# From employee engagement to employee experience

## Current state of play

Employee engagement is complex and touches upon almost all known parts of human resource management. There's no single definition but most scholars agree that engaged employees typically have high levels of energy and identify strongly with their work.

Studies have shown links between engagement and organisational performance outcomes including employee retention, productivity, profitability customer loyalty and safety (*Markos & Sridevi, 2010*). Much research has also explored drivers of employee engagement that, if present, can enhance it. One such study (*Bakker, 2008*) concluded that it is best predicted by job (e.g., autonomy, supervisory coaching, performance feedback) and personal resources (e.g., optimism, self-efficacy, self-esteem).

While engagement is undoubtedly critical to organisational success, at ETS we recognise that despite achieving high levels of employee engagement, many organisations continue to struggle with poor levels of performance or unhealthy levels of attrition. This therefore puts into debate whether by only considering how to improve employee performance through employee engagement, are organisations really considering the full picture?

In response to this, we've conducted research into the people-performance relationship to understand what else, other than engagement, is known to predict individual performance outcomes at work. Our conclusions from this research, and the subsequent focus of this paper, is recognising that organisations have a duty to not only tend to their employees' engagement, but their overall 'experience' of working for their organisation. Consideration of the over-arching experience is then better able to explain resulting employee performance and, most crucially for employers, where they need to focus in order to improve it.

## A model of work engagement

We've picked out the Job Demands Resources Model of Work Engagement (*Bakker & Demerouti, 2007*) to explain the mechanics of workplace engagement. It describes the relationship between the job demands, be they physical, cognitive or emotional, and resources that help an employee to achieve work goals. The balance between the two determines both the motivation felt (engagement) and strain experienced (burnout) by an employee. As a result, this relationship directly impacts work performance.



Below: Mechanics of the JDR model
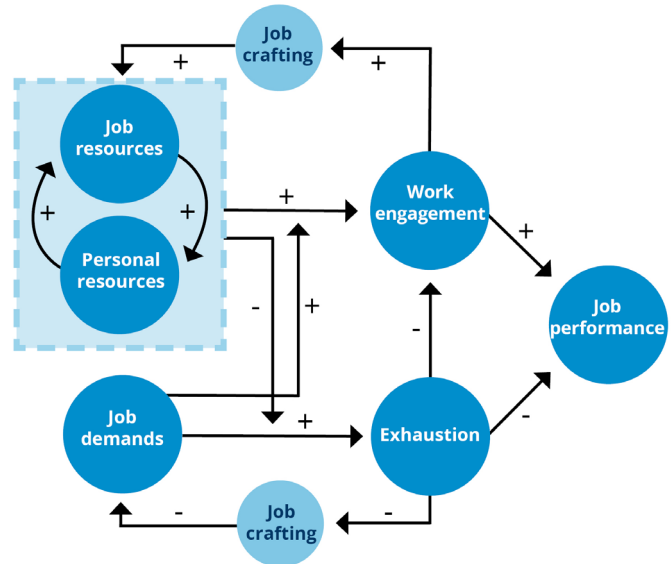
The JDR model provides further detail as to what influences motivation and job-strain. For example, low autonomy (a resource) paired with a challenging work environment and heavy workload (job demands) can cause low motivation, high strain, and thus poor performance. However, increased autonomy gives a drastically different outcome. In addition to autonomy, resources including a supportive and trusting work environment, goal and role clarity, and opportunities for professional development have also been found to decrease job-strain, increase motivation, and ultimately improve performance.

Lastly, job crafting denotes a conscious and independent effort by an individual to modify aspects of their job to improve the fit between the job and their own needs, abilities, and preferences. This becomes a negative when an individual experiences a higher state of job strain, thus job crafting becomes a reactive task in an attempt to overcome current hurdles.

Below: Breakdown of behavioural outcomes depending on the balance between job demands and job resources
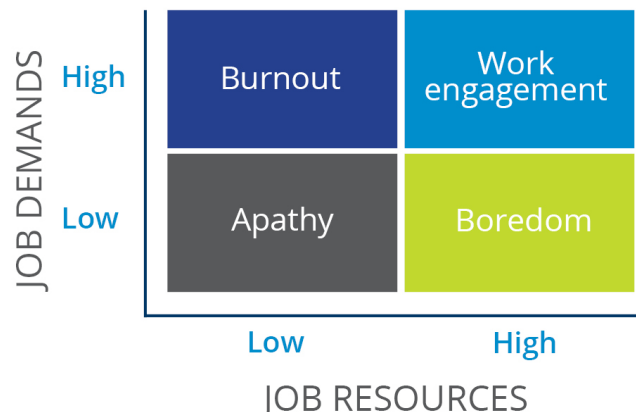
# Building on the JDR model

This model's main premise is that work engagement requires striking a healthy balance between available job resources and demands. However, more recent research argues that it is too one-dimensional to consider all job resources as feeding directly into employee engagement. Instead, there are different behavioural outcomes at play that are best served by specific job resources. One such paper (*Permana et al., 2015*), argues for the existence of two additional behavioural outcomes: employee 'enablement' and employee 'empowerment' alongside employee engagement for the provision of an overall framework of 'employee effectiveness'. Driving each behavioural outcome is a unique set of job resources, as described within the JDR model.

- Alignment of value and interest
- Trust in leadership
- Fit with job
- Fit with organisation
- Job satisfaction
- Opportunity for personal growth
- Passion
- Psychological capital
- Reward/recognition
- Vision
- Work accomplishment

- Adequacy of work equipment and supplies
- Clear direction
- Effective work processes
- Infrastructure for data sharing
- Job design
- Opportunity for learning and sharing
- Supportive work environment
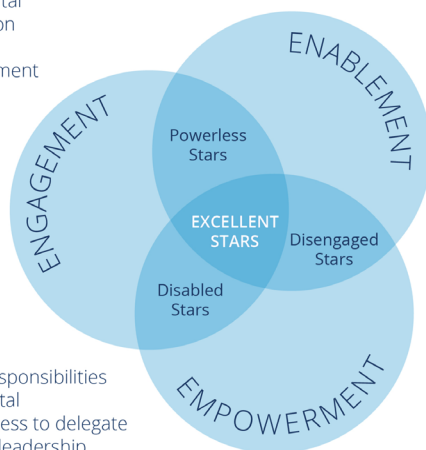
- Clear roles and responsibilities
- Psychological capital
- Superior's willingness to delegate
- Transformational leadership

*Above: Breakdown of behavioural outcomes depending on the balance between job demands and job resources*

The definitions given for each behavioural outcome are:

## Engagement

'The intensity of employees' emotional connection (i.e. attachment) they feel for their organisation, which influences them to exert greater discretionary effort (i.e. extra effort) committed to achieving their work goals.'

*In other words, it is about what is in one's heart (e.g. willingness).*

## Enablement

'The extent to which employees feel that they are provided with what they need to do their jobs well, while working in an environment that allows them to perform to their greatest ability.'

*In other words, it is about what is provided in one's surrounding.*

## Empowerment

'The extent to which employees feel they are provided with problem-solving and decision-making authority to do their job, while working in an environment that allows them to speak-up and suggest better ways of doing things'.

*In other words, it is about what is entrusted to one's capability.*

A further important distinction made by Permana et al's model is the emergence of specific behavioural states experienced when there is disparity between engagement, enablement and empowerment. These are labelled as Disengaged, Powerless or Disabled stars. For example, employees who are both engaged and enabled but aren't authorised to take responsibility can become Powerless stars.

This model therefore recognises that, while engagement can be high due to employee commitment to the organisational vision or perceptions of an exciting career path, for example, a lack of entrustment would prevent this from translating their high levels of engagement into high levels of performance. In practical terms, organisations that fail to appreciate this bigger picture, risk undermining employees who, while engaged, are lacking several other job resources which ultimately prevent them from reaching optimal levels of performance.

## The result: employee experience at ETS

### Introducing the 'EX³' model

We've used our understanding of the foundations of workplace engagement, coupled with the more recent focus on deconstructing the behavioural drivers of workplace performance as the basis for creating our own ETS model of Employee Experience ('EX³'). In doing so we have also created a benchmark for enablement and empowerment containing some 24,000 employees. Early feedback from our clients reveals the added value they've had from looking at their employees through these extra two lenses, which is allowing them to tailor survey actions even more appropriately.

### Core mechanisms

Our EX³ model focuses on understanding an employee's overall 'experience' – a collective assessment of perceived workplace engagement, as well as enablement and empowerment. By coupling a strong sense of engagement with an enabling and empowering infrastructure, a committed employee who is willing to apply discretionary effort will feel fully able and empowered to do so and will thus be more likely to reach greater levels of individual performance. Conversely, an employee who is exposed to a prolonged absence of job resources for any one of the three behavioural indicators is likely to suffer with job-strain and ultimately burnout if they are continually ignored by the organisation. This degradation of energy is as described within the JDR Model.

It is important to note that engagement, enablement and empowerment are regarded as three distinct but inter-related components of employee experience, each influenced by a broadly different set of job resources. To elaborate on this:

- Engagement, enablement and empowerment can vary between organisations and from person to person. Their distinctiveness means one can perceive high enablement (e.g. the right tools) but poor empowerment (e.g. constantly waiting for managerial approval). In this scenario, improving empowerment through removing unnecessary managerial approval may not only create a rise in individual empowerment, but also enablement as the employee's perception of their ability to complete a job improves. So, while impacted by differing job resources, changing one can influence another too.

- Job resources are recognised as predicting one of three components, but they shouldn't be regarded as mutually exclusive. Rather, in practice, some job resources may extend beyond impacting solely the component it is mapped onto. For example, development opportunities are regarded as predictive of engagement, but it may also contribute to empowerment if, for example, an employee is prevented from making decisions due to their lower ranking in the organisational hierarchy.

### Practical Applications

A major strength of the EX³ model is the ease at which its components can be brought to life in real-world settings. This section provides practical accounts of the model.

### Frustration

*High engagement & empowerment, low enablement*

If an employee is highly engaged but lacks necessary resources to complete their job, they are more likely to experience frustration from having their motivation to work hard and reach their goals scuppered. Failure to overcome these barriers can lead to decreased effort, weariness and sometimes, attrition. This is a support issue and the responsibility lies with the organisation to recognise and respond to their employee's needs.

*Image 4 below: EX³: optimising employee experience framework*

### Distrusted

*High engagement & enablement, low empowerment*

Equally, consider an employee committed to achieving their goals, who has an understanding of how to do so but who hasn't been given authority to suggest how this should be achieved. This can lead to the employee feeling distrusted and unappreciated. 'Goal Setting Theory' (*Locke & Latham, 2006*) describes when employees are involved in setting their own goals or can contribute to defining organisational targets, they experience higher levels of motivation which improves performance and increases commitment to the goals.

### Detached

*High empowerment & enablement, low engagement*

Employees who are enabled and empowered but are detached from the organisation (thus disengaged), won't put in discretionary effort or strive to perform to their best of their ability. Reasons for detachment can include doubts in the company vision/leadership, disgruntlement at reward or career development, or belief that the organisation does not connect with one's core beliefs or values.

### Auto-engagement

Auto-engagement is a phenomenon more likely to exist in organisations with an exciting brand or product, or where the work is highly stimulating/fulfilling. In such contexts, employees often exude engagement and pride in the organisation. Where this happens, the manager's role may be subtly different in that efforts should instead be focussed on channelling engagement (e.g. the extra effort). Managers can achieve this, and in turn drive higher performance, through creating the right conditions for their team to be successful, or in other words, by enabling and empowering employees. Auto-engagement could also partly explain why some organisations who experience high engagement fail to see a correlation with performance outcomes. Just because an employee is willing to apply extra effort, it doesn't mean they are able to if the organisational infrastructure prohibits them.

### Job crafting

The EX³ model advocates 'Job Crafting', as introduced earlier. Negative job crafting arises when an engaged employee reactively attempts to re-craft their job to compensate for lacking job resources. Specifically, we might expect to see the following three-step strategy:

#### 1. Determination

An employee uses energy to overcome scarce or inadequate resources. They expend more energy to obtain them or will seek short-cuts to complete their job in a way that minimises strain.

#### 2. Termination

Such a sustained energy expenditure is not sustainable and over time the employee will become weary of re-crafting their job (exhaustion), eventually stopping altogether (cynicism).

#### 3. Extermination

Usually in the form of resignation, the individual will seek new opportunities where their energy can be better utilised, allowing them greater scope to be successful.

## Final word - managers to the fore

Our ETS model of employee experience makes clear the distinctions within the people-performance relationship, showing engagement isn't the sole consideration and only provides part of the overall picture. Instead, to capture a broader and more complete understanding of an employees' experience, we must also measure enablement and empowerment.

In helping to realise true employee potential, line managers play a pivotal role. Firstly, they must act as change agents when issues with engagement, enablement or empowerment are reported. Employees reporting inadequacy often feel powerless and so managers must listen, understand and act so their employee's voice may be heard. Secondly, and on a more day to day basis, managers should ensure they are laying the foundations for employee success through their engagement, enablement and empowerment. This begins with fostering a work environment that can unlock individual potential by allowing engaged employees the best chance of success, through giving them everything they need to complete their job.

Managers who understand how to facilitate not only positive employee engagement, but also a great overall employee experience are those most likely to enjoy the strongest levels of individual and team performance.

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