



Employee Engagement
in Work and Health:
**Definition and
Measurement
Insights —
Opportunities for
Industry**

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Health Enhancement Research Organization (HERO) is a national non-profit dedicated to identifying and sharing best practices in the field of workplace health and well-being (HWB). HERO was established over twenty years ago to create and disseminate research, policy, leadership and strategy to advance workplace HWB, providing leadership of the nation's workforce. Much of the good work that HERO does is achieved through the efforts of its volunteer committees.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2015, the HERO Engagement Study Committee, operating on behalf of HERO members, was charged with the long-term goal of understanding the correlative and causal interrelationships between three domains of engagement:

- employee engagement in health and well-being (HWB),
- employee engagement in organizational success,
- organizational success and organizational engagement in employee HWB.

To address the goals in the committee's charter, a workgroup was formed to conduct an environmental scan of published articles. The initial focus for the review was to inform the field about how different facets of engagement are being defined and measured. A majority of the articles reviewed focused on influencers of employee engagement in organizational success. Of the 222 articles reviewed, 27% offered a definition for engagement, 32% provided guidance around

measurement, 37% discussed influencers of engagement, and 27% discussed the outcomes associated with engagement. The fewest number of articles identified pertained to organizational engagement in employee health and well-being. Based on these findings, the workgroup identified opportunities for additional scholarly research and "real world exploration" to better understand the role of the workplace in employee engagement in HWB, measurement capabilities to evaluate the impact of workplace policies/practices on employee HWB, and translational science activities to interpret the research into actionable steps for employers. Further, employers are encouraged to use applicable, validated measurement tools that best support measurement of employee engagement in business performance, employee engagement in HWB, and employer engagement in employee HWB.

INTRODUCTION

Engagement Study Committee Charge

In 2015, the HERO Engagement Study Committee, operating on behalf of HERO members, was charged with the long-term goal of understanding the correlative and causal interrelationships between:

- **Employee engagement in health and well-being** | understanding the science supporting *initial* and *sustained* engagement in and *ownership* of personal health status;

Environmental Scan Workgroup

The Environmental Scan Workgroup, a subset of the Engagement Study Committee, examined published articles and research studies for definitions and measurement of engagement in the three domains identified in the committee charter. The work included a literature search to identify published articles that met or did not meet established criteria. Once articles were identified and quantified, additional content was collected on the



- **Employee engagement in organizational success** | exploring the relationship between employee engagement in health and well-being, *individual* and team performance, and *engagement* (broadly defined) in organizational success; and
- **Organizational engagement in employee health and well-being** understanding the role that organizational success and outcomes play in employee engagement, specifically related to health and well-being.

definition and measures of the three types of engagement. Work began in Spring 2015, and concluded in Fall 2018. Articles were retrieved from a variety of databases, using multiple search strings (see Appendix A). A total of 222 articles were initially collected for review.

To further refine the workgroup's outcomes from the charter, members conducted reviews of every article to identify those providing definitions and measures of engagement. Results were coded in a spreadsheet. Quarterly reports were provided to the Engagement Study

Committee to update workgroup progress and receive feedback on next steps. The outcomes of this first phase of work are emphasized in this report.

In addition, an important component to the first phase was to identify whether the articles included information on potential influencers and outcomes of engagement. The purpose of this effort informs a second phase for the workgroup, which will focus on practical implications and considerations for the health promotion practitioner.

Results

The workgroup included articles that identified or partially identified definitions, measurement, influencers, and outcomes of engagement from published articles. Table 1 provides the quantitative results for those constructs. Across all the elements of interest to the committee, the evidence for influencers of engagement in organizational success was the most common, found in 83 (37%) of the articles reviewed. Across all categories, employee engagement in organizational success was the most commonly studied type of engagement the group reviewed, with a definition found in 27% of articles, measurement guidance in 32% of articles, influencers identified in 37% of articles, and subsequent outcomes found

in 27% of articles. Conversely, definition(s) of organizational engagement in employee HWB were least-commonly found, represented in only 5% of articles.

When considering these results, it's important to keep in mind that one category does not necessarily follow the other. For instance, while measuring engagement ideally would require a definition of engagement, it is not necessarily evident in the literature. Some articles did not include a definition of engagement but did measure the concept, and vice versa. The categories are not mutually exclusive, nor are they dependent on one another. In the following table, the workgroup determined that if an article addressed one of the four elements (definition, measure, influencer and/or outcome) of engagement, it was labeled "yes." If the article mentioned the word *engagement* but did not define it or measure it, or used a similar word, it was labeled "partial." Similar words/phrases to *engagement* were discussed and determined by the workgroup before the articles were reviewed. Examples included *employee dedication*, *employee commitment*, and *organizational citizenship behavior*.

Table 1. Definitions, Measurement, Influencers, and Outcomes of Engagement

	Employee Engagement in Health and Well-Being		Employee Engagement in Organizational Success		Organizational Engagement in Employee Health and Well-Being	
	Yes	Partial	Yes	Partial	Yes	Partial
Does the article provide a specific definition of "engagement"?	15 7%	11 5%	61 27%	29 13%	13 6%	15 7%
Does the article provide guidance on how to measure "engagement"?	25 11%	19 9%	71 32%	31 14%	24 11%	19 9%
Does the article help us understand what changes or influences "engagement"?	25 11%	20 9%	83 37%	42 19%	43 19%	23 10%
Does the article provide evidence on what outcomes are associated with "engagement"?	27 12%	21 9%	60 27%	46 21%	32 14%	28 13%

n=222

Definitions of Engagement

Throughout the process of reviewing the literature, several definitions for the three domains of engagement were found. Examples of these definitions are listed in Table 2. In more than one instance, the definition of *employee engagement in personal health and well-being* was associated with participation in one or more component(s) of a wellness program. Other definitions seemed to consider *engagement* and *participation* as similar, and perhaps overlapping, but different concepts. For example, one definition of engagement was a “personal commitment to optimize well-being.” This does not necessarily mean that one must participate in a workplace wellness initiative. Likewise, participation does not necessarily mean that the participant (e.g., employee) has a personal commitment to optimize their well-being, particularly if a financial incentive is offered as a reward for participation.

By contrast, common definitions of *employee engagement in organizational success* focused on a mental, emotional,

or psychological state of mind. Terms like “vigor” and “energetic” and “pleasure” were used to describe the state of engagement they sought to define. In many cases, those attributes are supposed to be directed toward a goal or desired outcome of some kind that presumably benefits both the employee and the organization.

Measurement of Engagement

Across the group of studies that were reviewed, there was no consensus on how to measure engagement in health and well-being. Two studies used participation rates (e.g., the number and percent of people who participated) as a proxy for engagement. Participation in one or more HWB program components was used in these cases, though these studies lacked consensus on how to measure and/or define participation. In addition, the SF-12, the Work Ability Index, Satisfaction with Life Scale, and Cantril Ladder were used in one study each to measure engagement in personal health and well-being.^{11,5,2,1}

Table 2. Common Definitions of Engagement

Employee Engagement in Health and Well-Being	Employee Engagement in Organizational Success	Organizational Engagement in Employee Health and Well-Being
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal commitment to optimize well-being. • Participation in wellness programming or “Program Engagement”; May include “wellness achievements” based on employer-determined wellness behavioral criteria. • Emphasizing their own decisive role in attaining goals and giving them the feeling that they can be effective in carrying out the necessary actions [healthy behaviors]. • Personal commitment to optimize well-being and subsequent action demonstrating that commitment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A positive, fulfilling, affective-motivational state of work-related well-being that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. • A cognitive, emotional, and behavioral state directed toward desired organizational outcomes. • To be energetic, fully immersed in work activities, and efficacious in work efforts. • Committed to the employer, satisfied with work and willing to give extra effort to achieve organizational goals • Active, work-related, positive psychological state, operationalized by the intensity and direction of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral energy. • High levels of pleasure and activation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychological relationship between the organization and employees, decreasing turnover in the organization.

By far the most common tool used to measure employee engagement in organizational success was the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale.⁶ This scale was found in 27 studies reviewed by the committee. Only one other scale, the Employee Engagement Scale⁷, was found in multiple studies. A full list of the measurement tools used and number of mentions can be found in Table 3.

Regarding organizational engagement in employee HWB, measurement was not common and varied widely. One scale, the Myer & Allen scale⁸, was found in two studies, while four other studies each used different measures of this construct.

addressed the concepts of employee engagement in their own HWB as well as organizational engagement in employee HWB, with available studies using an array of non-standardized measurement approaches.

One interesting pattern in the literature is the relative commonality of studies that examine what influences engagement and what outcomes are associated with engagement. Generally, scientific inquiry begins by observing a phenomenon, defining it within specific parameters, and then determining what factors influence it and are influenced by it. This literature search revealed a contrary pattern, such that no consensus definition was found, though it is possible that unpublished research exists in which engagement in

Discussion

Table 3. Engagement Measurement Tools (Number of Articles)

Employee Engagement in Health and Well-Being	Employee Engagement in Organizational Success	Organizational Engagement in Employee Health and Well-Being
SF-12 (1)	Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (27)	Meyer & Allen (2)
Work Ability Index (1)	Employee Engagement Scale (2)	Maslach Burnout Inventory (1)
Tracking incentives & points earned (1)	Organizational Commitment Scale (Meyer & Allen) (1)	Job Demands Resource (1)
HRA completion (1)	Positive and Negative Occupational States Inventory (1)	General surveys (1)
Life Satisfaction Scale (1)	VOEG (1)	Participation (1)
Cantril Ladder (1)	SF-12 (1)	
Participation rates (2)	Gallup Q12 (1)	
	Job Engagement Scale (1)	
	Work Ability Index (1)	

Number in parenthesis indicates number of articles using scale.

In the context of each type of engagement, different patterns emerged. The number of articles addressing engagement was greatest for employee engagement in organizational success. This appeared largely as a function of social science and organizational development researchers with similar research agendas. The bulk of these analyses addressed specific subpopulations, often from countries outside the US, and often used standardized measurement tools. In contrast, substantially fewer articles

its various forms is measured and defined. This presents an opportunity for employers and researchers alike to further learn and discover factors that influence individual engagement, and how to meaningfully address them in their organization.

Limitations

These findings should be applied within the context of some general limitations. First, there were inconsistencies between measurement of engagement by focus area. For example, definitions of job

engagement, work engagement, and employee engagement varied considerably, each with variation in focus, methods, and outcomes. In turn, this impacts measurement as well as the application of this measurement in actual practice. Future research should seek to include the definitions of employee engagement and how the construct can be consistently measured to support consistent application in the field. Second, there was a lack of compelling evidence for certain aspects of engagement, and the literature focused only in certain industries. For example, a wide range of engagement research can be found in the nursing field, and as a result, findings from these studies may not be generalizable across industries and contexts. Therefore, interpretation of this work should be considered within a reasonable set of boundaries. Notwithstanding, while several studies reported large national samples as well as a diverse population of participants, others were limited in scope and depth. Additionally, many companies do not publish internal research as a means to retain their competitive edge, however, partnering with researchers in ways that maintain anonymity and confidentiality would help provide additional evidence to the existing literature and further our understanding of employee engagement in practice.

Finally, when it comes to engagement, true collaborative partnerships between research and practice can be difficult to achieve due to different points of focus. For example, the goal of research is to produce new knowledge that can be generalized and disseminated across the industry, and at times requires access to proprietary or sensitive information about employee groups (i.e., demographic information or email addresses). These goals can be at odds with the need for leaders in practice to maintain a competitive edge without disseminating what that edge is, as well as the potential concern that any research might uncover unflattering information.

Employers are also understandably cautious about releasing employee information or data for research purposes, particularly when the data includes individual identifiers. Additionally, research necessitates an investment of time and energy and this includes time to publish or disseminate, from both the research and practice perspective, which often involves a level of financial support. Opportunities and further insight for the field require a deepening trust between research efforts and employers, at the same time educating employers about the benefits of scholarly practice so that leadership, employees and industry gain a better understanding of what drives engagement.

Practical Implications

Research Efforts

With respect to a better understanding of employee engagement in personal HWB, the relative lack of data and standardized measurement tools indicates that additional research is clearly needed. Both employers and the broader healthcare services industry have only recently recognized the importance of social determinants of health as well as the role of work as a health determinant. Previously, employers had focused on the scope of HWB program offerings, with less attention to program participation. Opportunities exist to more clearly understand barriers to employee engagement in employer-provided programs.

One way to foster greater employer involvement is to expand focus on the third engagement topic, employer engagement in employee HWB. As previously noted, this review yielded a surprisingly limited number of publications. A potential reason for this may be related to the search strategy employed by this scan. The term *organizational engagement* in employee health and well-being may have been too narrow to capture publications on related topics. Another possible explanation may be that this real-world research historically has not been a focus

of human resources representatives or business leaders. Yet emerging evidence is increasingly connecting the dots, linking investment in employee HWB to favorable business performance outcomes.^{9,4,3,10} Additional research insights can help employers to more strategically plan employee health benefits to foster greater employee engagement in their own well-being, resulting in improved business performance. Standardized measurement approaches can facilitate these evaluations, as can broader organizational awareness of the business value of workforce health.

Employers and Health Promotion Practitioners

With regard to employee engagement in their own HWB, the most common factors are outcomes associated with engagement in work. This is possibly due to employer interest in employee engagement for the sake of downstream outcomes of business interest. Those outcomes may include employee loyalty and enhanced productivity. Employers interested in these topics could improve upon the collective understanding of employee engagement by coalescing around a single definition and using validated measures or scales for this type of engagement.

For organizational engagement in employee HWB, the collective factor found in the literature relates to what influences or changes engagement. This may be associated with a general acknowledgement or belief that employee HWB has value to an employer, and a desire to become an organization that supports employee HWB. Employers with such a desire can enhance their understanding of the construct, thus improving the effectiveness of their efforts

by employing a scientific approach: identify potentially useful changes, implement them, measure the effects, and share the results. The health promotion expert can be a critical component to the effort, given the individual's background.

The workgroup suggests the following action steps based on the environmental scan:

1. Use applicable, validated measurement tools that best support measurement in employee engagement in business performance, employee engagement in HWB, and employer engagement in employee HWB.
2. Conduct additional scholarly research and “real world exploration” to better understand the role of the workplace in fostering/inhibiting employee engagement in HWB. Characterize barriers to engagement (personal priorities, program relevance, cultural/literacy considerations, program access).
3. Develop measurement capabilities to evaluate workplace policies/practices in context of their impact on employee HWB. Evaluate the extent of alignment between employer benefits programming and relevance to employee needs.
4. Consider development of a series of translational science activities to convert the results of this first research phase into tangible and actionable guidance for employers. Ideally, a step-by-step guide would likely yield the greatest perceived value.

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APPENDIX A: ARTICLE RETRIEVAL AND INCLUSION CRITERIA

Databases Searched: PubMed, PsychInfo, Ovid Medline, Cochrane, Google Scholar, Academic Search Premier, Business Search Premier

Search strings

• **Employee engagement with his/her health and well-being:**

- (Employee) AND (Health OR Well-being OR safety OR Culture OR Wellbeing OR wellness)
- (Employee) AND (Health) AND (engagement)

• **Employee engagement with employer:**

- (Employee dedication OR employee engagement OR employee loyalty OR organizational citizenship behavior) AND (corporate results OR profitability OR corporate performance OR performance OR returns)
- (Employee) AND (dedication OR engagement OR loyalty OR organizational citizenship behavior) AND (corporate) AND (results OR profitability OR performance OR returns)

- (Employee) AND (dedication OR engagement OR loyalty OR organizational citizenship behavior) AND (corporate) AND (results OR profitability OR performance OR returns)

• **Organization engagement with employees:**

- (Employer OR Organization) AND (Investment OR Resources) AND (Health OR Well-being OR safety OR Culture OR Wellbeing OR wellness OR concern OR outreach OR compassion) AND (Employee)
- (Organization AND investment) AND (employee) AND (health OR wellbeing OR wellness OR well-being)
- (Organization OR Corporation) AND (Investment OR Resources) AND (health OR wellness OR wellbeing)
- (Corporation) AND (Investment OR Resources) AND (health OR wellness OR wellbeing)

