagement in the academic literature. We will now consider approaches to understanding the antecedents of engagement. Which organizational and managerial factors are most closely linked to employees becoming engaged with their work?

The Government’s MacLeod Review of employee engagement (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009) presents much of its evidence for the antecedents and outcomes of engagement as case studies. Chapter four of the report is entitled *Enablers of engagement – what has to happen to make engagement work*. MacLeod and Clarke (2009) set out four ‘enablers’ that they find are consistent in their review of the evidence: leadership, engaging managers, voice and integrity. Case study examples from both the private and public sectors are used to demonstrate these themes. However, these themes are not the only associates of engagement presented in the report. Following over thirty case studies the report covers many other phenomena that are thought to influence engagement levels. Some are rather routine practices while others are elaborate transformations. Here we

isolate three areas that we wish to test in this paper. The following section will present a series of research hypotheses supported by findings in the literature.

Work variables

A general issue which is likely to be important for harnessing employee engagement is the way individual jobs are designed and organised. Do employees find their core work tasks interesting and achievable? Do they find that they are well suited to the work they are asked to perform? An aspect of public sector work that is often celebrated in relation to employee motivation is the 'public sector ethos' (Pratchett and Wingfield 1996). This is the idea that public sector workers are likely to be engaged in their work by virtue of the intrinsic rewards afforded by performing a public service. According to this perspective we might expect public sector employees to be generally more engaged than private sector employees. However, surveys do not always suggest this to be the case (Gould-Williams, 2003).

Schaufeli et al. (2001) found that engaged employees often find time for activities outside work that they enjoy. They contrast this to workaholics who often do not find satisfaction in any activity but work. This view is supported by Grzywacz and Marks (2000) and Montgomery et al. (2003) who suggest that positive work and home lives are mutually supporting: having a positive work experience impacts positively on family life. In practice, having a good work-life balance is an individual perception. For some workers, a thirty five hour week may be enough working hours whereas others would be happy to work fifty hours. The perception of work-life balance will also affect employee perceptions of work sustainability (White et al., 2003). If employees are frequently working over their preferred hours they are more likely to experience stress and potential burnout. This has tended to not been seen as a problem in the UK public sector. For example, Hughes (1998, p. 36) suggests that the orthodox approach to public sector HRM has in fact resulted in workers being 'treated too well'. However, recent changes in the public sector have started to make public organizations more demanding environments. As Boyne et al. (1999) state, public services have been 'encouraged, exhorted and, in the

last resort, forced to adopt a style of HRM which reflects private sector practices' (Boyne et al. 1999, p. 411). This leads to our first three research hypothesis related to work roles.

H1a: Work sustainability will be positively associated with engagement

H1b: Work-life balance will be positively associated with engagement

H1c: Satisfactions with hours of work will be positively associated with engagement

In addition to the demands of work in terms of workload and duration, another important consideration is the type of work tasks individuals are asked to fulfil and whether they match their skills and interests. Csíkszentmihályi's (1998) concept of psychological 'flow' has many similarities to the experience of engagement when participating in work tasks. When tasks are too basic or routine employees are likely to become frustrated and bored; when tasks are too complex or demanding, employees are at risk of experiencing anxiety and stress. It is the optimal experience of 'flow' where individuals feel they are absorbed and stretched to a comfortable degree where engagement is most likely.

Although public service work is considerably varied among professional, technical and administrative duties, some authors argue that there is a tendency to make work processes fairly standardized (Ackroyd et al., 2007). To allow central government scrutiny, work standards and performance indicators are created that apply equally across diverse organizational contexts and work settings (Winchester and Bach, 1995). Lack of job variety creates the risk of employees becoming disinterested in their work. This leads to our fourth and fifth hypotheses:

H1d: Person-job fit will be positively associated with engagement

H1e: Job variety will be positively associated with engagement

Another concern which is likely to affect employees' connection with their work is the perception of job security. Although employees may respond in different ways to the threat of losing their job, the majority of scholars argue that positive employee outcomes are more likely to be linked to a feeling of security (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 1984). If employees feel their job is under threat, some will put in extra effort and stay at work for longer; however, due to the violation of the psychological contract, this is unlikely to be sustainable and is more likely to end in burnout or organizational exit (Turnley and Feldman, 1999).

H1f: Job security will be positively associated with engagement

Management variables

Our second group of variables concern the perceptions employees have about their managers. There is evidence that perceptions of managers, at both line and senior levels, impact on engagement (Bates, 2004; Frank et al., 2004). MacLeod and Clarke (2009) report that an 'engaging manager' is at the 'heart of success' in attempts to establish an engaged workforce. Research by Consultancy firm Accenture goes as far as to suggest that 80 per cent of the variation in engagement levels is down to line managers. As a result, MacLeod and Clarke (2009) suggest the most important relationship at work is between an employee and their line manager.

Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) discuss the role of front-line managers (FLM) as change agents in implementing and delivering HRM. 'FLMs are important in helping to create, or transmit, impressions of the organization as a whole and in making jobs satisfying by influencing how demanding the job is, how much autonomy the employee has in the job and the sense of achievement that comes from doing the job.' (p. 16)

In addition to the crucial role of line managers, many authors highlight the importance of senior leadership. Alimo-Metcalfe and Bradley (2008) assert "Our experience of working with organizations in which the CEO and the top team accept that creating an engaging culture must start with them is that the effects can be extraordinary" (Alimo-Metcalfe and

Bradley (2008) quoted in MacLeod and Clarke, 2009, p. 53-54). MacLeod and Clarke (2009) content that too many chief executives and senior managers are unaware of employee engagement or are still to be convinced of its benefits.

Positive links between managerial behaviour and employee performance have been established by numerous authors (Avolio et al., 1993; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). An important part of the management relationship is trust, which Bennis and Nanus (1985) called the ‘lubrication that makes it possible for organizations to work’ (p. 43). Another aspect is leadership, which is recognised as an underlying factor influencing the way HR practices are enacted within an organization (Purcell et al., 2003). Authors appeal to particular styles of effective leadership and personality traits of individual leaders. For example, ‘transformational leaders’ are described as charismatic people with whom employees are likely to identify emotionally (Yukl, 1999). Our next two hypotheses are as follows:

H2a: positive perceptions of line managers will be positively associated with engagement

H2b: positive perceptions of senior managers will be positively associated with engagement

A related variable to general perceptions of management is the extent to which employees are clear about their work goals. “Engaging managers offer clarity for what is expected from individual members of staff, which involves some stretch, and much appreciation and feedback/coaching and training” (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009, p. 81). If the demands placed on employees are unclear or contradictory then it is unlikely that employees will feel attached to their work; hence:

H2c: Clarity of objectives will be positively associated with engagement

Improvement-orientated variables

As mentioned earlier, the MacLeod review offers numerous case studies as the main form of evidence for links to engagement. The typical format for such cases is to document an organizational event or situation that presents a performance challenge for senior managers. A case will then proceed to describe how managers instigate a transformative process through some kind of intervention. The resultant engagement ‘initiatives’ or ‘practices’ include process improvement programmes, HR practices such as performance appraisals and training, and culture change which emphasise organizational values. Each case then tends to conclude that the new engagement approach has led to considerable performance improvements. For example, MacLeod and Clarke (2009) report a series of scenarios: ‘[the company] changed all that with a complete transformation of the company ethos which centred on creating a shared vision’ (p. 21); ‘The manager and his team agreed that it was clearly time for change and that the only effective way to make that work was by getting everyone in the organization involved’ (p. 22); ‘following implementation of their employee engagement strategy, the firm’s profitability reached a new high’ (p. 28); ‘[the organization] addressed this by introducing a number of measures, including creating the Associate Engagement Group ...It is now in its third year and continues to gain prominence.’ (p. 42).

The quotes above show that, for MacLeod and Clarke (2009), and others within the practitioner literature, engagement is seen as something that needs to be introduced via some kind of improvement-orientated vehicle. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that ‘engagement’ is something that needs to be instigated and implemented by ‘hero or heroine’ managers (Clarke et al., 1998). For example, MacLeod and Clarke (2009) state ‘while most organizations were aware of the need for employee engagement, less than half knew how to implement it.’ (p. 32) These practices stand out from the previous two groups of variables about jobs and managers. They are not part of the established organizational structure and routine but operate as an extra boost for change. As noted in previous sections of this paper, public organizations are increasingly using management consultants to help introduce these kinds of ‘engagement’ practices. We will now cover some typical forms of improvement-orientated practices that are being used in public sector organizations and which may have an effect on engagement levels.

Performance appraisals (also known as personal development reviews or PDR) are a formalised method of planning, evaluating and improving employee performance through a periodic process of employee interviewing or surveying. They are thought to be particularly important where employees have a large degree of discretion at work (Murphy and Cleveland, 1995). According to Boxall and Purcell (2003: 144, 145) 'Performance appraisal systems can form a basis for individual work planning, for discussing 'critical success factors' in the job, and can provide the key (if not the only) input to decisions on merit-based salary increases, training, promotions, and international transfers.' In recent years many UK public sector organizations have identified performance appraisals as important initiatives to drive improvement. For example, the NHS annual staff survey uses proportion of staff appraised as a measure to gauge the relationship between employees and their line manager. Many NHS trusts have pushed to increase the proportion of staff being appraised. This has been a component of the recently implemented pay scheme across the NHS *Agenda for Change*. In local government, many local authorities have introduced policies to increase PDR coverage. This has also been a core component of the re-grading process across local government *Single Status*. Performance appraisals give individuals an opportunity to reflect on their work and make plans for future improvement. They could therefore serve a useful purpose in allowing employees to find a closer connection to their work. This leads to our next hypothesis

H3a: Performance appraisals will be positively associated with engagement

Another area of improvement focus linked to performance appraisals is training and development. Both formal and informal training is regarded as being essential in achieving adequate job performance (Bartel, 1994). Some training may provide individuals with the skills needed to meet the immediate requirements of the job, whereas other training programs may address the longer term developmental needs of both the individual and organization (Boxall and Purcell, 2003). Certainly, the consequences of neglecting training and development activities have been demonstrated in a number of

studies (Harvey and von Behr, 1994; Lloyd and Newell, 2000; Mueller and Purcell, 1992). When employees are trained they will hope to develop new skills which can be applied to the work environment. If delivered successfully, training is likely to increase the intellectual stimulation from work and therefore employee engagement.

H3b: Training and development will be positively associated with engagement

Robinson et al. (2004) established a link between the availability of opportunities for upward feedback and engagement. Truss et al. (2006) also argue that one of the main drivers of engagement is for employees to have these opportunities. Employee involvement schemes frequently feature in the HRM literature through notions of 'high commitment' practices (Boslie et al., 2005). The format and scope of involvement can vary significantly but the essential idea is that employees are informed about events and are asked to contribute to work decisions. Research has found that involved employees are more likely to feel an emotional attachment to work while also experiencing a strong social connection to colleagues and managers (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2005). Studies have shown potential weaknesses in these approaches where managers can be seen to show lip service to involvement but in reality ignore suggestions and retain all decision making power (Gould-Williams and Davies, 2005). However, many studies have shown involvement to lead to positive employee experiences so our next hypothesis runs as follows:

H3c: Organizational involvement will be positively associated with engagement

Team working is often characterised as a method of organising work which maximises interdependencies among employees while at the same time having the potential to increase employee autonomy (Mueller et al., 2000). Many authors point to the positive outcomes of team working as increased employee satisfaction, commitment and well-being (Wood and deMenezes, 1998). Buchanan (2000) notes how teams are frequently used as a form of organizational change and improvement. For example, the widely discussed socio-technical experiments of teams all took the form of management

interventions (Trist, 1981). Teams are perhaps most closely associated with social engagement. Designing work processes that rely on the interaction with colleagues in order to reach completion creates an increased group-mentality in team members that leads to increased cooperation and helping behaviours. This leads to our final hypothesis:

H3d: Team working will be positively associated with engagement

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHOD

We will now review the recent growth of interest in employee engagement throughout the public sector before outlining the research methods for this study.

Engagement in UK Public Sector

In July 2009 the UK department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) released an extensive review of employee engagement, *Engaging for success*, which has also become known as the ‘MacLeod Review’ after one of its main authors, David MacLeod. The Secretary of State for Business, Lord Mandelson, encouraged the reviewers to examine whether a wider take up of engagement approaches could impact positively on the competitiveness of the UK economy. After an eight month review period the report concluded that employee engagement is an important concept for UK organizations to take seriously and that it can lead to significant benefits for employees and organizations alike (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009).

The MacLeod Review makes little effort to clarify the definition of engagement for practitioners. Instead the authors list a range of definitions from various sources. They suggest “it is most helpful to see employee engagement as a workplace approach designed to ensure that employees are committed to their organization’s goals and values, motivated to contribute to organizational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well-being.” (p. 9) They see the concept as combining “a blend of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job involvement and feelings of empowerment. It is a concept that is greater than the sum of its parts.” (p. 9) There is also little awareness or concern shown

for the academic literature that is discussed above. Instead, the authors are happy to draw on the formulations of consultancy firms and state “we believe in all three – attitudes, behaviours and outcomes – are part of the engagement story.” (p. 9) The report also suggests that organizations in different industries and of different sizes need to find their own definition and approach to engagement. Nevertheless, engagement is viewed as a multi-dimensional construct and the approach therefore shares some common themes with the academic literature. We will now consider how engagement has been defined and measured across other parts of the UK public sector.

Engagement in the NHS

The UK’s National Health Service (NHS) has invested increasing time and resources to assimilate employee engagement into its organising philosophy over the last few years. The concept has featured in various policy and strategy outputs relating to workforce issues. In 2007, the NHS National Workforce Projects released a report entitled *Maximising staff engagement*. The report described engagement as a measure of ‘how much people connect with their work’ and listed the factors that feed into employee experiences of the concept, such as excitement, absorption and effort. The report concluded that creating jobs that were both stimulating and enjoyable was the most important challenge for the NHS.

During 2008 the NHS facilitated a series of reports and events around engagement. The Department of Health (DH) commissioned a research consultancy firm to undertake an exploratory study of NHS staff attitudes. A core component of the resulting report, *What Matters to staff in the NHS*, was described as employee engagement. This was mainly measured through a proxy of employee advocacy. The report does not define engagement but uses the term ‘emotional’ and sometimes ‘rational’ engagement in the text. In the summer 2008, ‘Staff engagement’ featured as one of four key themes at the NHS Employers annual conference and the same organization also hosted a special event *Engage, involve, improve: making staff engagement a reality* to bring together NHS practitioners to discuss the concept. Linked to this activity, NHS employers published a

briefing report towards the end of 2008 entitled *Staff engagement in the NHS*. This report draws on the work of the Institute for Employment Studies by defining engagement as “when a positive attitude is held by the employee towards the organization and its values” (p. 2). Engagement here is depicted as a Venn diagram among commitment, motivation and organizational citizenship behaviour with engagement sitting at the intersection. The report highlighted the benefits of harnessing an engaged workforce and linked the findings to policy issues and initiatives taking place the NHS. Also in 2008, the DH established a national policy group for staff engagement and involvement, including representatives from NHS employers, Unison, the Healthcare Commission (now Care Quality Commission) and International Employment Studies. The group makes recommendations to the People Matters executive group, one of the five reporting to the DH board.

Other initiatives and recent changes in the NHS are also building on the employee engagement agenda. The NHS has been conducting an annual staff survey since 2003 but in the last few years this has included more questions linked to employee engagement. In the section ‘your job and organization’ there are questions such as ‘I am enthusiastic about my job’, ‘time passes quickly when I am working’ and ‘I often do more than is required’. The results of the surveys are published by the Care Quality Commission and are used by NHS managers to monitor and make changes to workforce practices. Under the recently launched NHS Constitution, a single document outlining the core values of the NHS, the staff section has the commitment “to engage staff in decisions that affect them and the services they provide” (NHS Constitution, 2009, p. 10). It is also a component of recent improvement initiatives such as the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement’s *productive ward programme* where nurses and medical staff are trained to increase the efficiency of ward procedures. Finally, The Department of Health’s director general of workforce, Clare Chapman, has described employee engagement as “crucial” to meeting the future challenges of the NHS (NHS Employers, 2008)

Engagement in the Civil Service

Engagement has also been given a high profile through various departments of the Civil Service. In 2004, the Cabinet Office's *Drive for Change* project highlighted engagement as a key component of successful modernization and change. In April 2009 the *Operational Efficiency Programme* led by the HM Treasury published a report looking at possible efficiency saving across the Civil Service. One of the main themes of the report is employee engagement. Although engagement is not explicitly defined, the report recommends that government agencies and departments should be expected to have in place comprehensive programmes of employee engagement. Furthermore, it is held that future Capability Reviews should take account of departmental arrangements for employee engagement when assessing a department's capacity to innovate.

Connected to the trends across central government, the Civil Service created its own approach to engagement in 2008. Central to the approach is an engagement model called 'Say, Stay and Strive', which was developed in partnership with consultancy firm Ipsos MORI. This has some links to the approach adopted in the NHS as it used organizational advocacy and affective commitment as two main components. Sir Gus O'Donnell, Cabinet Secretary and Head of Home Civil Service, explained the important of this approach:

The Civil Service faces unprecedented challenges tackling complex policy issues every day. In order to meet these challenges we must harness the talents of all our staff to the full. Our employee engagement programme enables us to do this by understanding and improving civil servants' experience of work. (quoted in MacLeod and Clarke, 2009, p. 13)

As part of this expanding programme, the Civil Service carried out its first service-wide survey of employee engagement in 2009. It is one of the largest single surveys ever carried out in the UK with a sample of over 500,000 employees. The survey covers many government agencies and departments overseeing many aspects of public administration.

To support this work, a team reporting to the Permanent Secretary sub-group for employee relations has published a series of fact sheets for managers. The fact sheet entitled *Introducing engagement* described the concept as “...more than just being satisfied or motivated. Engaged employees have a sense of personal attachment to their work and organization that means they want to give their best to help it succeed. Engaged employees tend to speak positively about their organization and have an active desire to stay” (p. 1) The approach is therefore intended to be comprehensive and robust. The model of engagement is supported by a detailed survey tool to measure engagement levels and find potential areas for improvement. This is supported by background information and guidance notes to help managers introduce engagement into the workplace and implement the ideas. Another fact sheet, *Making the Case*, states:

For once, it’s useful to define something by what it’s not. Employee engagement is no passing fad. It’s an approach built on decades of progress in people management to help deliver higher organizational performance. (p. 2)

Engagement in local government

Local government authorities have also become receptive to the engagement message in recent years. The Labour Government’s local government modernisation agenda has pushed councils to become more flexible, innovative and improvement-orientated. As part of regulatory regimes such as Comprehensive Area Assessment and Wales Programme for Improvement, local authorities are encouraged to adopt ‘best practices’ while also devising their own approach to improvement. Many councils have used this impetus to design their own improvement programmes and many are using engagement as the core to workforce initiatives. In February 2009, the department for Communities and Local Government took part in the second phase of a project run by the Cabinet Office to pilot an employee engagement approach to staff surveys. This draws heavily on the work in the Civil Service with the aim to support managers to introduce engagement techniques across local authority services.

During 2009, the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), which supports local authority improvement, piloted *the Employee Engagement Exchange Circle*. This brings together senior people from local government to deepen their understanding of how to improve employee engagement. The sessions involve an exchange of ideas, research and practical experience. They will be planned to respond to participants' needs and priorities. It is the intention to publish briefing papers, articles and research papers as a result of this process.

As we have seen, the UK public sector has been an enthusiastic consumer of employee engagement concepts over the last few years. Although no overriding definition or approach has emerged, the concept is seen as overtaking traditional measures of employee outcomes by subsuming traditional concepts of satisfaction, commitment and motivation into a multi-dimensional concept of engagement. The Civil Service's 'Say, Stay and Strive' model is perhaps the most prominent approach so far which is experiencing a high level of influence across central government departments and local government authorities. With these approaches being included in annual staff surveys and training programmes they are likely to be a feature of public sector thinking for some time.

Survey design and Sample

We draw on survey data from three public sector organizations: *NorthTrust* - an NHS Hospital Trust; *GovDep* - a central government department; and *WestCouncil* - a large local government authority. Service areas were selected on the basis that they were actively involved in 'employee engagement initiatives'.

An on-line version of the survey was created and distributed to potential participants via an email link. A paper copy was also produced and distributed to employees without computer access. The questionnaire covered a wide range of issues linked to employee experiences of their work, their managers and wider organization. It also included questions relating the attitudinal outcomes of employee engagement and related concepts. A total sample of 2181 employee responses was collected. Of this total, 420 responses

were collected from *NorthTrust*, 1198 responses from *WestCouncil*, and 563 from *GovDep*.

NorthTrust

NorthTrust is an NHS Foundation Trust providing acute healthcare to a population of 330,000 and specialist services to a wider population of 1.5 million. It has foundation trust status which means it has augmented independence from government regulation and can reinvest any surpluses back into improving service delivery. The population served by the hospital includes some of the most socially deprived communities in England. The trust is one of the largest employers in the area with nearly 4,500 staff. It has a bed complement of 860 inpatients beds and 90 day case beds. In 2007/08 the annual income was £225 million.

The vision of the trust is ‘provide high quality, patient-centred healthcare and proactively enhance the trust’s local, national and international reputation.’ The central aim of the organization’s HR strategy is to be an employer of choice for the area. The organization has been running a staff survey for several years and has a staff involvement policy. The HR department has developed a wide range of practices to support the diverse needs of the workforce with the common theme of ‘valuing staff’. These include employee benefits, awards and training. The trust sees employee engagement as feeding into the values and initiatives of the trust. The trust is in the process of replacing its employee involvement policy with an engagement policy.

WestCouncil

WestCouncil is one of the largest local authorities in the UK with a workforce of over 50,000. In 2006/07 the council had a total budget of £858m.

The council has undergone significant changes in recent years. Poor Audit Commission performance ratings in the early 2000’s led to a senior managers devising a large scale

transformation plan with the aim of reforming back office functions, including IT, finance and procurement. As part of this wider approach, in 2006 the council's workforce development team worked alongside a management consultancy firm to introduce a new improvement programme. The core aim of the programme was to improve employee engagement and innovation. The council setup a network of leaders for the programme selected from services and departments across the council. Leaders were trained to run group workshops which are held every few months. Improvement teams are encouraged to discuss what is working well in their area, what is working not so well, and to come up with new ideas for improvement. In the first year, more than 6,000 service improvement actions were suggested. More than 25,000 staff have been involved in the programme since 2006. The council reports a positive outcome from the initiative. According to the workforce development team, staff motivation has 'increased from 56 to 86 per cent and confidence in management has gone up from 29 to 68 per cent'. The programme has featured as a best practice in a number of trade journals and won several awards for HR innovation.

GovDep

GovDep is a large government department that covers several customer-facing business areas. In this paper we focus on one of the larger agencies within the department. The agency has offices in various locations across the UK, including south-east England, the Midlands and the north of England, as well as Wales and Scotland. Core values of the agency include ensuring an accurate, rapid and joined-up service based around customer need; improving value for money for the taxpayer; and reducing levels of service error. The agency currently employs over 16,000 people and the services are used by around 15 million customers in the UK.

The agency has recently undergone considerable change as a result of a merger between two previously separate agencies. This has led to a new management structure and 'head office' rationalisation and provided an opportunity for headcount efficiencies. Like many areas of the civil service, there is an efficiency drive with overall reduction in financial

allocation for the next three years. GovDep as a whole has a target to reduce the workforce by 30 per cent over three years.

The department and agencies have been involved in working towards increased employee engagement for some time, although this has only been branded as ‘employee engagement’ latterly. This interest stems from a drive to renew employment practices and processes as part of a wider agenda of government modernization. The department and agencies have conducted an annual staff survey for several years, which feeds into improvement activities. It has increased the focus on employee involvement initiatives during the last three years. In 2008 the staff survey suggested that 18 per cent on staff were ‘disengaged’. Across the whole of GovDep this suggested nearly 20,000 people, mostly from frontline delivery roles and junior grades.

The majority of the agency’s employees work in an office/contact centre environment. There is an emphasis on employee development, coaching and teamwork. There is also careful attention to diversity and equal opportunities. Sickness absence rates have been relatively high in the agency over recent years, compared with private sector organizations (although low for the wider department), and a new performance standard for sickness has been put in place with the aim to reduce sickness absence to below 8.3 average working days per year.

Measures

All items in our survey are based on a statement with a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Engagement

Employee engagement is measured using a new scale we have developed for this project.¹ Building on Kahn (1990) and May et al. (2004) we use a three dimensional

¹ We have a validation paper for this construct under preparation. If you would like to receive more details about the derivation of this measure please contact the authors.

construct. We define engagement as ‘being positively present during the performance of work by willingly contributing intellectual effort, and experiencing both positive emotions and meaningful connections to others’ (Gatenby et al., 2008). Our construct distinguishes among intellectual engagement, affective engagement and social engagement. In this paper we are interested in the general relationship between public sector work and engagement and thus we use an aggregate measure for overall engagement (Cronbach’s Alpha .78)

Intellectual engagement is measured using seven items, including ‘I spend time thinking about how to do my job better, ‘I get completely absorbed in my work’ and ‘I think about how to improve the way I do my job when I’m not at work’. Affective engagement is measured using four items, such as ‘I really want to do a good job’ and ‘I am energised by my job’. Our measure of Social engagement differs to May et al.’s (2004) physical engagement in that we have given more attention to the relationship between individuals and their work colleagues. Our measure uses seven items, including ‘I talk to people at work about how to improve the way I do my job’, ‘I talk to people at work about how to improve the way the team or department work’ and ‘I like to help out my colleagues’.

Job variables

The sustainability of workload scale is measured using eight items, for example ‘I am happy to keep working at my current pace over the next year’, ‘I will cope with the challenges of my job over the next year’ and ‘my workload is manageable’. Work-life balance is measured with two items ‘I will be able to achieve the correct balance between my home and work lives over the next year’ and ‘My managers provide support to help me manage my work-life balance’. The Cronbach’s Alpha for this scale ranges from .83 to .87 for our three datasets. A four item scale is used for person-job fit. Statements include ‘overall, my job is right for me’ and ‘the demands of my job are a good match with my skills’ (Alpha score ranges from .82 to .88). Job variety is measured with a single item ‘I am satisfied with the amount of variety in my job’. Job Security is also a single item measure ‘I am satisfied with my level of job security’.

Management variables

Perceptions of line managers were assessed with eight items. This is a general management scale covering aspects of leadership, communication and trust. Items included 'my line manager is an effective leader', 'my line manager listens to my ideas and suggestions' and 'I trust my line manager'. The Alpha score is between .95 and .96.

Perception of senior managers was measured using seven items. These also covered different aspects of management like communication, trust and leadership. Questions included 'senior managers treat employees with respect', 'my senior managers are effective leaders' and 'senior managers make employees feel valued'. Clarity of work objectives is another scale used to assess the effectiveness of managers. Here four items are used, which include 'I understand my work objectives for the coming year'. Cronbach's alpha is .93 to .95.

Improvement practices

Improvement practices are a group of measures used to assess organizational activities with improvement as a core component. These practices are often introduced by management as part of change programmes. Performance appraisals (or personal development review) was assessed with a single item 'I am satisfied with my own appraisal'. Training and development is also measured using a single item 'I am satisfied with the training and development I receive'. Organizational involvement is measured with three items 'I am involved in decisions that directly affect my job', 'I attend meetings where I can make suggestions relating to my job' and 'my managers act on suggestions I make at meetings'. The Cronbach's score for this scale range between .77 and .85. Finally, team working is a single item measure 'I am satisfied with the extent to which I work in a team'.

Control variables

Control variables were included as variables we are not directly interested in exploring but which have been found to influence employee attitudes and work-related behaviours in previous studies. These included respondents' age (open question); gender dummy (male=1 female=0); highest qualification (1= degree or above, 2= other higher education below degree, 3= A level; NVG 3; 4= GCSE, O Level or NVQ 2; 5= NVQ 1 or other; 6= no qualifications); full time (full-time=1 part-time=0); trade union membership (member=1, non-member=0) and job role dummy variable (manager=1 non-manager=0).

RESULTS

Regression analyses

To test our research hypotheses ordinary least squared multiple regression was undertaken for the three organizational datasets with the control variables entered at step 1, the six job variables at step 2, the three management variables at step 3 and the four improvement variables at step 4. Overall, the equations explained a good degree of change in the dependent variable, with the R^2 ranging from .32 to .41.

We will first consider equation 1 for the three organizations. At GovDep age, gender, educational attainment, union membership and management responsibility all explain respondents' engagement levels. At WestCouncil, only gender and management responsibility are significant. At NorthTrust, age, gender and management are significant. Overall, the control variables explain between .03 and .13 of the variation in engagement with age having a positive association and males having a negative association.

INSERT TABLES 1 - 3

Equation 2 shows the relationships with the added job variables. In this equation the strongest association across all three organizations is person-job fit (Beta values from .37

to .41). Also significant were job variety for WestCouncil and work-life balance for NorthTrust.

The next set of variables were entered at step 3 to test the associations with perceptions of managers. At this step, person-job fit retains its explanatory power alongside clarity of work objectives which has beta values of .18 to .29. At NorthTrust, perceptions of line managers is also significant.

Equation 4 includes the improvement-orientated practices. Of the variables added at this stage, involvement is significant at GovDep and training and development is significant at WestCouncil. None of the improvement variables significantly explain the variance in engagement at NorthTrust.

DISCUSSION

The results provide partial support for the research hypotheses. Although the overall model had good explanatory power this appears to be due to only a small number of variables. We now consider the three groups of variables again in turn.

First, there are the issues relating to individual jobs. The aspect which clearly stands out here is person-job fit (hypothesis H1c). This finding shows that, rather than the amount of work people are required to do or how long they stay at work, a more important factor is the type of work they are asked to do. This provides support for the theory of 'flow' (Csikszentmihályi's, 1998) and suggests that if employees can find an optimal level of task type and difficulty to match their skills then they are more likely to feel engaged. This association is seen for employees in the NHS, Civil Service and local government.

At WestCouncil job variety was also a significant variable. This could be explained by the level of work standardisation in this setting and the related perception that variety of work is particularly important. If work is varied employees are also likely to experience more challenge and therefore a closer fit between their skills and their job. For employees

at NorthTrust, work-life balance has some explanatory value. This appears more important than work sustainability or hours of work. Perhaps more so than in the Civil Service or local government, employees of the NHS are routinely expected to work long and unsociable hours. It is how employees manage their work in relation to their home life and their sense of balance that appears more important than a specific focus on working hours. Job security does not appear as a significant variable in any of the organizations. Almost constant restructuring and organizational change have become a routine feature across the UK public sector. This is reflected in recent events at our three case organizations. One explanation is that employees may become resistant or immune to threats of job security so it does not have as much effect on their work experience as in other settings. For example, Hallier and Lyon (1996) found that managers who were faced with the threat of job threats through a redundancy process could quickly re-establish commitment if they were retained in the organization.

The second group of issues were related to how employees perceive managerial behaviours. For the datasets in this study, general perceptions of both line and senior managers were not significantly related to engagement. This result differs from previous studies such as Frank et al. (2004) and Halbesleben and Wheeler (2008). In contrast to Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) we did not find general support for the argument that leadership and trust are important associates for engagement. However, line managers were significant at NorthTrust. Overall our data are similar to the research of Saks (2006), who found that perceptions of managers were not associated with engagement. The issue that stood out instead was clarity of objectives (hypothesis H2c). This was common across the three cases. This is however related to management behaviour, as it is frequently the role of managers to clarify and communicate clear performance goals at different levels, from the organizational to the individual. This finding provides support for the conclusions of MacLeod and Clarke (2009) who suggest that creating a working environment with clear objectives is one of the most important parts of being an “engaging manager”. For example, if employees have a clear understanding of what they are required to do they are more likely to find meaning in their work (May et al., 2004).

The third set of issues relates to what we have called here improvement practices. We noted earlier that it has been a common component of the public sector approach to engagement to see it as an approach to organizational change. That is, an approach where engagement is seen as something that needs to be added to the work experience through improvement practices and programmes (see MacLeod and Clarke, 2009). The practices we test here are performance appraisals, training and development, organizational involvement initiatives and team working. The results suggest that these practices that not highly associated with engagement in the public sector.

Satisfaction with performance appraisals did not have explanatory value in any of the organizations. We did not find support for Boxall and Purcell's (2003) suggestion that appraisals or PDRs are an important part of how employees relate to their work. A possible explanation for this is that employees are either not routinely being appraised or that they are finding appraisals ineffective. It may indeed be a combination of the two. For instance, in the NHS annual survey results suggest that an average of 65 per cent of NHS staff were appraised in 2008 and only 28 per cent found these "well structured" (Care quality Commission, 2008).

Employee involvement had explanatory value at GovDep only. The GovDep agency has recently undergone a major merger and restructure. There is likely to be a lot of uncertainty for staff during this time which may explain the positive response from staff who felt involved in decision making (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2005). Involvement was not important in the other two organizations. This is perhaps surprising at WestCouncil where considerable investment has been put into introducing an involvement programme based around employee workshops. This may suggest that the programme is not having the impact that managers had intended or that employees perceive that managers are paying lip service to involvement. This has been found in previous research in local government (Gould Williams and Davies, 2005). However, in WestCouncil training and development emerged as a significant issue for engagement. It is possible that employees perceive the recently introduced improvement programme as a form of training rather than as involvement. In which case, it is having a positive impact.

It is not clear why training did not feature as an important issue in the other two organizations. Both claim to have extensive provision for training. However, it should be noted that many respondents at NorthTrust were professionally trained nurses and allied health professionals (e.g. physiotherapists). Due to professional training requirements it is unlikely that training opportunities vary markedly across this workforce.

The final issue is team working. Contrary to the findings of Wood and deMenezes, (1998) and Thompson (2000) this did not have explanatory power in our data. The work of critics to team working approaches offers some possible elucidation. Sinclair (1998) and Harley (2001) point to the potentially stressful experience of working in teams as employees are constantly under the scrutiny of their peers. Gould-Williams and Gatenby (forthcoming) found that when team working is used in conjunction with strong forms of management control, employee commitment is reduced and stress increased. It may be that teams are having a negligible influence in our three organizations or that they are having a negative effect. Based on our evidence in the public sector team working is not strongly associated with employee engagement.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper has demonstrated the relevance of studying employee engagement in the UK public sector. Many public services, including the NHS, Civil Service and local government are actively pursuing engagement. We have shown that there are two main ways of looking at the concept – as a measure of positive employee outcomes or as a workplace approach to organizational improvement. Our findings suggest that these approaches are often used in combination and are implemented with the help of management consultancy firms.

Our main conclusion is that engagement should not always be seen as the outcome of improvement initiatives; it need not be something which is added to the organization through some kind of intervention. Instead, engagement is about the core experience of work through perceptions of person-job fit and clarity of objectives. This has policy

implications for strategies trying to inculcate an engaged public sector workforce. Policy strategists should note that best practice improvement initiatives, such as ‘high performance’ HR practices, do not always lead to significant improvements in employee outcomes. The UK public sector is now routinely using management consultants to deliver improvement initiatives but often the return from such interventions are difficult to measure. At best, it appears that many recent improvement initiatives have been associated with modestly positive employee outcomes.

These findings also have important implications for public sector managers who often embrace new initiatives. Rather than attempting transformational change, it is perhaps more important for most managers to focus on doing the ‘simple’ things well. This includes working to formulate and communicate clear work objectives that employees can understand. This should be part of the routine work process and not bolted on to the core experience of work.

Future research could expand on this work in several ways. It would be useful to examine data specific to different employee groups to focus on how different types of work tasks impact engagement. For example, what types of workers perceive the strongest job fit? It would also be useful to explore the different approaches managers can take to creating clear work objectives. Certainly, there has been a strong drive from the UK central government to measure the performance of public services. It would be interesting to explore how managers are using national targets and standards to create a meaningful work experience for employees.

Table 1: Regression equations – Employee Engagement

NorthTrust				
	β	β	β	β
Control Variables				
<i>Step 1</i>				
<i>Personal characteristics</i>				
Age	.12*	.03	.02	.02
Male	-.13**	-.09*	-.09*	-.09*
Highest qualification	-.09	-.09*	-.08*	-.08
Full time	.02	.03	.03	.04
Trade union member	.08	.09*	.09*	.08*
Manager	.26***	.15***	.13**	.12**
R^2	.12			
$Adj R^2$	.11			
Job Variables				
<i>Step 2</i>				
Sustainability		.04	-.02	-.01
Work-life balance		.14	.05	.03
Person-job fit		.41***	.31***	.28***
Hours of work		.03	.03	.03
Job variety		.07	.07	.06
Job security		-.05	-.08	-.08
R^2		.39		
$Adj R^2$		.37		
Management variables				
<i>Step 3</i>				
Perceptions of line managers			.133**	.11*
Perceptions of senior management			.04	.02
Clarity of objectives			.18***	.18***
R^2			.43	
$Adj R^2$			.41	
Improvement practices				
<i>Step 4</i>				
Appraisal				-.06
Training and development				-.09
Organisational involvement				.06
Team working				.05
R^2				.44
$Adj R^2$				.41
F Value				16.39
n				420

* Statistically significant at .05 level; ** statistically significant at .01 level; *** statistically significant at .001 level

±Standardised beta values shown.

Table 2: Regression equations – Employee Engagement

	WestCouncil			
	β	β	β	β
Control Variables				
<i>Step 1</i>				
<i>Personal characteristics</i>				
Age	.01	-.02	-.02	-.02
Male	-.08*	-.04	-.03	-.03
Highest qualification	-.05	-.03	-.03	-.02
Full time	.06	.06	.05	.05
Trade union member	.01	.04	.03	.02
Manager	.16***	.08*	.05	.05
R^2	.04			
$Adj R^2$	.03			
Job Variables				
<i>Step 2</i>				
Sustainability		.09	.07	.07
Work-life balance		.08	.02	.02
Person-job fit		.37***	.29***	.30***
Hours of work		-.06	-.05	-.05
Job variety		.10*	.07	.08
Job security		-.01	-.00	.01
R^2		.29		
$Adj R^2$		.28		
Management variables				
<i>Step 3</i>				
Perceptions of line managers			.03	.03
Perceptions of senior management			-.02	-.01
Clarity of objectives			.24***	.23***
R^2			.33	
$Adj R^2$			.31	
Improvement practices				
<i>Step 4</i>				
Appraisals				-.04
Training and development				-.10**
Organisational involvement				.04
Team working				.06
R^2				.34
$Adj R^2$				.32
F value				20.19
n				1198

* Statistically significant at .05 level; ** statistically significant at .01 level; *** statistically significant at .001 level

±Standardised beta values shown.

Table 3: Regression equations – Employee Engagement

	GovDep			
	β	β	β	β
Control Variables				
<i>Step 1</i>				
<i>Personal characteristics</i>				
Age	.19***	.12***	.12***	.12**
Male	-.23***	-.14***	-.11**	-.11**
Highest qualification	-.06***	-.13***	-.11***	-.11**
Full time	.032	.01	.00	.01
Trade union member	-.09*	-.06	-.05	-.06
Manager	.26***	.12***	.10**	.09**
R^2	.14			
$Adj R^2$	.13			
Job Variables				
<i>Step 2</i>				
Sustainability		.08	.03	.04
Work-life balance		.05	.02	.01
Person-job fit		.40***	.28***	.28***
Hours of work		.00	-.01	.00
Job variety		.09	.08	.07
Job security		-.02	-.06	-.05
R^2		.41		
$Adj R^2$		.39		
Management variables				
<i>Step 3</i>				
Perceptions of line managers			.01	-.00
Perceptions of senior management			.01	-.01
Clarity of objectives			.29***	.28***
R^2			.46	
$Adj R^2$			.44	
Improvement practices				
<i>Step 4</i>				
Appraisal				-.03
Training and development				-.04
Organisational involvement				.10*
Team working				.01
R^2				.46
$Adj R^2$				.44
F Value				21.49
n				563

* Statistically significant at .05 level; ** statistically significant at .01 level; *** statistically significant at .001 level

±Standardised beta values shown.

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