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Nonprofit Employee Work Engagement: A Ripple Effect Impacting Communities

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Employee Work Engagement in Nonprofit Organizations

Employee work engagement is a concern within organizations, especially in the current job market where companies are struggling to attract and retain workers. People are sensitive to cues in their environment, and that means that their work environment, where people spend most of their time, will affect their attitudes, actions, and behavior. In recent years, a lot of attention has been brought to research on work engagement in the for-profit sector, and unsurprisingly, there has not been much research done in the nonprofit sector. The nonprofit sector is experiencing a growth in professionalization, and as such it is important to pay attention to keeping employees engaged at work to be able to compete in a competitive job market. A lot of people assume that it is competitive pay that keeps employees loyal to an organization, and funding in the nonprofit sector is in and of itself an issue. Money is not the cure-all solution to retaining employees, there are other ways to keep employees happy, and work engagement is one of them.

As most nonprofit employees do direct service work, keeping employees engaged should be a primary focus since the sector is known for burnout. Not only is work engagement essential for employee retention, but due to the intensity of the work to meet the mission of the organization, keeping employees engaged is better for the overall health of the organization. If employees are engaged in their work, then they will be actively engaging the community, which is another primary focus of nonprofits. Likewise, if the employees are not engaged in their work, then they are most likely not putting forth effort at work and not engaging the community, which could be detrimental to the organization and its mission. Therefore, this case study researched to
what extent employee work engagement is related to an organization’s community engagement within a nonprofit.

**Literature Review**

**Work Engagement**

One concern with studying work engagement is how to define it. There are many definitions of work engagement across academia. For example, one definition of engagement is when employees, “know what is expected of them, have what they need to do their work, have opportunities to feel an impact and fulfillment in their work, perceive that they are part of something significant with coworkers whom they trust, and have chances to improve and develop.” (Harter et al., 2002, p. 269). Another more commonly known definition of work engagement is, “involvement, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, absorption, focused effort, and energy.” (Bakker & Leiter, 2010, p. 11). For my paper, I am choosing to define work engagement as referring to “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption.” (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74). I believe that this definition is the best to move forward with because it is not as broad as Harter’s definition and a little more precise and refined than Bakker and Leiter’s definition.

Another concern with studying work engagement is how to measure it. Work engagement can be measured by the Utrecht Work Engagement scale, a 17-item scale with three subscales measuring vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003). The UWES has a Cronbach's Alpha of .8-.9, meaning it is a good measure of internal consistency and is a reliable scale.
Work engagement is important to individuals as well as organizations because the employee and the business have a relationship that depends on each other. For example, the relationship at the business-unit level between employee satisfaction—engagement and the business-unit outcomes of customer satisfaction, productivity, profit, employee turnover, and accidents has been examined and generalizable relationships large enough to have substantial practical value were found (Harter et al., 2002). This implies that changes in management practices that increase employee satisfaction may increase business-unit outcomes, like profit. If employee work engagement can impact business unit-outcomes in the for-profit sector, then it can be hypothesized that work engagement can impact other organizational outcomes, like community engagement in nonprofits.

**Community Engagement**

Community engagement is another term that has broad definitions in academia. For the purpose of this study, community engagement will be defined as, “engagement processes and practices in which a wide range of people work together to achieve a shared goal guided by a commitment to a common set of values, principles and criteria.” (Aslin & Brown, 2004, p. 3). This means efforts should be made by an organization to be as inclusive as possible and engage the community to achieve its mission. Are stakeholders being informed, consulted, and participating within a nonprofit?

It may be beneficial to view community engagement through a partnership lens. Partnerships are advantageous because the nature and scale of public service needs and challenges are impossible to address alone, their complexity requires multiple actors. According to an article that refines the partnership concept, the normative perspective asserts that partnerships, “should seek to maximize equity and inclusiveness. In a democratic fashion they
should mobilize, legitimate and engage all parties potentially affected by or potentially contributing to a particular public service delivery effort” (Brinkerhoff, 2002, p. 20). This position argues that partnership is the most ethically appropriate approach to service delivery, encompassing a view of participation and empowerment, through principles of mutual influence, equality and reciprocal accountability. This can be accomplished through, “frequent interaction, communication and decision making, both formal and ad hoc, throughout the stages of programme design, implementation and evaluation” (Brinkerhoff, 2002, p. 23).

If an individual organization has its own mission, values and identified constituencies to which it is accountable and responsive, and nonprofits define the value they produce in terms of their mission, then nonprofits need to be engaging the community it is serving, as that is the purpose of their organization. These stakeholders in the community may be beneficiaries, individual contributors, staff or other supporting organizations. In the partnership context, important stakeholders who possess power, legitimacy, and urgency are often partner organizations who control important resources or may provide access to important opportunities (Brinkerhoff, 2002). Therefore, community engagement will be operationalized as organization transparency, client opinions being considered for decisions regarding the organization, the public is informed of available services and resources, and if the organization has partnerships with other organizations in the community.

**Previous Research**

There has been little research with work engagement and community engagement specifically regarding nonprofits. A recently published study on antecedents, consequences, and context of employee engagement in nonprofits presents one of the first findings that result from empirically validated measures of engagement in nonprofits (Akingbola & van den Berg, 2016).
They examined how engagement mediates employee and organizational consequences and their research suggests that the consequences of engagement are behavioral outcomes such as commitment and organizational citizenship behavior, which nonprofits consider critical to their organization.

Since nonprofits are known to rely heavily on social media to engage the public, one study analyzed whether Facebook impacted community engagement (Cho et al., 2014). Nonprofits do not tend to capitalize on social media’s interactive nature, so although they have the best intentions, they are not engaging the public. They tend to be one-way communication for sharing information, rather than two-way symmetrical communication intended for building and maintaining relationships with the community. The study found that communities demonstrate high levels of engagement with organizational messages when two-way symmetrical communication is used, compared to public information or two-way asymmetrical models. Although, it should be noted that in order to build dialogic communication, information dissemination can be the first step to gain the public’s attention.

Previous nonprofit research has primarily focused on employee work engagement or community engagement. This study bridges the gap in research by looking to what extent employee work engagement is related to a nonprofit’s community engagement. It has already been supported that a consequence of engagement in nonprofits is organizational citizenship behavior, so this research went a step further and studied whether a consequence of engagement is community engagement. This study used the UWES to measure work engagement, and in addition to this, community engagement was measured using interviews and by analyzing the organization’s website and Facebook.

Method
Case Description

For the purpose of this case study, the organization Family Counseling Services of Northern Illinois located in Rockford, Illinois was used. This organization was founded in 1877 and was originally dedicated to helping people who couldn’t afford basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. Today FCS is a mental health nonprofit, and on their website their mission statement reads, “Family Counseling Services of Northern Illinois strengthens our communities by providing individuals and families with quality counseling and education that is affordable, accessible, and confidential” (FCS). Since mental health counseling is known to cost a lot, they strive to provide counseling for all, including those with low income or no insurance. They accept Medicaid, or they charge patients on a sliding fee scale based on their income to be affordable. They currently employ 6 administrative staff, and 17 clinicians. A preexisting relationship was established with this organization through an internship in the Fall of 2022.

Materials

Utrecht Work Engagement Scale

The survey includes items regarding attitudes and behaviors at work. There is a total of 17 items with three subscales measuring vigor (6), dedication (5), and absorption (6). (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003). The participants could respond on a 0-6 scale ranging from never to always, and it should take about 3 minutes to complete.

Qualitative Interview Questions

The interview questions were a qualitative way to measure community engagement by collecting primary data. There were five questions asked and it took about 15 minutes to complete.
To further measure community engagement, secondary data was taken by analyzing the organization’s website and Facebook page. What to look for on the website would be information on available resources, and what to look for on the Facebook page would be if the organization’s posts aimed for feedback and input.

Procedures

This organization was chosen for the case study due to an established preexisting relationship. To initiate the research process, contact was made directly with the executive director to ask for permission to gain access to the organization’s employees. An online survey tool was used to create the work engagement survey and was dispersed to the employees through a link. After the survey had been dispersed to employees, interviews were held at the organization’s location. The clinicians do direct client services by providing counseling and do not deal with organizational outreach and engagement, so the focus of the community engagement interviews were the administrative staff. Since there are 6 administrative staff, the goal was to interview four staff (executive director, receptionist, business manager, and client service supervisor). In the end three staff were interviewed due to the client service supervisor being out of the office. Small nonprofits tend to have a lot of things to get done and with little staff to do it, so the interviews were short, precise and straight to the point. Finally, after all primary data had been collected, secondary data was analyzed by looking at the organization’s website and Facebook page.

Results

Utrecht Work Engagement Scale
The UWES survey link was sent via work email directly from the Client Services Supervisor to all 23 employees. There were 12 total final responses for a response rate of about 52.2%. The overall results for the UWES had a mean score of 4.75, which on a 0-6 scale is a good indication of work engagement. On average, employees agreed to statements that indicated feelings of vigor, dedication, and absorption in their work a few times a week. The first question, “At my work, I feel that I am bursting with energy,” 66.6% of respondents agreed with this statement a few times a month, 25% of respondents agreed with this statement a few times a week, and 8.3% of respondents agreed with this statement every day. The second question, “I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose,” 8.3% of respondents agreed with this statement once a month or less, 8.3% agreed with this statement a few times a month, 16.6% percent agreed with this statement once a week, 8.3% agreed with this statement a few times a week, and 58.3% agreed with this statement every day. The third question, “Time flies when I’m working,” 8.3% agreed with this statement a few times a year or less, 16.6% agreed with this statement a few times a month, 8.3% agreed with this statement once a week, 8.3% agreed with this statement a few times a week, and 58.3% agreed with this statement every day. The fourth question, “At my job, I feel strong and vigorous,” 8.3% agreed with this statement once a month or less, 8.3% agreed with this statement a few times a month, 25% agreed with this statement once a week, 41.6% agreed with this statement a few times a week, and 16.6% agreed with this statement every day. The fifth question, “I am enthusiastic about my job,” 8.3% agreed with this statement once a month or less, 16.6% agreed with this statement a few times a month, 25% agreed with this statement once a week, 50% agreed with this statement a few times a week, and 50% agreed with this statement every day. The sixth question, “When I am working, I forget everything else around me,” 16.6% of respondents never agreed with this statement, 8.3% of respondents agree with this statement a few times a year or less,
8.3% agreed with this statement once a month or less, 16.6% agreed with this statement a few times a month, 16.6% agreed with this statement a few times a week, and 33.3% agreed with this statement every day. The seventh question, “My job inspires me,” 16.6% of respondents agreed with this statement a few times a month, 50% agreed with this statement a few times a week, and 33.3% agreed with this statement every day. The eighth question, “When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work,” 16.6% of respondents never agreed with this statement, 16.6% of respondents agreed with this statement a few times a month, 8.3% of respondents agreed with this statement once a week, 25% agreed a few times a week, and 33.3% agreed every day. The ninth question, “I feel happy when I am working intensely,” 16.6% agreed with this statement a few times a month, 8.3% agreed with this statement once a week, 33.3% agreed with this statement a few times a week, and 41.6% agreed with this statement every day. The tenth question, “I am proud of the work that I do,” 16.6% agreed with this statement a few times a month, 8.3% agreed with this statement once a week, 8.3% agreed with this statement a few times a week, and 66.6% agreed with this statement every day. The eleventh question, “I am immersed in my work,” 16.6% of respondents agreed with this statement once a week, 25% agreed with this statement a few times a week, and 58.3% agreed with this statement every day. The twelfth question, “I can continue working for very long periods at a time,” 16.6% of respondents agreed with this statement once a week, 50% agreed with this statement a few times a week, and 33.3% agreed with this statement every day. The thirteenth question, “To me, my job is challenging,” 16.6% of respondents agreed with this statement once a month or less, 8.3% of respondents agreed with this statement once a week, 8.3% agreed with this statement a few times a week, and 66.6% agreed with this statement every day. The fourteenth question, “I get carried away when I’m working,” 25% of respondents agreed with this statement a few times a
month, 16.6% agreed with this statement once a week, 16.6% agreed with this statement a few times a week, and 41.6% agreed with this statement every day. The fifteenth question, “At my job, I am very resilient, mentally,” 16.6% of respondents agreed with this statement once a week, 41.6% agreed with this statement a few times a week, and 41.6% agreed with this statement every day. The sixteenth question, “It is difficult to detach myself from my job,” 8.3% of respondents never agreed with this statement, 8.3% agreed with this statement a few times a year or less, 25% agreed with this statement a few times a month, 8.3% agreed with this statement once a week, 16.6% agreed with this statement a few times a week, and 33.3% agreed with this statement every day. The seventeenth question, “At my work I always persevere, even when things do not go well,” 16.6% of respondents agreed with this statement a few times a month, 8.3% agreed with this statement once a week, 16.6% agreed with this statement a few times a week, and 58.3% agreed with this statement every day.

Qualitative Interview

There were five questions asked for the qualitative interviews. The first question was, “How do you define community engagement?” The responses to this question ranged from, “Being visible in the community that you work in and communicating with constituency,” to “Knowing what the people in the community need and providing and fulfilling their requests. This means not coming up with your own ideas about what they need but listening to people and responding to them.” The second question was, “Do you believe that the work that you personally do impacts the organization?” All responses were yes. The third question was, “Do you have any organizational partnerships?” All responses were yes, and they could list all of their partners in the community. The fourth question was, “Do you believe that the constituents you serve are
aware of available resources?” All responses were yes, and they mentioned the resource pamphlets they give to clients during visits

**Figure 1**

*Resource Pamphlets*

*Note. This figure demonstrates resource pamphlets in the waiting room of the office. Not only information on community resources, but also relevant resources like how to apply for free internet services. There are also QR codes to scan to take community surveys for feedback. These resources are printed in both English and Spanish.*

The final question was, “Does this organization take into account client voice and opinion when making decisions?” All responses were yes, and they all mentioned the client satisfaction surveys that are given to every client after their first three sessions, and then given to them every ninety days (Figure 2). These surveys ask if they feel that they are given the service they need, if they are making progress towards their goals, is their functioning improving due to services, what they think of their general interaction with staff, and accessibility.

**Figure 2**
Satisfaction Surveys

Website and Facebook

The results of analyzing the website found adequate and easily accessible information on available resources (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Website Resource Information
The results of analyzing the organization’s Facebook page found proof of posts that aimed for two-way communication and feedback (Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Facebook Survey*

Your opinion matters! Please complete our Public Participation Survey to help identify mental health service gaps and needs in Winnebago County, Illinois. Scan the QR code or click the link provided. Share and encourage your friends and family to take it too!

bit.ly/3Gw25Hh

**Discussion**

**Implications**
The conclusion that can be drawn from this case study research is that there is a strong indication that work engagement in nonprofit employees correlates with that organization’s community engagement. The results of the UWES found a good indication of work engagement among the employees. Community engagement was operationalized as organization transparency, client opinions being considered for decisions regarding the organization, the public is informed of available services and resources, and if the organization has partnerships with other organizations in the community. The results of the interviews and by analyzing the website and social media page found a good indication of community engagement done by the organization.

**Recommendations**

One limitation of this research is the case study aspect. If this was to be done again, it would be ideal to repeat this study with a larger sample size of nonprofits to draw from. This case study was only done on a small mental health nonprofit, so it should be repeated with medium and larger nonprofits across different subsectors to make the sample as diverse as possible. Another constraint would be time. The reason this was a small case study was largely due to time constraint of one semester. If this study were to be done again with more time, the outcome would capture the best picture. One last constraint would have to be the current literature in nonprofit research. Scholars need to come to and agree on a definition of community engagement so that we can develop a reliable and valid qualitative measure of community engagement to better analyze the construct.

**References**


