

# *Interpretation of Employee Job Engagement Based on Social Exchange Theory*

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**Abstract:** Nowadays, employees and organizations have become an interdependent interest community, employees need to get paid from the organization through job engagement, and the organization needs the job engagement of employees to get performance. The social exchange theory shows that the implicit condition for the exchange of employees and organizations is that both parties can achieve mutual benefits. Based on social exchange theory, this study explores the issue of employee job engagement from the perspective of employee values.

## **1. Social Exchange Theory and Job Engagement**

Social exchange theory points out that the essence of social interaction is exchange behavior. When individual exchange, they must consider the benefits and rewards that may be involved. In other words, in the process of exchange, the individual will first evaluate the potential benefits that may arise after the exchange, exchange cannot be conducted if both parties cannot obtain satisfactory results or reward during the exchange (Befu, 1977). The interaction between people is basically a kind of exchange process. The exchange includes emotion, reward, resources and fairness (Befu, 1977). Taking the job engagement of an employee as an example, when the employee pays for his work, he expects that the organization will give corresponding rewards, and then the employee may continue to engage in work.

Therefore, the establishment of a social exchange relationship between employees and organizations means that employees engage in their own work in exchange for the support and return of the organization to individuals (Kahn, 1990). The implied condition of exchange is that both parties achieve the goal of mutual benefit by exchanging their own unique resources. The core of the exchange is self-interest and interdependence (May et al., 2004), and the contributors are not considered from the immediate benefits. It is expected that the recipient will pay back in return (Blau, 1964). Therefore, to understand the process of forming the job engagement needs to be based on the social exchange process.

Specifically, the employees' commitment and endeavor to work is for obtaining some expected rewards from the work (Kim et al., 2015). According to the social exchange theory, whether an employee is willing to exchange with the organization is firstly involved how the employee evaluates the return obtained from the organization after the exchange, that is, the employee is willing to work in order to get corresponding rewards from the organization. And the organization

hopes to generate job performance through the employees' job engagement, thus giving the employees corresponding rewards, so employees and organizations can be regarded as interdependent interest community. Social exchange theory explains the exchange relationship between employees and organizations as shown in Figure 1.

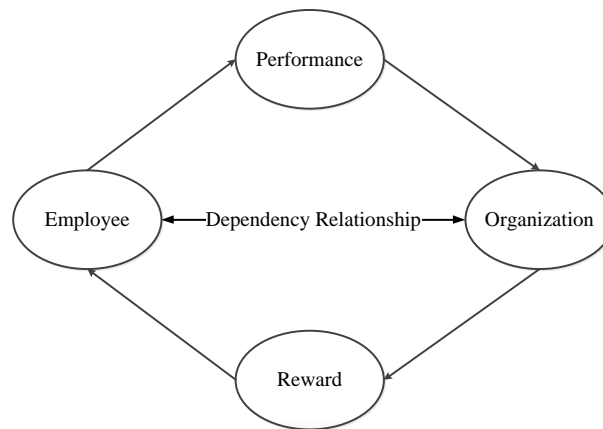


Figure 1: Exchange relationship between employees and organizations.

The employee evaluation of this exchange is fair through their personal values. Whether employees will engage in their job, first determined by whether the result of engagement is valuable, because employees' job engagement is to exchange valuable things with organizations, and judging the value of the other's exchange is based on the personal values. In this study, employees use values to evaluate whether job engagement can be paid from the organization, if employees believe they can get rewards from the job engagement, they are likely to engage in work.

However, after the job engagement, the measure of the rewards obtained from the organization is subjective, employees may feel fair or unfair. Therefore, in the process of evaluating the exchange with the organization, employees may have different individual behavioral outcomes based on the exchange relationship evaluation between the job engagement and organizational rewards. The process of employees' job engagement is shown in Figure 2.

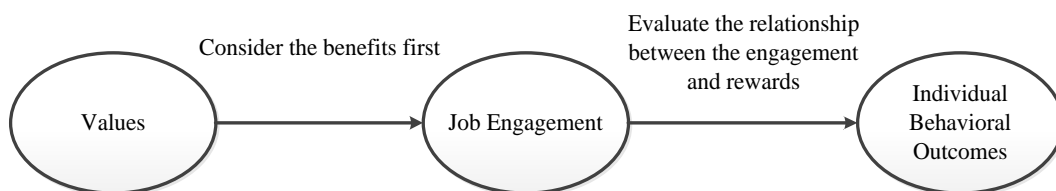


Figure 2: Process of employees' job engagement.

## 2. Theoretical Perspectives of Job Engagement

There are three theoretical basis used to explain the job engagement, one is the role theory, the second is the job demands-resources model (JD-R), and the three is the person-job fit theory. The following are introduced separately.

### 2.1 Job Engagement based on Role Theory

From the perspective of role, we can analyze and study a person's social behavior. The role theory mainly includes role cognition, role learning and role expectation(Biddle & Thomas, 1966). Job

engagement, based on role theory, refers to the self-control of organizational members so that individuals and the role of work can be combined, and if employees have a higher level of job engagement, they are better able to fit into the self-employment work role behaviors, furthermore, they may have better self-expression at work(Kahn, 1990).

From the perspective of role theory, we can explore why individuals have different degrees of self-engagement in workplace roles. A high degree of self-engagement in the role of the workplace is personal engagement; otherwise, a low degree of self-engagement in the role of the workplace can be called personal disengagement. The so-called job engagement is the physiological, cognitive, emotional focus and expression of the role played by the members in the workplace(Kahn, 1990).

Rothbard (2001) was inspired by Kahn (1990) and believed that role engagement is composed of two dimensions, namely attention and absorption. Among them, attention refers to individuals' perception of their availability in work, and the ability to think about their work roles, absorption refers to the individual's concentration on his work role and the intensity of the engagement in their work role.

May et al. (2004) extended the concept of Kahn (1990), and considers that job engagement is the relationship between employees' psychological identity, behavior, cognition and emotion. Macey and Schneider (2008) defined job engagement as personal focus on their own goals, keen on organizational goals, and willing to work hard to achieve them. Saks (2006) defined job engagement as the degree to which individuals are absorbed in the job and immersed in their job roles.

Based on the perspective of role theory, Schaufeli et al. (2002)consider that the job engagement contains the three dimensions of vigor, dedication and absorption. It is a mental state with positive thoughts and personal aspirations related to work. Vigor: work with a high degree of energy and flexibility of mind, willing to work hard, can persist in the face of difficulties. Dedication: individuals understand the importance and significance of their own work, and work with enthusiasm and a sense of honor. Absorption: an individual's willingness at work, not easily influenced by the things around him.

## **2.2 Job engagement based on Job Demands-Resources Model**

According to the job demands-resources model (JD-R model), the main point is to assume that the individual may encounter a different working environment in different organizations, and the characteristics of these working environments can be classified into two categories: job demands and job resources(Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). So it forms an inclusive model and can be applied to all kinds of occupations, irrespective of specific job demands and resources.

Job demands refer to the physical, social, or organizational aspects of the employee's work, which requires the physical or mental endurance and efforts to be done, so that it will have a negative impact on the physical and psychological aspects, examples include: high working pressure, role overload, poor working environment and organizational restructuring. Although job demands do not necessarily lead to negative results, it may have a negative impact on the work of the employee if the job demands exceed the range that the employee can bear(Lu, Kao, Siu, & Lu, 2010).

Job resources refer to the physical, psychological, social or organizational resources provided by the job, such as job autonomy, personal learning and development opportunities. It helps to (1) promote the achievement of job objectives; (2) reduce the physiological or psychological costs associated with job requirements; (3) motivate the individual growth and development(Schaufeli, Bakker, & Rhenen, 2009). In a resource rich environment, job is likely to be completed and job

objectives will be achieved (Schaufeli et al., 2009). For example, peer support and performance feedback can increase the chances of success in job objectives.

The first point of the job demands-resources model is that it contains two psychological processes that cause job burnout. The first is health problems caused by job demands resulting from excessive fatigue; the second is the lack of job resources, which leads to lower job engagement and subsequent turnover. The model mainly assumes that the results of job requirements and work resources imbalance may lead to many negative factors, such as job burnout, but the promotion of job resources may compensate for the negative impact of excessive job demands. Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) deduced that job burnout and job engagement may occur simultaneously, and job demands positively affect job burnout, job resources positively affect job engagement. The model is shown in Figure 4.

The second point of the job demands-resources model is that the characteristics of the work may cause two different results. First, high job demands, such as job overload, can deplete the employee's mental and physical strength, and thus may lead to health problems or job burnout (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). Secondly, inadequate or lack of job resources will hinder the achievement of goals and may cause failure or frustration, which may lead to employees' withdrawal phenomenon and reduce their job motivation so as to turnover intention. When the external environment lacks job resources, individuals can not reduce the negative impact of high job demands and fail to achieve their work goals. In this case, turnover intention is an important self-defense mechanism to avoid the frustration when the future goals are not reached (Antonovsky, 1987).

Although job resources do not necessarily completely eliminate the negative impact of job demands on employees, Oldham and Hackman (2010) believes that job resources have an incentive effect on employees. As long as the job resources can meet the psychological needs of the employees, employees' willingness to work can be enhanced. In addition, the incentive process is caused by job resources, which promote the growth, learning and development of employees, or help to achieve their goals. And providing abundant resources in the working environment will help employees to dedicate their efforts and abilities to job tasks (Schaufeli et al., 2009).

### **2.3 Job Engagement based on Person-Job Fit Theory**

Based on job burnout, Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) put forward the concept of job engagement, and regards the two as the two ends of the continuum reflecting the relationship between employees and their work, and use the Person-Job Fit Theory to explain the phenomenon of job engagement and job burnout (Maslach et al., 2001).

According to the theoretical framework, job burnout and job engagement reflect the sustained impact of the relative stability of the relationship between the individuals and their working environment on the employee's psychology, therefore, the job engagement (burnout) state of employees can be explained by the degree of matching between individuals and their working environment. It is easier to experience and show the state of job engagement when the employee's self-perception is more matched with the working environment, and on the contrary, the more the employee's self-perception is not matched with the working environment, the easier it is to experience and show the state of job burnout (Maslach et al., 2001).

Maslach et al. (2001) divided the person-job fit into six aspects, such as workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and value. Workload refers to the matching between the quantity and nature of job demands and employees' physical strength and ability. Control refers to the degree of compatibility of employees' work related information and decision-making power or influence with their work needs. Reward refers to the matching of the economic, institutional and social rewards of

the employees from their work environment to their needs. Community refers to the matching degree of employees' social interaction with others in the working environment as a whole. Fairness refers to employees' perception of fairness and equality in decision-making in the working environment. Value refers to the matching of job objectives and expectations perceived by employees in their work environment with their ideals and motivations(Maslach & Leiter, 2008).

The relationship between the matching degree of the employees-working environment and the employee's job engagement (or burnout) has been supported by some empirical research from these six aspects(Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Maslach et al. (2001) integrated the six aspects of the employees-working environment, and pointed out that the relatively long (or not) matching of personal and working environment is the organizational antecedents of employee's job engagement (or burnout). The high matching of six aspects, such as employee personal and organizational work environment, will make employees experience job engagement, and low matching will result in job burnout(Maslach et al., 2001).

### 3. Summary of the Theory of Job Engagement

Through the discussion of the above three kinds of job engagement theory, we can see that each theory can explain the reasons for the employee's job engagement, but each theory has its advantages and disadvantages.

Based on the role theory, the meaning of job engagement is put forward, people show their cognition, emotion and behavior in their work roles, that is, their devotion to work(Kahn, 1990). The definition of job engagement based on role theory highlights the subjectivity and initiative of employees in the work, and advocates that employees' perception of work situation further affects their engagement state by influencing their psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety and psychological availability of self-experience, and ultimately affects their work behavior and performance.

Role theory emphasizes the cognition and learning of the role in the work and the importance of the role played by the employee. Therefore, the role theory can be applied to the explanation of any work role in the organization. However, because employees' job engagement is a continuous psychological input process, role theory overemphasizes role factors, and cannot explain the individual in the case of different role playing in the organization, there may be a role conflict, and job engagement may be interrupted. For example, the technology R & D experts in the organization, and also the enterprise manager, as managers need to manage and co-ordinate the whole enterprise, may not be able to devote their energy to the technology research and development work.

The job demands-resources model for job engagement regards the job engagement as the result of the employees' job resources and job demands in the external environment, and thus more comprehensive study of employees' job engagement from the individual, work and work situation. However, the theoretical framework of this kind of research has not yet been able to integrate and explain the influence of these different factors on employees' job engagement, so it is theoretically not systematic. Moreover, the core concepts of job resources, job demands in the theoretical framework are only basic categories, and their specific content depends on specific situations, which makes the theory lack of concrete and practical research, and makes its different research difficult to compare with each other in the empirical results.

The job engagement of the Person-Job Fit Theory considers the job engagement as the psychological experience of the relationship between the employee and its work environment. Therefore, the job engagement and job burnout are integrated, and use individual work environment fit to explain employees' job engagement (burnout) psychological state. This theory is systematic

and seems to be easy to operate in empirical, but it is very difficult to select the specific dimension of the person-workplace environment fit and ensure its representativeness and universality.

The job demands-resources model and Person-Job Fit Theory consider job engagement as a positive and fulfilling positive mental state related to work (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008). It also emphasizes that individual and organizational environmental factors affect employees' job engagement and influence their performance. However, compared with the study of role theory emphasizes the subjectivity and initiative of employees in the work, emphasizes the cognition and learning of the role in the work, and highlights the importance of the role played. The Person-Job Fit Theory overemphasizes the influence of the environment on the individual, and the job demands-resources model is too idealized for the individual to distinguish the work enthusiasm of any object.

From the perspective of personal values, this study does not consider the external organizational environment factors, and believes that the impact of values on job engagement is more intense. Because employees encounter challenges or setbacks in their work, they cannot solve problems only by changing their organizational environment or increasing their job resources and personal resources. The organizational environment is generally fixed, the individual cannot easily change the organizational environment, and the resources are limited and easy to be consumed. Organizations cannot always provide resources to employees. However, role theory cannot explain employees' conflict of roles in organizations, and there may be interruption of job engagement in different roles.

Table 1: Advantages and disadvantages of social exchange theory.

Social Exchange Theory	
Theoretical perspectives	Employees use values to evaluate the reward of the organization, and will evaluate the relationship between the job engagement and the organizational rewards. If the employee thinks that the rewards obtained from the organization exceed the job engagement paid by the employees, the employee will likely continue to engage in the work, which may lead to better performance.
Advantages	Personal values are relatively stable, forming a certain value orientation and behavioral stereotype, which are not easy to change. As a basis for evaluation of the exchange relationship between the employees and organization, values can explain employees' long-term work engagement.
Disadvantages	The motivation to get rewards (tangible or intangible) as an incentive to work, the equitable distribution of the exchange must be taken into consideration, exchange behavior can be carried out, but in practice, most of them are unfair exchange relations.

Because values are an individual's view or evaluation of objective things in the process of early socialization. Once the individual values are established, they have relative stability and form a certain value orientation and behavior setting, which is not easy to change. It is not a transient experience that existing research generally defines job engagement as a stable, long-lasting, and proactive working state (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Social exchange theory can explain employee's long-term job engagement, which is summarized in Table 1.

The change of job resources can only solve the problem of short-term job engagement, employees' persistent job engagement depends on the values of the employees. Therefore, from the perspective of value, this study explores the job engagement of employees. Employees use values to

evaluate whether they can get rewards from the organization, and will evaluate the relationship between the job engagement and the organizational rewards. If the employee thinks that the rewards obtained from the organization exceed the job engagement paid by the employees, the employee will likely continue to engage in the work, which may lead to better performance. Therefore, value is used as the basis of the exchange relationship evaluation between the employees and organization.

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