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Contributing or Clocking In: A Study of Work Engagement

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Abstract. While organizations benefit from lower operating costs resulting from higher quality and quantity of work when employees are engaged in their work, (Risher, 2018). This study used the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) to uncover the work engagement levels of county extension agents at one University. Findings suggest Extension agents report Florida Extension agents reported possessing high levels of self-perceived work engagement. These findings were consistent with other previous research (Abbott, 2017; Weyrauch, 2010) which likewise found Extension agents often or very often report dedication.

INTRODUCTION

Employee turnover in Extension has many consequences, including a loss of institutional knowledge, suffered community relationships, decreased or inconsistent programming, additional strain on remaining staff, and increased costs to the organization to find and train replacement employees (Enslie, 2005; Strong & Harder, 2009). As of 2017, UF/IFAS Florida Extension agents had a turnover rate of 8.7%, more than double the national labor turnover rate at the time (Benge & Harder, 2017). A possible cause of Florida Extension agent turnover problem is low work engagement. Work engagement refers to an employee's psychological connection with his or her work (Bakker & Leiter, 2010). While work engagement is important for quality and quantity of work, reports suggest that only 44% of private sector employees and 38% of public sector employees are engaged in their work (Lavigna, 2017).

Most Americans spend approximately one-third of their waking hours at work (Saks, 2006). It is estimated that across all professions, more than 28% of workers will voluntarily leave their employment each year—but of this percentage, 77% could have been retained by their employers under different circumstances (Work Institute, 2018). Relevant literature has identified several factors which are linked to employee turnover. These include stress, burnout, gender, tenure, job satisfaction, low organizational commitment, and low work engagement (Bakker et al., 2008; Chong & Monroe, 2013). Since the 1990s, work engagement has become increasingly prominent in popular literature and research regarding employee (Schaufeli, 2013). Engaged employees produce

higher quality and quantity of work, and consequently, their organizations can incur lower operating costs (Risher, 2018). Fortunately, work engagement is malleable and can be intentionally increased (Bakker et al., 2008).

Very few studies have investigated work engagement among Extension agents (Abbott, 2017; Martin, 2013; Weyrauch et al., 2010). Russell et al.'s (2019) literature review of Extension burnout and work engagement research identified this notable gap in the research and suggested that more investigation of work engagement within Extension could help administrators design more supportive environments for professionals. This study focused on assessing the work engagement levels of UF/IFAS Extension agents. It is imperative that Florida Extension understand the self-perceived work engagement levels of employees.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Work engagement is divided into three dimensions: vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Vigor is characterized by effort and investment in one's work and persistency in the face of work-related difficulties (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). A vigorous employee may be characterized by physical and emotional strength, energy, and alertness (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Dedication corresponds to a sense of pride and meaning in one's work. Dedication is characterized by enthusiasm and inspiration. Employees who possess high dedication find significance in their work. Dedication functions as the opposite of cynicism in the burnout construct (Shirom, 2011).

Absorption refers to the ability to concentrate on their work in a positive manner (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Absorption is evidenced by high levels of concentration and being absorbed in one's work (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Those possessing high absorption may become deeply immersed in work, sometimes accompanied by a difficulty in detaching from it (Mauno et al., 2007).

Vigor and dedication are considered the core dimensions of engagement, while absorption is a consequence of engagement (Bakker et al., 2008). Employee engagement is positively related to positive outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behaviors, and is negatively related to detrimental outcomes such as turnover intentions (Saks, 2006) and burnout (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

There are three types of employees in the workplace: engaged employees, not engaged employees, and actively disengaged employees (Crabtree, 2013). Engaged employees are those who find passion in their work and feel connected to their organization. Disengaged employees put the time into their work but do not emotionally connect. Actively disengaged employees are those that are unhappy with their work and act out their unhappiness. These employees may be found actively undermining other employees and the organization (Crabtree, 2013).

While at first glimpse a high degree of employee engagement is positive, detrimental work behaviors can mask themselves as engagement (Rothbard & Patil, 2011). It is possible to confuse workaholism, a detrimental behavior, for high levels of work engagement (van Beek et al., 2011). Workaholics tend to be the most likely to suffer burnout, followed by engaged workaholics, with engaged employees being the least likely to suffer burnout (van Beek et al., 2011).

Weyhrauch et al. (2010) found Extension agents' program areas to be significantly related to their levels of dedication and absorption. Family and Consumer Science agents had higher dedication levels than both Agriculture and Natural Resource agents and 4-H agents. Statistically significant differences were also found for absorption, with Family and Consumer Science agents reporting greater absorption than 4-H agents. No significant differences were found for vigor. In another study of work engagement in Extension, Abbott (2017) found that County Extension Directors (CEDs) possess average above average to high engagement. CEDs reported average vigor, high dedication, and high absorption. The results of the study also showed that CEDs had no significant differences in engagement based on gender, age, or years of service.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to identify the self-perceived work engagement levels among Florida Extension agents.

Specific objectives were to describe agents' perceptions of (a) vigor, (b) dedication, and (c) absorption.

METHODS

Researchers used a descriptive research design to guide this study. The University of Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study in December 2019. The target for data collection was a census of currently employed Florida Extension Agents. At the time of survey, the population consisted of 351 Extension agents.

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) instrument, developed by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), was used to collect data. Since the introduction of the UWES, several studies have tested the validity of the relationship between burnout and workaholism, identified causes and consequences of engagement, and investigated how work engagement might impact an employee's health (Salanova et al., 2001; Schaufeli et al., 2002; Montgomery et al., 2003).

The lead researcher created an online version of the instrument managed through Qualtrics. The instrument included three sections. Section A asked participants to identify details of their employment. Participants identified Initiative teams with which they primarily worked (e.g., 4-H Youth Development, Agriculture and Natural Resources, etc.), and selected whether they were a county Extension agent, CED, or a regional or state specialized agent.

Section B consisted of items from the UWES instrument. The UWES instrument presents 17 statements relative to how employees might feel about their work (e.g., At my work I feel bursting with energy). These statements corresponded with one of the three facets of engagement (vigor, dedication, and absorption) (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Participants were asked to rate each statement on a 7-point frequency scale (1 = *Never*, 2 = *Almost never/A few times a year or less*, 3 = *Rarely/Once a month or less*, 4 = *Sometimes/A few times a month*, 5 = *Often/Once a week*, 6 = *Very Often/A few times a week*, and 7 = *Always/Every day*) (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Scores were interpreted as follows: 1.00 - 1.49 = *Never*, 1.50 - 2.49 = *Almost Never*, 2.5 - 3.49 = *Rarely*, 3.49 - 4.45 = *Sometimes*, 4.5 - 5.49 = *Often*, 5.50 - 6.49 = *Very Often*, and 6.50 - 7.00 = *Always*. Section C was one open-ended question which asked, "What do you like most about your job?" Section D addressed demographic questions of gender and age.

The UWES has undergone numerous tests for validity since its creation in 1999, and these tests support the assertion that work engagement is negatively associated with burnout (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). The scale has additionally been found to be highly internally consistent (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Cronbach's alpha values for each measure are equal to or exceed .70, with most measurements ranging between .80 and .90 (Salanova et al., 2001). Likewise, the instrument is relatively stable with coefficients for vigor, dedication,

Assessing Work Engagement of Extension Agents

and absorption at .30, .36, and .46 respectively (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). In this study using the UWES among Florida Extension agents, Cronbach's alpha values ranged from .91 to .92. According to George and Mallery (2003), a Cronbach's alpha value greater than .90 indicates excellent internal reliability.

The distribution of the survey was guided by Dillman et al.'s (2014) Tailored Design Method for web-based surveys. Data were collected in January 2020. A final response rate of 65% ($n = 229$) was achieved. However, when deleting incomplete and unusable responses, a final usable response rate of 62% ($n = 216$) was achieved.

The largest group of respondents reported to the 4-H youth Initiative team ($n = 71$, 33%), followed by the Agriculture and Natural Resources Initiative team ($n = 60$, 27.78%), and the Individual and Family Resources Initiative team ($n = 34$, 14.74%). Most respondents reported working as a county Extension agent ($n = 166$, 76.2%). The remaining 23.8% of the population was comprised of CEDs, regional specialized agents, and state specialized agents. Most respondents reported as female ($n = 141$, 64.7%) and tended to be 30 - 39 years ($n = 51$, 23.4%) or 40 - 49 years ($n = 53$, 24.3%) old. Those reporting any other age comprised 39.1% ($n = 85$) of the population. Most respondents were white (81.0%, $n = 171$). Asian was the second largest respondent group comprising 9.0% ($n = 19$) of the population. Those reporting Hispanic or Latino ethnicity comprised only 6.0% ($n = 13$) of the population.

Lindner et al. (2001) suggested that non-response issues be addressed any time less than an 85% response rate is achieved. Because this study achieved a 62% response rate, early and late respondents were compared using two-group independent t -tests. Early respondents were defined as the individuals who responded after the initial invitation and late respondents were defined as individuals who responded after the second reminder. Ary et al. (2006) and Miller and Smith (1983) stated that research has shown similarities usually exist between late respondents and non-respondents. The variables of interest used to compare early and late respondents were the three constructs of work engagement: (a) vigor, (b) dedication, and (c) absorption. No significant differences between early and late respondents were found for agents' levels of (a) vigor, $t(155) = .55, p > .05$; (b) dedication, $t(155) = 1.00, p > .05$; or (c) absorption, $t(155) = -.78, p > .05$. The lack of significant differences between early and late respondents suggests the results can be generalized to the target population (Lindner et al., 2001).

Researchers used descriptive statistics to describe the current levels of work engagement possessed by Florida Extension agents as determined by the UWES. They also calculated frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations for overall self-perceived employee engagement as

well as each of the three subscales of vigor, dedication, and absorption.

FINDINGS

The purpose of the study was to describe the current levels of work engagement reported by Florida Extension agents as determined by the UWES. As shown in Table 1, respondents reported being engaged by their work with a tendency to *very often* exhibit dedication ($M = 5.76, SD = .90$), and *often* exhibit absorption ($M = 5.43, SD = .87$) and vigor ($M = 5.41, SD = .90$).

Table 2 displays responses related to the construct of vigor. Responding agents tended to *often* experience vigor. Almost 70% of participants ($n = 145$) responded *very often* or *always* to the statement, "I can continue to working for very long periods of time." Similarly, 67.47% of participants ($n = 145$) responded *very often* or *always* to the statement, "At my work I always persevere, even when things don't go well."

Table 3 displays responses related to the construct of dedication. Respondents reported that they *very often* experience dedication. Over 80% of participants ($n = 73$) responded *very often* or *always* to the statement, "To me, my job is challenging," while 72.72% of participants ($n = 139$) responded *very often* or *always* to the statement, "To me, my job is challenging."

Table 4 displays responses related to the construct of absorption. Participants reported *often* experiencing absorption. Almost 70% ($n = 147$) of participants responded *often* or *very often* to the statement, "Time flies when I am working." Responding agents were least affirmative to the statement, "It is difficult to detach myself from my job," with only 49.05% ($n = 102$) responding *often* or *very often* to the statement, "It is difficult to detach myself from my work."

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Florida Extension agents reported possessing high levels of self-perceived overall work engagement. A composite of the average Florida Extension agent *often* experiences vigor, *very often* experiences dedication, and *often* experiences

Table 1. Levels of Work Engagement

Construct	M	SD
Dedication	5.76	.90
Absorption	5.41	.90
Vigor	5.43	.87

Note. Scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Almost Never, 3 = Rarely, 4 = Sometimes, 5 = Often, 6 = Very Often, 7 = Always.

Table 2. Respondents' Perceptions of Vigor

Question	Never	Almost Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Always
	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
At my work, I feel bursting with energy	2 .94	6 2.83	13 6.13	46 21.70	56 26.42	72 33.96	17 33.96
At my job, I feel strong and vigorous	1 .48	3 1.43	15 7.14	35 16.67	61 29.05	69 32.86	26 12.38
When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work	3 1.44	3 1.44	16 7.66	34 16.27	44 21.05	84 40.19	25 11.96
I can continue working for very long periods of time	1 .48	2 .96	6 2.87	29 9.57	35 16.75	92 44.02	53 25.36
At my job, I am very resilient, mentally	1 .48	2 .96	11 5.29	29 13.94	48 23.08	81 38.94	36 17.31
At my work, I always persevere, even when things do not go well	1 .48	2 .48	6 2.87	20 9.09	35 22.01	92 37.80	53 29.67

Table 3. Dedication Individual Responses

Question	Never	Almost Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Always
	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
I find the work I do full of purpose and meaning	1 .47	0 0.00	5 2.36	21 10.38	38 17.92	93 44.34	51 25.43
I am enthusiastic about my job	1 .47	3 1.42	3 1.89	24 11.32	35 16.51	93 44.34	50 24.06
My job inspires me	2 .96	3 1.44	4 1.92	34 16.35	51 24.52	71 34.13	43 20.67
I am proud of the work I do	2 .96	0 0.00	0 0.0	10 4.78	26 12.44	63 30.14	10 51.67
To me, my job is challenging	4 1.91	1 .48	2 .96	32 15.31	31 14.83	95 45.45	44 21.05

Table 4. Absorption Individual Responses

Question	Never	Almost Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Always
	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Time flies when I am working	1 .48	0 0.0	5 2.36	26 12.74	30 14.62	80 38.21	67 31.60
When I am working, I forget everything else around me	4 1.91	8 3.83	17 8.13	51 24.40	48 22.97	60 28.71	21 10.05
I feel happy when I am working intensely	2 .96	3 1.44	7 3.30	23 11.00	46 22.01	84 40.19	44 21.05
I am immersed in my work	1 .48	0 0.0	4 1.91	16 7.66	41 19.62	93 44.50	54 25.84
I get carried away when I am working	2 .96	1 .48	18 8.61	35 16.75	49 23.44	74 35.41	30 14.35
It is difficult to detach myself from my job	5 2.40	7 3.30	21 10.10	40 19.23	33 15.87	54 25.96	48 23.08

Assessing Work Engagement of Extension Agents

absorption. These findings were consistent with previous research (Abbott, 2017; Weyrauch, 2010) which likewise found that Extension agents often or very often report dedication. Florida Extension agents in this study demonstrated more dedication and absorption than Extension agents in other states (Abbott, 2017).

This study found that many Florida Extension agents reported experiencing absorption often or very often. Florida Extension agents were least affirmative to the statement, “It is difficult to detach myself from my job.” This statement is indicative of the concept of workaholism and thus this is a positive observation that agents may be experiencing healthy levels of absorption, but not over-absorption to the point of burnout. Despite the many studies showing that agents are susceptible to burnout (Ensle, 2005; Harder et al., 2015; Peters et al., 2008; Russell & Liggans, 2020) the population of agents in our study appear to be avoiding unhealthy engagement associated with workaholism. Although these findings are encouraging, Florida Extension Administration should train supervisors and employees in how to identify and prevent workaholism to proactively ensure that agents maintain healthy levels of engagement.

While the typical Florida Extension employee possesses a high level of self-perceived work engagement, in any organization there are those who are less engaged. Approximately 13–19% of participants indicated they experienced vigor, dedication, or absorption *sometimes* or less frequently. Those who suffer from low engagement are not a lost cause, as engagement is malleable and can be increased (Bakker et al., 2008). Work engagement is contagious (Bakker et al., 2008), and thus the engagement of others in an employee’s office, cohort, or team can impact their individual engagement. Team engagement can be increased when team members are collectively involved in collaborative work duties and emotionally connected to teammates (Guchait, 2016). Recognizing this, Extension supervisors should be on the lookout for those who are less engaged and intervene as necessary.

The survey for this study closed in February 2020. Beginning in March 2020, the United States was faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, which changed the way people lived and worked. Florida Extension employees found themselves suddenly working from home and learning to program virtually while dealing with other personal stressors unrelated to work stemming from the pandemic. Early studies have found that the pandemic has had a negative impact on work engagement (Jung et al., 2021; Song et al., 2020). It is recommended that future studies of Extension agent populations are conducted to uncover how this phenomenon may have impacted employee engagement. Those studies should consider age, gender, and familial roles as they relate to the pandemic’s impact on work engagement and should

expand the audience to include the work engagement of regional and state Extension professionals.

Extension leadership currently has a prime opportunity to examine and adjust how employees engage with their careers. Post-pandemic, employees may be re-examining how they interact with the workforce, making attention to engagement imperative among organizations. The higher quality and quantity of work produced by engaged Extension employees can benefit the citizens and communities we serve as they adjust to a “new normal” after this unprecedented event.

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