ABSTRACT

ANTECEDENTS AND CONTINGENCIES OF DISENGAGEMENT AT WORK: A CONSERVATION OF RESOURCES APPROACH

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Disengagement at work has been a cause of concern for the business world for a while now. Disengaged employees are likely to be withdrawn psychologically despite physical presence. Practitioners hold that disengagement afflicts a vast majority of the workforce. The urgency and the extent of practitioner discourse on the subject however do not find resonance in the academic research. If disengagement at work has to be arrested, it is important to have a comprehensive understanding of the conditions that trigger disengagement in employees. In this background, this thesis had two objectives:

1. To organize and integrate the extant approaches to disengagement at work.
2. To empirically test the antecedents and contingencies of disengagement at work.

Towards the fulfillment of the first objective, I reviewed the relevant literature to uncover the two approaches to disengagement at work. While Kahn's (1990) grounded approach suggests that the lack of psychological conditions of meaningfulness, availability and safety leads to disengagement, the job demands-resources (JD-R) approach of Demerouti et al. (2001) contends that lack of job resources triggers disengagement at work. Synthesizing the two approaches, I proposed an interplay of resources before the incidence of disengagement at work. Specifically, I argued that lack of job resources is likely to lead to disengagement. Further, I also proposed a moderating role of personal and social resources on the relationship between job resources and disengagement at work. In doing so, I used the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) to integrate the extant approaches to disengagement at work.

Towards fulfilling the second objective, data were collected from early career IT employees (N = 321). Hierarchical regression results suggest that except for perceived coworker support, all job resources (or lack thereof) were significantly associated with disengagement at work. Mixed results were found for the personal resource of resilience. While it moderated the relationship between perceived organizational support and disengagement along expected lines, its moderating influence on the association between job complexity and disengagement was found to be opposite to the hypothesized direction. Finally, emotional sustenance from family/ friends (social resource) did not moderate the influence of job resources on disengagement.

My work has significant implications for research. First, by employing conservation of resources (COR, Hobfoll, 1989) lens, causes and contingencies of disengagement at work were delineated. In doing so, this thesis has consolidated the extant approaches that have coexisted but scarcely interacted, for over a decade and a half. It is hoped that the research model presented herein advances research on the phenomenon, leading in turn to suitable evidence-based interventions. Second, the negligible interplay of resources, as evidenced by the empirical results, indicates that engagement and disengagement are likely to be distinct from each other and not the two sides of the same coin. Finally, given the availability of only one measure, I have also called for additional measures of disengagement at work to facilitate triangulation.

This thesis has specific implications for practice as well. First, one of the motivations for this research were the practitioner concerns coupled with lack of specificity in describing the phenomenon of disengagement. This thesis parsimoniously delineates the causes and contingencies of disengagement which is likely to be useful, providing a much-needed structure to practitioner discourse on disengagement. Second, empirical setting of the study is also significant. This research responds to a specific call for the determination of disengagement levels in the Indian IT sector (see Bhatnagar, 2007). Further, to the best of my knowledge, this is the first study on disengagement in the Indian IT sector. Finally, in the light of findings, it is important for the practicing managers to note that job resources are inalienable. Of the social support resources, support from organization and organizational elites is of paramount importance for early career professionals. Further, managers cannot necessarily bank upon personal and social resources of employees to mitigate the influence of lack of job resources. Additionally, they need to be careful with highly resilient employees. Specifically, resilient individuals should be assigned to jobs that are sufficiently complex for their ability.

This thesis is not without its limitations. First, with respect to the sample, I collected data only from professionals working in the Indian IT industry. Further, the study sample composed of about 20% women, which is less than the industry average. Second, the design of this study was a cross-sectional survey wherein respondents answered to both predictor and outcome variables simultaneously. Though recommended procedural precautions were taken, I refrain from claiming causality. Finally, most of the measures employed for the study exhibit unsatisfactory validity and reliability indices. Similar conclusions in future studies employing varying measures would grant credence to my findings.

The proposed model is only a beginning in so far as it integrates the extant literature on disengagement. For example, the proposed model highlights the loss of supervisor support as one of the causes of disengagement, but it does not quite capture dysfunctionality or abuse of leadership. Thus, there is scope for new frameworks explaining the incidence of disengagement at work. Second, the model proposed in this research suggests that in the wake of the loss of job resources, individuals are likely to employ personal and social resources at disposal to substitute for such a loss. However, this should not prevent employees from seeking substitutes for the loss of a job resource from another job resource. Future research may, therefore, like to uncover as to how the availability of one or more job resources will moderate the effect of loss of another on disengagement. The model proposed herein should be tested in more representative samples across occupational groups. Further, the researchers should examine additional personal and social resources for the likely buffering effect.

References

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