The Role of Staff Counseling in Promoting Work Engagement and Productivity: A Case of Kabarak University

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Abstract

Significant shifts in the global economy have accelerated the need for organizations to find innovative ways to address new technological, demographic and marketplace realities. These shifts have also forced institutions of higher learning in Kenya to reevaluate costs associated with talent, necessitating a need to maximize productivity with minimal work force. Employees of any institution are expected to be proactive, show initiative, take responsibility for their own professional development and to be committed to high quality performance standards. These expectations place high job demands on the staff and in so doing predispose them to burnout. However, there is no comprehensive staff counseling programs aimed at helping the human resource develop their positive psychological capital that would inoculate them from psychological indisposition and thus boost work engagement for higher output. This paper explores the role of counseling in promoting work engagement and increasing productivity at Kabarak University. The article theorizes that engagement, conceptualized as the investment of an individual's complete self into a role, is a significant factor in job wellness and correlates positively with counseling. Mixed methods research was used to conduct the study. Secondary data was augmented with the participant observation data collection procedure. Qualitative and quantitative data analysis was done using SPSS 22. It was established that at Kabarak University, work engagement is a human resource concern that can be strengthened by staff counseling programs. The job specification for the professional counselors within the university precluded their active involvement with psychological welfare of staff. HRD researchers seeking to conduct original research in universities, and practitioners interested in creating greater levels of engagement in their organizations will find the discussion and implications sections valuable.

Key words: staff counseling, productivity, engagement, attrition

Introduction

In recent decades, it has been postulated that the productivity of an organization depends on lower level of employees' burnout and stress at workplace (Al-Kahtani, 2013). The human resource capital can be the biggest asset as well as its biggest liability in any institution of higher learning (Das, Narendra, & Mishra, 2013). In the present era that is full of competition and demand for quality, the one thing that creates sustainable competitive advantage of our universities is the workforce, the people who are the institution. Investment in human resources development could be viewed as the only exclusive factor that makes an institution more successful than another. Das *et al*. (2013) argue that although better products, services, strategies, technologies or, perhaps, a better cost structure contribute to superior performance, all of them can be copied over time. When it comes to people, research has shown, time and again, that work engagement drives employees to significantly outperform work groups that are not engaged. Organizations need to attain competitive advantage over others, which is possible not simply through number of workforce but talented and engaged workforce. In the fight for competitive advantage in Kenya academic institutions, an engaged human resource are the ultimate goal.

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At Kabarak University as in other universities all over the world, strategic HR continues to be a major focus which has led to paradigm shift from partnership to integration where importance is being given to the talent management and engagement. Mobilizing a talented workforce is not a major challenge since many of the employees are concerned and equipped with knowledge and skill for their overall development. However, having knowledge, skill and attitude to work may not effectively drive the institution towards its vision of world class education in biblical perspective until the employees are adequately motivated and utilized through work engagement. Engagement here can be promoted through psychological health provision with specific reference to staff counseling. Engaged employees are fully involved in, and enthusiastic about their work, thus willing to invest the discretionary effort. It is the level of commitment and involvement an employee has towards their organization and its values. In short, it is a positive attitude and a strong emotional bond held by the employees towards the organization.

Low work engagement erodes self efficacy and leads to lack of meaningful existence in life and work. This could lead to burnout, which has been defined by existential researchers as a state of existential vacuum (Tomic & Tomic, 2011). When these factors combine, they could individually or collectively influence the intention to leave, which is positively correlated to staff turnover and negatively related to staff productivity. Tumwet (2012) views staff turnover as signifying the extent to which management's strategic thought on human attraction, retention and development is met. Kabarak university staff turnover spiked in 2009 when it peaked at 10.2%; as compared to 2008 (4.25), 2010 (6.5%) and 2011 (3.1%). It is evident that though turnover has been stabilizing since then, the rates are still high. There is need, therefore, to study the work and wellness levels in the university and establish whether these levels predict staff attrition in the university. It is for this reason that this paper looks into the role of staff counseling in enhancing productivity at Kabarak University.

Literature Review

A 2013 global study by GALLUP on the state of engagement in the work place indicates that only 13.6% of employees worldwide are engaged at work, 61.7% are disengaged and 23.3% actively disengaged. This implies that only one in eight workers are psychologically committed to their jobs and likely to be making positive contributions to their organizations. The regional engagement statistics indicate that 10% of employees in Africa are engaged and 33% actively disengaged in sub-Saharan Africa. It can therefore be inferred that the bulk of employees in Kenya, as is elsewhere, are not engaged; they lack motivation and are less likely to invest discretionary effort in organizational goals or outcomes. Those who are actively disengaged are unhappy and unproductive at work and liable to spread negativity to coworkers. If this low level of engagement among workers is not checked, it may continue to hinder gains in economic productivity and life quality in much of the world.

However, current trends in Occupational Psychology have resulted in positive innovations in Human Resource policies and practices the world over. Organizations now focus on the well being of employees as it is believed that healthy employees are motivated and energetic (Furnham, 2012). The idea of Work Engagement emerged to improve the performance of employees by focusing on their wellbeing (Truss, Alfes, Delbridge, Shantz, & Soane, 2013). The concept of Work Engagement was introduced by Schaufeli, Salanova, González-romá and Bakker (2002) who defined it as a constructive state of well being, which is characterized by high level of energy and commitment with work. According to Bakker and Evangelia (2008) the job and personal resources boost up employees' performance and engaged employees are more energetic and committed with their work. Work Engagement consists of Vigor (possessing high level of energy at work); Dedication (having strong belongingness with organization) and Absorption (a state of full concentration in work) (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007). Engaged workers feel positively about their situation, but beyond mere satisfaction they are motivated to expend energy on a task. Thus job engagement can be viewed as a positive, fulfilling, affective-motivational state of work-related well-being that can be defined in terms of high levels of energy and high levels of involvement in work (Leiter & Bakker, 2010; Bakker, Albrecht & Leiter, 2011).

Practitioners and academicians tend to agree that the consequences of employee engagement are positive (Saks 2006). Most organizations today realize that a 'satisfied' employee is not necessarily the 'best' employee in terms of loyalty and productivity (Warr & Inceoglu, 2011). It is only an 'engaged employee' who is intellectually and emotionally bound with the organization, feels passionately about its goals and is committed towards its values who can be termed thus (Warr, 2012). This way, an institution that cultivates an employee engagement culture creates a community at the workplace and not just a workforce. Engagement is important for human resource practitioners to cultivate given that disengagement or alienation is positively correlated to the problem of workers' lack of commitment and motivation (Al-Kahtani, 2013). Other Research using a different resource of engagement (involvement and enthusiasm) has linked it to such variables as employee turnover, customer satisfaction – loyalty, safety and to a lesser degree, productivity and profitability criteria (Harter, Schnidt & Hayes, 2002).

Employees who have a heightened connection to their organization, supervisor, and coworkers, and who make additional effort in their work are considered engaged (Ulrich, 2004). This statement reflects the recent focus by human resource professionals and management on employee engagement and its connection to productivity (Gibbons, 2007). Some human resource specialists associate low employee engagement with poor corporate performance and profitability. Rampersad (2008) inferred that lack of engagement is causing large and small organizations all over the world to incur excess costs, under-perform on critical tasks, and create widespread customer dissatisfaction.

Intrinsic rewards of work, such as personal satisfaction and strong self-efficacy, contribute to meaningful experience at work (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Making work meaningful is an important aspect of improving performance and employee engagement. Wheatley (2006) connected creativity, innovation, and engagement to what interests and brings meaning to people. Wheatley believed that by watching how people spend their time and listening to what they talk about, we can begin to understand what's important to them. Both Senge and Wheatley explored the connection between values, positive approaches, and the beliefs of leaders and their impact on employee commitment, loyalty, and performance (Senge, 2006; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004) and Wheatley (2006, 2007).

Research has identified several factors that promote engagement in the work place. These include the use of positive language in organizations which has been successfully mediated by HR support systems within organizations. This includes the use of positive terminology versus negative. Senge (2006) postulates that one of the catalysts of employee engagement and the resulting organizational performance is the organizational leader's positive beliefs, values, and attitude towards employees. An organization's capacity to manage employee engagement is closely related to its ability to achieve high performance levels and superior business results.

Theoretical Framework
The Job Demands – Resources Model of Work Engagement
The Job Demands – Resources Model attempts to synthesize the theoretical insights and empirical findings of several prior models, including the Demand-Control-Support model (DCS; Karasek & Theorell, 1990), the Effort–Reward Imbalance model (ERI; Siegrist, 1996), and the Conservation of Resources model (Hobfoll, 1989). Thus, in contrast to the DCS and ERI models which focus on specific work characteristics (e.g. control, support, or (un)fairness), the JD-R model offers a more flexible approach, embracing a wide variety of work-related factors that impact on well-being, thereby allowing the choice of factors to be tailored to particular work contexts (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The model provides a framework for studying the underlying processes through which various job resources and personal resources independently or combined predict work engagement, which in turn will have a positive impact on performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Since its formulation by Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli (2001), the model has demonstrated its usefulness as a parsimonious

yet comprehensive model for conceptualizing and investigating occupational wellbeing, burnout, and engagement (Boyd, Bakker, Pignata, Winefield, Gillespie & Stough, 2011).

Job demands are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological effort or skills, and are associated with physiological or psychological costs (Demerouti *et al.,* 2001). Job resources, on the other hand, are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that function to reduce job demands, enable achievement of work goals, and/or stimulate personal growth, learning, and development (Bakker, Demerouti, Taris *et al.,* 2003). Resources are therefore assumed to promote work-related motivation and engagement (the motivational hypothesis; Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2003), while excessive job demands lead to impaired health and exhaustion via energy depletion (the health impairment hypothesis; Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2003). The contrasting relationships between demands and health impairment, and between resources and engagement (termed "dual process") form the centerpiece of the JD-R model, and are well supported by empirical evidence across a range of occupations (Lewig, Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Dollard & Metzer, 2007; Broeck *et al.,* 2008).

Methods and Materials
Design
Mixed methods research was used to conduct the study. Secondary data was augmented with the participant observation data collection procedure. The study utilized *ex post facto* cross-sectional survey design. The variables under study were examined in retrospect and without prior manipulation. Data was collected using four psychometrically validated scales: existential Fulfillment Scale, Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, Maslach Burnout Inventory and Singh's (2000) three-item measure.

Instrumentation
Existential Fulfillment: Existential fulfillment, composed of the three dimensions of self acceptance, self-actualization and self-transcendence, was measured using the Existential Fulfillment Scale (EFS) (Loonstra *et al*., 2007). This scale consists of 15 items (five items for each dimension) measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (*'not at all'* relevant to me) to 4 (*'fully'* relevant to me). The maximum score per dimension is 20. The EFS is a standardized psychometric tool whose factorial structure has shown an acceptable fit (Loonstra *et al*., 2007). The internal consistency coefficients are 0.79, 0.76 and 0.82, for self acceptance, self actualization and self transcendence respectively.

Work Engagement: Work engagement was made operational by the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale - UWES (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). The 17-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale contains three dimensions - vigor, dedication, and absorption - measuring the degree to which people feel engaged, energized, and consumed by their work (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma & Bakker, 2002). The measure uses a 7-point Likert-type scale that ranges from *never* (0) to *always* (6). The vigor dimension consists of 6 items such as *"At my work, I feel bursting with energy"* (α = 0.85, M = 21.81, SD = 4.18), whereas the dedication dimension includes 5 items like *"My job inspires me"* (α = 0.89, M = 18.45, SD = 4.06). High scores on these scales indicate greater work engagement. The UWES has been found to be a reliable and valid self-report questionnaire (Schaufeli *et al*., 2006). Due to historically high correlations between the factors (ranging in a recent study from 0.83 to 0.97), researchers have recommended treating the scale as one-dimensional when the focus of the research is work engagement in general - stating that "the high correlations between the three factors indicate substantial overlap between them, and thus restrict their use as separate dimensions" (Seppala *et al.,* 2009).

Job Burnout: Burnout was measured with the Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Scale (MBI – GS; Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996). The MBI – GS (20 items) consists of 3 sub-scales: emotional exhaustion (8 items)*;* depersonalization (5 items); and self efficacy (7 items) based on a 7-point scale, from *"never"* to *"always"*. Similarly, the MBI reliability tests (Schaufeli 1990) were between 0.80

and 0.90 for emotional exhaustion and between 0.70 and 0.80 for cynicism and inefficacy. In this study, the data collection tool yielded an overall Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of ≥0.80 which was regarded as sufficient for research purposes according to Fraenkel and Wallen (2000).

Three-Item Measure
To assess intention to leave the study adopted Singh's (2000) three-item measure. The uni-dimensional scale measures the degree to which people have considered leaving their current job position using items like *"I often think of quitting."* It has performed reliably in past administrations with coefficients ranging from 0.87 to 0.94. Respondents scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). The measure produced a coefficient alpha of .89 ($M = 7.35$, $SD = 3.47$).

Results
A total of 34 respondents that were randomly sampled from the campuses of Kabarak University participated in the study. 59% of the respondents were male and 41% female. This correlates with the staff distribution by gender in the university as well as the findings of a study by Tumwet in 2012. Among the respondents, 68% were married, 29% single and 3% were separated. It was established that 82% were employed on permanent basis, 12% were on contract while 6% were temporary workers.

The study established that employees at Kabarak University were highly engaged (4.6 engagement index) and moderately burnt out (2.7 burnout index). Similarly, existential fulfillment was also found to be moderately high as evidenced by an index of 3.7. Organizational loyalty and job commitment was high as evidence by an index of 4.9. This was supported by the fact that 72.7% of respondents responded that given a choice, they would still work at Kabarak University. Intention to leave was low, with an index of 1.2 and 12.1% of respondents indicating that given a choice they would leave their employment.

Figure 1 indicates that 39.4% of respondents felt that there was need for the university HRD to engage a staff counselor. On the perception index of whether deploying a staff counselor would make a significant difference, a score of 3.27 predicted moderate expectations. However, a mean index of 4.24 indicated that staff felt there was a significant need to strengthen staff counseling programs at the university. This was supported by 61.7% of respondents who strongly proposed that counseling programs were necessary at the HR level. A 3.71 index showed a moderate perception of the value of staff counseling contribution to staff productivity. However, it should be noted that 41.1% of respondents felt staff counseling program would improve their productivity.
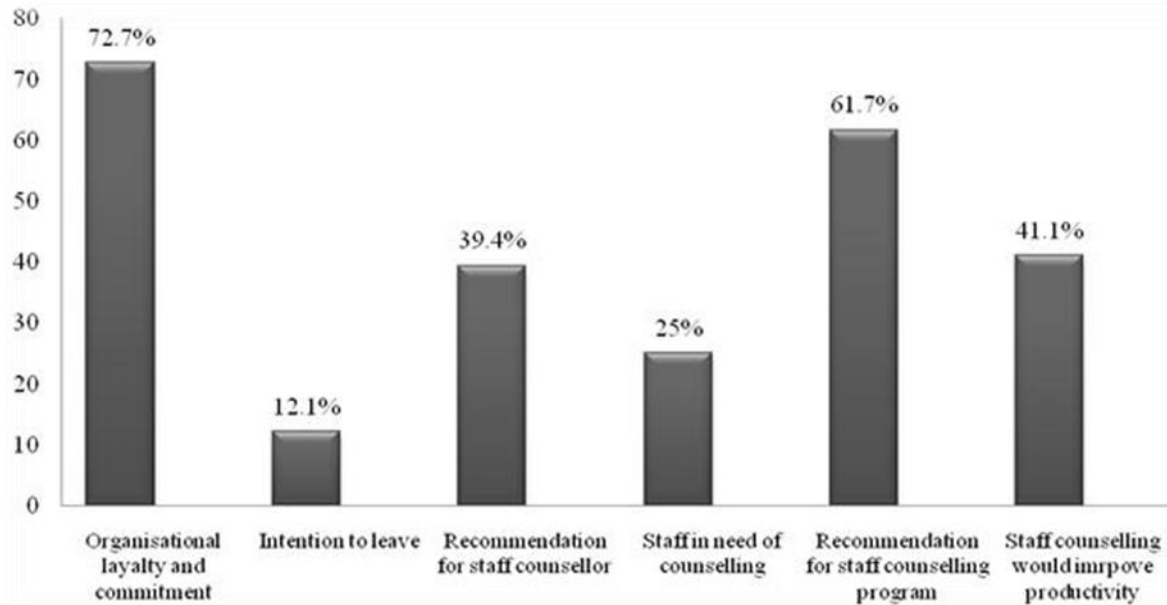
Figure 1: Percentages of respondent's scores on various issues

Age was not significantly correlated with respondents' levels of existential fulfillment. However, correlations between age and work engagement as well as job burnout were significant. There was a strong positive correlation between staff who proposed that there was need for staff counseling services and their view of the role of HR counseling in significantly improving staff productivity. There was also a strong significant positive correlation between staff who recommended the establishment of staff counseling program and those who felt they needed counseling themselves. Work engagement was significantly and negatively correlated to employee intention to leave (-0.61 on a 2-tailed significance of $p<0.01$).

Table 1
Correlations between Variables

		1	2	3	4	5	6
1	No intention to leave	-					
2	Intention to leave	-0.26	-				
3	Need for counseling	0.15	0.46*	-			
4	Psychological needs	0.11	-0.42	-0.01	-		
5	Necessity for staff counseling	0.12	0.31	0.48*	0.02	-	
6	Productivity	-0.01	0.36	0.52*	0.15	0.67*	-

There were no significant gender differences in burnout or work engagement among employees of Kabarak University. Job groups/position levels did not present any significant differences in overall work engagement or job burnout. However, a significant difference in psychological distress was found among position levels, with junior employees reporting significantly higher levels of psychological distress than senior employees (*t(68)* = 3.177, p<0.01).

Three complementary analyses were used to examine interrelationships among the different dimensions of burnout and engagement. Dimension-level correlations results indicated that all of the estimated true

correlations are moderate to strong in magnitude and associated 95% confidence intervals excluded zero, indicating statistical significance. The average true correlation between the burnout and engagement dimensions was –0.54, with inefficacy being the burnout dimension most strongly correlated with all three engagement dimensions (mean $\hat{\rho}$ = –0.8).

The study next used meta-analytic matrices of the estimated true correlations as input into a set of regression analyses to further determine the degree of commonality between the various burnout and engagement dimensions. Regressing the engagement-absorption dimension on all three burnout dimensions resulted in a coefficient of multiple correlations (R) of 0.69. Thus, the dimensions composing burnout accounted for 53% (i.e., 0.132) of the variance in individuals' absorption scores. Results likewise yielded a multiple R of 0.76 for dedication (71% variance accounted for by the burnout dimensions) and a multiple R of 0.82 for vigor (73% variance accounted for by the burnout dimensions). Similar patterns of association with the available correlates were also observed in the dimensions composing burnout and engagement. Overall, the average vector correlation was –0.9, ranging from –0.78 to as high as –0.97. Considering that engagement research has established that dedication and vigor as direct opposites of cynicism and exhaustion (see Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Cole, Walter, Bedeian, & O'Boyle, 2011), respectively, this study established that engagement dedication and burnout-cynicism exhibit a nearly identical pattern of association with the available correlates (mean vr = –0.96); the same holds true for the pattern of association with respect to the correlates and engagement-vigor and burnout-exhaustion (mean vr = –0.93). Finally, although absorption is believed to be a distinct aspect of engagement (see Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003), its average vector correlation across the three dimensions of burnout was substantive (mean vr = –0.82).

Discussion

A PricewaterhouseCoopers (2010) global study found that engaged employees put in 57% more effort on their work and are 87% less likely to resign compared to employees who consider themselves disengaged. It is known from other studies (e.g., Rich *et al.,* 2010; Shirom, 2010) that job engagement in higher learning has been significantly associated with certain job and institutional characteristics, so that theoretical models of staff psychological well-being and productivity certainly need to embrace organizational environmental variables. But those models will be incomplete and potentially misleading if they exclude the staff dispositional features such as psychological wellness.

Given that job engagement among university staff was associated with identifiable person-specific variables as well as with certain job characteristics, it was important to consider their possible mode of combination. In respect of other forms of well-being, research has pointed to (but rarely examined in detail) the combined impact of both institutional environmental and personality features (e.g., Warr, 2012). However, almost no research has addressed their joint operation in relation to job engagement, instead examining only one of the two sets of variables.

The first hypothesis posited that employee psychological well-being would relate to work engagement. Multiple regression analysis revealed that two independent variables accounted for 36% of the overall variance in work engagement, $F(3, 115) = 20.98$, $p < 0.001$. Employees organizational loyalty – intention to stay - ($\beta = .41$, $t = 5.38$, $p < .001$) and intention to leave ($\beta = −0.43$, $t = −5.70$, $p < 0.001$) emerged as significant predictors of work engagement. These findings suggest that the presence of organizational loyalty and the absence of intention to leave predict high work engagement.

The second hypothesis indicated that employee psychological well-being would relate to intention to leave as well as job burnout. Multiple regression analysis indicated that two independent variables accounted for 14% of the overall variance in job burnout, $F(3, 118) = 6.40$, $p < 0.001$. Need for a counselor ($\beta = 0.28$, $t = 3.29$, $p < 0.01$) and perception of value for staff counseling programs ($\beta = 0.21$, $t = 2.34$, $p < 0.05$) emerged as a significant predictors of intention to leave.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that employees of Kabarak University exhibited high work engagement and moderate job burnout. Existential fulfillment, which is related to the worker's spiritual disposition among employees were also found to be of moderate levels. Work engagement and job burnout were significantly influenced by the age of employees. The staff exhibited high organizational loyalty as well as high commitment to their jobs. The study established that there is low intention to leave among employees in the university. Work engagement was found to be a strong mitigating factor for intention to leave. A significant difference in psychological distress was found among position level, with junior employees reporting significantly higher levels of psychological distress than senior employees. Staff productivity was positively correlated to employee support services with special reference to staff counseling programs.

Recommendations

The recommendations that were proposed based on the outcome of the study include the need to establish and strengthen employee psychological support programs that include HR counseling. It was also recommended that the HR could establish an office that would facilitate employee psychological interventions which would serve to maintain the intention to leave among the staff at the low levels.

Suggestion for further Research

The study could be replicated with a larger sample to observe if the external validity still held. Being a faith-based institution, it was expected that existential fulfillment levels would be higher and job burnout lower than observed. Research should therefore be done to establish the cause for the disparateness in study observation among staff of Kabarak University. A study of staff perception of psychological support services should be conducted to establish viability of engaging a professional counselor dedicated to staff issues.

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