



# A Study on the Impact of Proficiency on Work Engagement in Public Sector

Normohammad Yaghoubi<sup>1</sup>, MohammadOsman Hosseinbor<sup>2</sup>, Mohsen Yaghoubi\*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Associate Prof., Faculty of management and Economics, University of Sistan and Baluchestan, Zahedan, Iran

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Prof., Faculty of Literature and Humanities, University of Sistan and Baluchestan, Zahedan, Iran

<sup>3</sup>M.A. student in Public Administration-Human Resource management, Faculty of Management and Economics, University of Sistan and Baluchestan, Zahedan, Iran

\*Corresponding author's E-mail: Mohsen.Yaeghoubi@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

## Original Article:

Work engagement has received a great body of research in recent years. Consequently, identifying the antecedents and outcomes of this phenomenon is regarded as important research topics. This paper investigates the association of work engagement and proficiency. Proficiency has been studied as an antecedent of work engagement in this article. The suggested relation was examined in a sample of 395 employees in four public organizations in Iran. The finding indicates that there is a positive and significant relationship between work engagement and proficiency. Moreover, only one of the subscales of proficiency (organization member proficiency) could predict the variance of work engagement.

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## 1. Introduction

This study is to examine the relationship between work engagement and proficiency and introduce proficiency as a significant driver of work engagement. Work engagement is a positive state of mind on-the-job that is not a temporary state and do not focuses on any specific individual, or behavior and is presented by three subscales: vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). Work engagement has a direct impact on the profits and losses of organizations (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010). Hence, it has received a sharp interest in the literature lately and this study is to determine work engagement and suggest a potential driver of this phenomenon which is an important issue (Rothmann & Rothmann Jr, 2010). One possible driver is proficiency that consist of individual task proficiency, team member proficiency, and organization member proficiency that is related to drivers of work engagement such as social support from colleagues and supervisors and skill variety (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Therefore, this paper determines the influence of proficiency on work engagement .

Recently, many scholars focused on the factors contributing to the conceptualization and improvement of work engagement concept. The positive relation of work engagement and work performance is one possible reason for such interest (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008) . Simpson (2009) reported the impact of organization factors on work engagement by reviewing 32 studies in the realm of this phenomenon. Proficiency that two of three its subscales are team member proficiency and organization member proficiency may have the assumed influences as well. Proficiency is one of the subscale of work performance that developed by Griffin, Neal, and Parker (2007). To our knowledge, there is no other study in the literature that investigates the association of work engagement with proficiency and introduces proficiency as a driver of work engagement .

In sum, this paper adds to the existent literature initially by introducing proficiency as a significant antecedent of work engagement and secondly determines the level of work engagement and proficiency in public sectors in Iran.

## 2. Literature review

The concept of work engagement was conceptualized firstly by (Kahn, 1990, p. 694)as follows: "harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances". Subsequently, Schaufeli et al. (2002, p. 74) defined work engagement as follows: "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Vigor is characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working. Dedication is characterized by a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Absorption is characterized by being fully concentrated and

deeply engrossed in one's work". Later, Macey and Schneider (2008, p. 4) explanation of engagement was "... a desirable condition [that] has an organizational purpose, and connotes involvement, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, focused effort, and energy."

Up to now, engagement has mostly been considered within the framework of the JD-R Model. The JD-R Model explains that work engagement could improve by stimulating jobs with much job resources. As a result, positive organizational outcome (e.g. employee's commitment, job performance, lower turnover) would be achievable (Schaufeli, 2012). In this regard, identifying the antecedents of work engagement could help to better understand and predict work engagement. Personal resources and job resources are assumed to affect work engagement as antecedents (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Optimism, self-efficiency, and self-esteem are examples of personal resources. Supervisor's feedbacks, autonomy, and skill variety of employees are examples of job resources that could play as motivators for individuals to put more efforts to work and be more engaged. Job resources and personal resources are positively related to work engagement (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011). Simpson (2009) conducted a literature review and investigated 32 engagement-based articles among which 20 studies examined the antecedents and/or outcomes of work engagement. "Key findings suggest organizational factors versus individual contributors significantly impact engagement at work". Moreover, a number of antecedents and outcomes of work engagement have been recognized so far (Schaufeli, 2012).

Work engagement in domestic research, Iran, has not been seriously studied. Exploring the previous studies, only a few papers have studied this phenomenon and its drivers. Keshtkaran, Kavousi, Gholipour, Sohrabzadeh, and Sharafi (2012) were the first who investigated the effective factors on work engagement in nurses of public educational hospitals. In another study, Taghipour and Dezfali (2013) tested a model of antecedents of work engagement. They found that job satisfaction, psychological empowerment, moral climate and work motivation had statistically significant relationship with work engagement. Our study is one of the few studies in Iran that examined a significant driver of work engagement.

This paper suggests proficiency as a job resource that helps employees be more engaged and efficient at work. Our main hypothesis is suggested as follows: Proficiency is positively related to work engagement. Therefore, the research question of this paper is: "what is the impact of proficiency on work engagement?"

### 3. Methodology

This study was a cross-sectional-descriptive study. It examined the relationship between work engagement and proficiency. The questionnaire was translated to Persian and face validity was checked before distribution. Then it was distributed in four public organization in Iran and 395 employees responded to the questionnaire with the respond rate of 88.5%. Pearson correlation was used to explore the strength of the relationship between work engagement and proficiency. Moreover, multiple regression was used to explore the predictive ability of proficiency on work engagement.

#### 3.1 Measures

Two variables that used in this study are work engagement and proficiency that are operationalized as below:

##### 3.1.1 Work engagement

The short version (9-items) of Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). Three dimension of work engagement include 3 items for vigor ( $\alpha = .82$ ), 3 items for dedication ( $\alpha = .87$ ), and 3 items for absorption ( $\alpha = .74$ ). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for 9-items was (.92). Work engagement was on a 7-point Likert Scale. "At my job, I feel strong and vigorous.", "I am proud of the work that I do", and "I am immersed in my work" were examples of each dimension ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (always) expressing their feelings on work.

##### 3.1.2 Proficiency

Proficiency is a subscale of job performance developed by Griffin et al. (2007) and consisted of 3 sub-dimensions: 3-item Individual task proficiency ( $\alpha = .83$ ), 3-item team member proficiency ( $\alpha = .77$ ), 3-item organization member proficiency ( $\alpha = .87$ ). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for 9-items was (.84). The participants were asked to report how often they had carried out the behavior over the past month on a scale ranging from 1 ("very little") to 5 (a "great deal"). "I carried out the core parts of your job well", "I coordinated my work with coworkers", "I defended the organization if others criticized it" were examples of each dimension ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (always).

### 4. Findings

Tables 1 and 2 shows the descriptive statistics including Biographic Variables and Job Characteristics of the sample.

Table1. Biographic Variables

Variable	Age range						Gender			Marital			Education					
	Less than 25	25 to 35	35 to 45	45 to 55	More than 55	Total	Female	Male	Total	Single	Married	Total	High School	Diploma	Associate	Bachelor	Master & PHD	Total
Frequency	0	198	105	65	23	391	127	295	386	72	318	390	8	31	40	205	106	390
Percentage	0	50.6	26.9	16.6	5.9	100	32.9	67.1	100	18.5	81.1	100	2.1	7.9	10.3	52.6	27.2	100

**University College of Takestan**

Biographic characteristics of the study in table 1, shows that 50.6% of employee's age ranges from 25 to 35 years old that presents a relatively young pyramid age. Besides, the number of male participants was about two times greater than females and the marrieds' participants were almost 5 times more than singles. The education level of the sample is relatively high because only about 10% of sample has no academic degree.

**Table 1. Job Characteristics**

Categories	Tenure (years)						Employment type					Job position				Sample					
	Less than 5	5 to 10 years	10 to 15 years	15 to 20 years	More than 20	Total	Full time	Long contract	Short contract	Third party	Total	Managers	experts	clerks	others	Total	Organization 1	Organization 2	Organization 3	Organization 4	Total
<b>Frequency</b>	92	100	73	33	91	389	171	47	141	31	390	46	227	84	32	389	157	142	49	47	395
<b>Percentage</b>	23.7	25.7	18.8	8.5	23.4	100	43.6	12	36.2	7.9	100	11.8	58.4	21.6	8.2	100	39.7	35.9	12.4	11.8	100

Table 2 shows that the number of employees over 10 year's tenure is almost equal to the number of employees who have under 10 year's tenure. Full-time and long-term contracted include 55.6% of the sample. Long-term contracts usually extend each 5 years for employees. However, in case of salary and benefits they are treated just as full-time employees. The most frequently employment type of the samples (36.2%) is short-term contract that extends yearly. Some services done by third party employees (7.9%). Organizations outsourced services however these employees working inside the company. Among the job positions, Experts are the most frequent part of the sample (about 58.4%).

Following, tables 3 and 4 respectively show the frequency distribution of work engagement and proficiency at 3 levels. The sum of the values for each item of work engagement (Likert 7-point) ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (always). Therefore, for each dimension values from 0 to 9 point were assessed as low, from 10 to 14 point were evaluated as average, and from 15 to 18 point were measured high.

**Table 2. Work Engagement Frequency Distribution**

Subscale	Level (percentage)		
	Low	average	High
<b>Vigor</b>	17.3	49.9	32.8
<b>Absorption</b>	22.4	51.6	26
<b>Dedication</b>	21.5	38.1	40.4
<b>Total (Engagement)</b>	20.4	46.6	33

Table 3 indicates that only about 20% of sample has low work engagement and about 80% of sample has average (46.6%) or high (33%) level of work engagement.

The sum of the values for each item of proficiency (Likert 5-point) ranging from 1 ("very little") to 5 (a "great deal"). Therefore, for each dimension values from 3 to 8 point were assessed as low, from 9 to 11 point were evaluated as average, and from 12 to 15 point were measured high.

**Table 3. Proficiency Frequency Distribution**

Subscale	Level (percentage)		
	Low	average	High
Individual	.5	21.5	78
Team Member	1	20.1	78.9
Organization Member	13	39.3	47.7
Proficiency	4.8	27	68.2

The level of individual task proficiency and team member proficiency was relatively high. However, the level of organization member proficiency was low in comparison with the other two subscale, table 4 shows that employees have the perception of relatively high level of proficiency (68.2%) overall.

**Table 4.** Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations for Main Variables and Subscales

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>1 Vigor</b>	12.54	3.37	-						
<b>2 Absorption</b>	12.16	3.33	.70**	-					
<b>3 Dedication</b>	12.86	3.95	.76**	.75**	-				
<b>4 Individual Task Proficiency</b>	12.32	1.58	.22**	.20**	.18**	-			
<b>5 Team member Proficiency</b>	12.49	1.63	.26**	.27**	.24**	.58**	-		
<b>6 Organization Proficiency</b>	10.97	2.55	.46**	.43**	.53**	.32**	.39**	-	
<b>7 Work Engagement</b>	37.58	9.68	.90**	.89**	.93**	.22**	.28**	.53**	-
<b>8 Proficiency</b>	35.81	4.51	.43**	.41**	.44**	.74**	.79**	.81**	.48**

Table 5 indicates that there is a significant relationship between work engagement and proficiency ( $r=.48$ ). Among the subscales of proficiency, organization member proficiency had the strongest relationship with work engagement subscales. The relationship between organization member proficiency with vigor, absorption, and dedication was respectively ( $r=.46$ ), ( $r=.43$ ), and ( $r=.53$ ) significant. Moreover, proficiency was related to work engagement subscales in a significant level.

**Table 5.** Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations for Demographics and Main Variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<b>1 Work Engagement</b>	37.58	9.68	-							
<b>2 Proficiency</b>	35.81	4.51	.48**	-						
<b>3 Gender</b>	1.67	.47	.19**	.01	-					
<b>4 Tenure</b>	2.82	1.48	.08	.13**	.25**	-				
<b>5 Job position</b>	2.26	.77	-.10*	-.04	-.11*	-.27**	-			
<b>6 Marital Status</b>	1.82	.38	.07	.03	.30**	.39**	-.02	-		
<b>7 Contract type</b>	2.08	1.05	-.09	-.12*	-.13	-.49**	.46**	-.17**	-	
<b>8 Education</b>	3.95	.93	-.12*	-.09	-.04	-.21**	-.44**	-.16**	-.22**	-
<b>9 Age</b>	2.78	.92	.09	.07	.27**	.66**	-.23**	.24**	-.38**	-.10*

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 6 shows the correlation between work engagement and proficiency with demographic variables. Work engagement had statistically significant and positive relationship with gender ( $r=.19$ ) at the 99% confident level. The relationship between work engagement with job position ( $r=-.1$ ) and education ( $r=-.12$ ) was significant at the 95% confident level. This relationship means that education and job position are negatively related to work engagement and as these two increase, the level of work engagement decrease. The correlation between proficiency and tenure ( $r=.13$ ) was significant at the level of 99% confident. It means that the higher the tenure period was, the higher the perception of proficiency was. The correlation between proficiency and contract type ( $r=-.12$ ) was significant too.

Later, to determine how much of the variance of work engagement can be predicted and explained by proficiency subscales, multiple regression was used. Three steps were applied in multiple regression. The first step was checking the assumptions such as normality, linearity, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity to ensure no violation of the assumptions. Second step was evaluating the model by ANOVA table and indicated that there is a significant relationship between dependent and independent variables ( $Sig=.000$ ). It was determined that 0.31% of work engagement variance was explained by proficiency. In the third step, independent variables were evaluated to determine which one could contribute to the prediction of the dependent variable (work engagement). Table 7 shows the results of multiple regression.

**Table 6.** Coefficient of Multiple Regression Correlation

Model	Standardized coefficients(Beta)	t	Sig
1 Individual Task Proficiency	.018	.33	.73
2 Team Task Proficiency	.084	1.54	.12
3 Organization Task Proficiency	.517	11.03	.00

Evaluating the model indicated that only organization member proficiency was statistically significant and could predict 51.7% of work engagement variance while the other two subscales were statistically insignificant ( $p>.05$ ).

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study firstly, aimed to investigate the relationship between work engagement and proficiency, and secondly, aimed to determine how proficiency could predict the variance of work engagement. It was concluded that work engagement and proficiency had positive and significant relationship together. Hence, our primary hypothesis was confirmed. In this case, our research finding is in consistent with Gorgievski, Bakker, and Schaufeli (2010) that found a positive relationship between

work engagement and task performance. However, only one of the subscales of proficiency (organization member proficiency) could explain the variance of work engagement. One, who has organization member proficiency, would give others a positive image of company, support the company if others complain about it, and usually talk positively about the company. Moreover, it is concluded that individual task proficiency (i.e. doing the core tasks of jobs well, using standard procedures and being sure that tasks completed properly) and team member proficiency (i.e. cooperating efficiently with coworkers and helping them whenever they ask or need) were relatively high in public organizations in Iran. Nevertheless, team member proficiency and organization member proficiency could not predict work engagement in a significant level.

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