THE RECIPROCITY OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: A STUDY OF UNIVERSITY ACADEMICS

Employee engagement is envisaged by Robinson, Perryman and Hayday (2004) as being based on a reciprocal relationship between an employee and their employing organisation. The employee and the organisation provide a service to the other beyond the mere transactional relationship; the organisation provides something extra to the employee in return for increased engagement levels. This research aims to determine the existence and importance of a reciprocal engagement relationship between the employee and their employing organisation. The findings from the qualitative interviews highlighted employee engagement as being reciprocal in nature. Some consideration is given to engagement to the immediate workgroup. Implications from this study are considered as well as limitations and alternatives for future research.

Keywords: Employee engagement, organisational commitment, organisational citizenship behaviours, reciprocity

INTRODUCTION

Organisational effectiveness is gaining increasing interest in organisations today. There is an increased need in organisations to invest in the human component of production (Echols, 2005). This is especially so in the competitive market place, where organisations want to drive employee productivity to increase profitability. One such way of enhancing organisational effectiveness is having an ‘engaged’ workforce. This research paper provides an investigation into employee engagement in an academic context. The aim of this research is to determine the existence and importance of a reciprocal engagement relationship between the employee and their employing organisation. The paper will outline the issues relevant to employee engagement and reciprocity, which leads into the methods of investigation. An analysis of the results and discussions provides an in-depth look at the issues and relates them to the relevant literature.

The term ‘engagement’ paired with employees working within an organisation was first introduced by Kahn (1990). In his groundbreaking work, Kahn (1990) was able to distinguish between being engaged or disengaged at work. He believed that each person in their work role presented a degree of ‘self’ and each ‘performance’ at work is only as good as the degree of self presented. Kahn (1990) defined engagement as being the degree and amount of involvement in the organisation. Employee engagement is akin to many other contributions to the employee-
organisational relationship; for instance psychological contract, organisational commitment, job satisfaction to highlight just a few. Robinson, Perryman and Hayday (2004) from the Institute of Employment Studies (IES) have invested some research effort into the area of employee engagement.

Employee engagement is envisaged by Robinson et al. (2004) as being based on a reciprocal relationship between an employee and their employing organisation. The employee and the organisation provide a service to the other beyond the mere transactional relationship; the organisation provides something extra to the employee in return for increased engagement levels. Robinson et al. (2004:9) define employee engagement as;

...a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organization and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context, and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organization. The organization must work to nurture, maintain and grow the engagement, which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee.

A reciprocal engagement relationship can also be identified in the work by Luthans and Peterson (2002) where it was found that higher levels of both cognitive and emotional engagement, as provided for by Kahn (1990) will increase managers’ self efficacy, and thus once increased, will increase employee engagement levels; and a circular relationship will be created. Reciprocity is in terms of the employee – manager relationship. Luthans and Peterson (2002) deem that emotional engagement refers to management’s perceived interest in the employee; thus creating strong emotional ties with the organisation. Whereas cognitive engagement refers to employees knowing what is expected of them; they understand their purpose or mission within the organisation and they are given opportunities to excel and grow. This is especially important for organisations today where the focus is on trying to maintain healthy relationships with employees so they are encouraged to stay with one organisation and develop a career. There is a breadth of engagement research that does not necessarily deal with reciprocity as an important aspect to the employee – organisational/

Evidence is provided by Robinson et al. (2004) that the most significant drivers in employee engagement levels is for the employee to have a sense of feeling involved and valued by the organisation. There are a range of organisational initiatives that are identified by Robinson et al. (2004: 24) that can provide this of feeling of being valued and involved. These increased feelings are dependant upon the individual and what organisational initiatives they particularly feel that they deserve or would benefit from. The reciprocal relationship is formed. According to Robinson et al. (2004) the employee will reciprocate to the organisation through the demonstration of increased engagement behaviours. Those being increased organisational commitment (OC) and a greater exhibition of organisational citizenship behaviours (OCB). This will lead to enhanced organisational outcomes; productivity. Then the organisation is financially in a better position to engage the employee further. This reciprocal relationship is demonstrated in figure 1.

**FIGURE 1 - The Reciprocation of Employee Engagement**
Reciprocity in its own terms is a significant contribution to human behaviour. Gouldner (1960) articulated the ‘norm of reciprocation’, which is a fundamental human norm that people will reciprocate the good work of others. Of consideration, when discussing reciprocation is the psychological contract, which is seen as the ‘unspoken promise’ of rewards for services, including both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards (Baruch & Winkelmann-Gleed, 2002). The psychological contract rests upon reciprocal responsibility; if the employee demonstrates high levels of engagement they are keeping their side of the contract to the organisation. Reciprocity would then dictate that the organisation would provide something in return to enhance engagement levels.

Some research suggests that the organisational environment where engagement with the employee will increase has open communication, respect, positive relations with co-workers, teamwork and trust (Crabtree, 2005). These attributes were found by Crabtree (2005: 2) to be the single most important factors to participants ‘…in maintaining a sense of comfort and well being at work.’ These outcomes of employee engagement are evident in the reciprocal relationship that Robinson et al. (2004) postulates, through the exhibition of increased OC and OCB’s, this is evident in figure 1. Discussions will proceed which outline OC and OCB’s with relation to reciprocity.

Organisational Commitment

OC in its most common form was defined by Porter, Steers, and Mowday (1974) as being based on the employee’s involvement and identification with their respective organisation. In their research, Porter et al. (1974) have identified three components of commitment; the want to exert an extra effort on behalf of the organisation, belief and acceptance of the organisations values and goals and a desire to remain with the organisation. A body of research has emerged that utilises the definition derived from Porter et al. (1974) or variations upon it (Deery & Iverson, 1998; Price & Mueller, 1986; Bishop, Scott & Burroughs, 2000; Benson, 1998 and Mowday, Steers & Porter, 1979). According to Mowday et al. (1979: 226), commitment encompasses ‘…an active relationship with the organisation such that individuals are willing to give something of themselves in order to contribute to the organisation’s well being’.
Further, Angle and Perry (1983) define a member-based and organisational-based model of commitment. The organisational based model is based on what the individual can bring to the workplace and what the organisation offers in reciprocation to the individual, it is conceptualised as:

...a prospective member bring[ing] need[s] and goals to an organisation and agrees to supply her or his skills and energies in exchange for organisational resources capable of satisfying those needs and goals. (Angle & Perry 1983, p.127)

This conceptualisation can be explained through the ‘norm of reciprocation’ (Gouldner, 1960). Pairing well with reciprocation is the theory of ‘social exchange’ (Blau, 1964), where individuals engender feelings of obligation, trust and gratitude to the organisation because of the service provided to them (Agarwala, 2003). When one person does a favour for another then the other person is obliged to reciprocate (Bishop et al. 2000). Therefore, if the organisation treats the employee well, then the employee is likely to reciprocate and vis-versa.

Reciprocation is further highlighted through employee’s having a sense of duty and responsibility to the organisation (Mueller, Wallace, & Price 1992). Organisations will provide a secure job and in return the employee will be committed to the organisation, and the organisations values and goals. Taking in consideration of the psychological contract, as including both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, the psychological contract will be maintained by both parties. The extrinsic rewards offered by the organisation are the most influential of factors in the organisational-based commitment model as formulated by Angle and Perry (1983). The norm of reciprocation is evident in the relationship between the organisation and the employee, through the extrinsic rewards offered to the employee from the organisation. The extrinsic rewards could encompass organisational initiatives of particular benefit to the employee. The intrinsic rewards would also impact upon the reciprocal relationship. Chang and Chelladurai (2003) state simply that when an employee feels attached too, involved with, and if they identify with the values of the organisation, the organisation will reciprocate especially when the employee exceeds the minimum requirements of their job by helping others and the organisation. It has been demonstrated that OC has impacted upon by
reciprocation. Robinson et al. (2004) identified OC as being one such way of demonstrating engagement, the other being OCB.

**Organisational Citizenship Behaviours**

The work on OCB’s originated from the work of Smith, Organ., and Near (1983). Essentially, the ideas and definitions of OCB have remained the same. OCB can be defined as ‘individual behaviour that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognised by the formal reward system, and on the aggregate promotes the efficient and effective functioning of the organisation’ (Organ, Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 2006:3). In other words, the employee will put in extra discretionary effort for the benefit of the organisation without formal reward.

Looking at OCB from a social exchange perspective (Blau, 1964), and Organ (1988) holds that individuals are bound by the norm of reciprocation (Gouldner, 1960), when the organisation provides the resources, treatment and opportunities that induce employee satisfaction, then individuals will reciprocate in the form of OCB’s. Accordingly those employees who view that their supervisors treat them fairly are more likely to exhibit OCB’s (Moorman, 1991). Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Moorman, and Fetter (1990) identified five distinguishable components of OCB; altruism, conscientiousness, courtesy, civic virtue and sportsmanship. In their research, it was found that transformational leadership styles will encourage positive behaviours from the employees. For the employee it will create an increase in trust and respect in and for the organisation. This will create a personal desire from the employee to do more than what is expected for the benefit of the organisation (Podsakoff et al. 1990).

**Benefits of the Research**

The benefits of an engaged workforce have been emphasised both in Australia and America. The American example postulates that an engaged workforce will result in greater organisational profit margins, increased employee productivity and increased consumer loyalty (Echols, 2005). It has been calculated that the cost disengagement in America is 300 billion dollars per year in lost productivity. This translates in Australia as costing the economy 31.5 billion dollars per annum.
(Hooper, 2006). In Australia, research estimates that only 20% of the workforce are actively engaged, 62% are not engaged and 18% are actively disengaged (Hooper, 2006). This research in both countries has been carried out by the Gallup Institute using the Q12, engagement questionnaire. It indicates the economic necessity of engagement research. The impact of engagement needs consideration, especially the idea of it being a reciprocal relationship. The intention of this research is to ascertain whether in fact engagement seen as a reciprocal relationship.

The literature review has demonstrated that the both OC and OCB can be reciprocal in nature, which Robinson et al. (2004) identifies as the key result of being engaged. Robinson et al. (2004) and Luthans and Peterson (2004) both emphasize reciprocity as being a key element of the engagement relationship, whether to organisation or manager. There provides some link to engagement actually being reciprocal in nature. The intention and aim of this research is to ascertain whether in fact engagement is seen as a reciprocal relationship and what the relative importance of a reciprocal relationship is.

METHOD

The research method used was a qualitative analysis of structured interviews. It was determined that this was in fact the best way to elicit responses that were in-depth and illustrative of examples relevant to employee engagement and the reciprocal relationship held with the employing organisation. This was especially important in this research because of the small sample size that was used. This is just one part of a larger study on employee engagement in academia. The participants used for this study were from a leading, Melbourne metropolitan university (the University). All the participants were academics at various levels; they all were derived from the same department within the University. The study is based on eight interviews with the academic participants; the interviews all occurred within a two week period and were held in the office of each of the participants. Of the participants there was three female and five male. The academic levels of the participants were distributed as follows; one lecturer A; two lecturer B; four lecturer C; and one
Professor. The average tenure for the participants at the University was 11.57 years and the average tenure in their current positions was 7.81 years.

The participants were asked seven structured opened ended questions. It was hoped that these questions would elicit responses regarding employee engagement and the reciprocal relationship between the organisation and the employee. The interview questions were derived from the research presented by Robinson et al. (2004), their research presented a view of employee engagement where the relationship was reciprocal in nature. The participants in their questioning were asked to whom they felt that they were engaged too; the University, the Faculty or the Department, this is significant for when analysis of the data was to occur. Further, the participants were also supplied with the definition of employee engagement as articulated by Robinson et al. (2004), they were asked to comment and relate it to their engagement relationship. They were also asked about being valued and involved in the organisation. Finally, questioning surrounded the relationship between the organisation and employee being reciprocal. In essence, the interview questions that were derived from Robinson et al. (2004) research wanted to explore employee engagement as a reciprocal relationship and whether the participants believed that this relationship existed and their ideas regarding employee engagement.

RESULTS

Seven questions were asked to the participants in the structured interview that were derived from the research of Robinson et al. (2004). In answering these questions the participants are specifying whether they believed that a reciprocal relationship exists with the organisation; where the organisation offers to the employee something which in turn will increase the employee’s feelings of good will towards the organisation. Also the questioning was designed to further elaborate on a reciprocal relationship between the employee and their organisation, as what Robinson et al. (2004) define engagement as being.

A question was asked of the participants that identified who that they believed that they were engaged too. It is interesting to note that all but one of the participants noted that their first line
of engagement was to the Department that they worked within. Besides the first line of engagement being to the Department, two of the participants, who were from different campuses, they both felt that they had a strong attachment and engagement relationship with their respective home campuses and faculty, this perhaps could be due to the home campuses being smaller. The one participant, who did not acknowledge any of the aforementioned lines of engagement, feels that their personal line of engagement was to their Doctoral students to whom they supervise, and this was acknowledged by them as the most enjoyable part of working at the University.

Defining Employee Engagement

The participants were provided with the Robinson et al. (2004) definition of employee engagement, and they were asked to read it. The reasons for the participants reading the definition was twofold; firstly so that they could get an idea of what employee engagement was, and when the researcher was discussing it what concept the researcher was referring too. Secondly to garner the participant’s feedback on the definition, their thoughts on it and whether they believed that it applied at the University, or to their line of engagement. The definition was seen as an ‘ideal of what employee engagement should be about’ the definition is ‘useable and workable’. One participant notes that they believed that the definition is back to front, the causal linkages are in the reverse;

*An employee is not going to develop a positive attitude toward an organisation and its values and become engaged unless the organisation first provides the work environment that nurtures, maintains and grows the engagement.*

‘The practicality of [the definition]… is very different, I don’t know if you can see that being a practical outcome’ this participant argued that this is due to the different individual perceptions and the changing organisational culture, because you have come into an organisation with certain expectation and over time those expectations change.

The relationship between the Department and the Robinson et al. (2004) definition of employee engagement can be seen in the following statements. Within the department ‘there has been considerable progress towards this type of ideal’, another participant believes that the
department is not as bad at engagement as compared to other departments within the faculty. The department maintains ‘the engagement culture’, and to another participant the definition ‘defines what I do in my everyday life’. Alternatively, in the department ‘do we do it? Certainly not’ this was the only negative response to the definition and in regards to the department applying it.

Robinson et al. (2004) identify feeling valued and actively involved within an organisation to be the significant drivers of employee engagement. The participants were asked whether they agreed or not and to provide some comments. The findings were consistently positive to the drivers of employee engagement, although some negative feedback was given. ‘If something comes up that you have been involved in, that you think that you should have, then you do get slighted and resulting in a feeling of disengagement’, ‘these are the fundamental principles’, another feels valued as a supervisor a of doctoral students because ‘it is a huge amount of my time commitment, they are fabulous to work with’. Alternatively another participant said, ‘I agree with the statement but it doesn’t happen here’.

_In a University often it doesn’t matter how hard you work because we are all like feral cats in the dark in our little offices and no one knows what anyone else is doing... You make your own degree of involvement in a way as an academic you work hard recognising that there might not be extrinsic rewards coming your way it is just something that you feel motivated to do yourself...you make yourself in a public sector organisation._

The results highlight individual perception as being significant in determining levels of engagement and the overall needs of individuals from within the organisation:

_All of this is all about perception you might get the person next door to me who says, great organisation, fantastic has all these supports in place because those support systems service their needs at this time, and they don’t service my requirements at this time._

This statement is reflective of the individuality of engagement and the reciprocity of it. Relating back to figure 1, the organisational provided initiatives need to benefit each individual employee, for engagement with that employee to occur.
The Reciprocal Relationship

The definition of employee engagement provided by Robinson et al. (2004) states that the engagement relationship is reciprocal in nature. When the participants were questioned in this regard, six of the participants believed that the engagement relationship with the organisation was reflective of being reciprocal in nature, although two of these participants believed that the reciprocal relationship was an unequal one.

In any organisation the individual employee doesn’t have equal bargaining power with the organisation and that is certainly the case but against that particularly in the last couple of years, whenever I have asked for support a reasonable amount of support has been provided.

The University is very good in terms of paying for conference expenses … there is a limit beyond which they won’t go but at least you get to travel overseas once a year... there aren’t many perks in academia compared to private enterprise there aren’t.

Some participants see the relationship in terms meeting individual needs such as; expecting ‘the organisation to look after my needs and I will look after their needs’ and ‘in a bureaucratic sense in the organisation there is a reciprocal relationship although I don’t think that there is a personal relationship’. One participant sees it as a ‘collective reciprocation’ ‘there is a commitment from the organisation to the people within the organisation and I think that the people need to be treated fairly from within’. ‘I guess that there still has to be rules about how reciprocity works, so I guess I would feel that if I wasn’t being valued then that sense of reciprocity wouldn’t be felt’. The extent of the reciprocal relationship is seen as dependant upon ‘how much noise you make in a public sector organisation … people who have the capacity to make themselves seen and heard may often get benefits that others don’t’.

Two of participants believed that there was not a reciprocal relationship between themselves and the organisation, ‘what sort of reciprocal program or process do you think that they could offer, there is none, I can identify none’. This participant further argued that there used to be reciprocation, having the availability of an ‘inter-relationship with overseas cohorts’, to have this relationship now
'...you need to jump through more hoops... a journal article [is needed] but you have to meet a teaching load ... so in a word no'. The other participant says a reciprocal relationship ‘I can’t envisage that happening no’.

In brief, the results highlight the significance of who an employee has the engaged relationship with. Further, the results point to there being a reciprocal relationship with the University and the individuality of employee engagement. In the next section the results will be discussed in light of the literature, also the limitations and proposals for future research will be explored.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this research was to determine whether employee engagement was based on a reciprocal relationship. The results will be analysed with reference to the relevant literature. The discussions will proceed regarding the actual engagement relationship as seen by the participants, the relationship to the provided definition and the reciprocity of the relationship.

The participants were asked to whom they believed their first line of engagement was too. The Department that the participants worked within was identified as the participants’ source of their engagement, and the participants answered the engagement questions in this regard. This draws attention to an important point that employees have a closer engagement relationship to their immediate workgroup, in this case the department, rather than the broader organisation. Kahn (1990), as previously examined, stated that engagement is dependant on self and the amount of self that an individual wants to exhibit; cognitively, emotionally and physically. A possible inference is that employees have a greater comfort with their immediate workgroup so thus a greater engagement relationship. Two of the participants draw attention to a ‘social engagement’ to their work colleagues; this could be referring to a similar type of phenomenon. This is similar to a commitment approach as maintained by Baruch and Winkelmann- Gleed (2002), where they posit that individuals have different constituencies for their commitment focus; the self, family and work.
In relation to work; work group commitment is where an individual identifies with their immediate workgroup rather than their employing organisation.

**Defining Employee Engagement**

When presented with the Robinson et al. (2004) definition of employee engagement, the participants believed that it reflected an ideal; others said that the definition reflected what happened within their department. This highlights a serious limitation of the study, due to only one department being interviewed; the results are only applicable to that department. Other departments within the University may yield different results; one participant highlighted this fact by acknowledging that engagement occurs in this department, but definitely not in others.

The results also reiterated the individuality of the engagement relationship; different rewards will entice different people. One participant acknowledges the lack of extrinsic rewards that an academic has due to the individuality and autonomy of their positions. This is in contrast to Angle and Perry (1983) who identify that as part of the organisational based model of commitment that the extrinsic rewards are the most influential of factors. Academic present a unique sample set that need investigation on engagement and related concepts that is academic specific.

**The Reciprocal Relationship**

With regards to the employee engagement relationship being seen as reciprocal, the results reinforce the stipulated definition from Robinson et al. (2004), through six from the eight participants suggesting that there is a reciprocal relationship between themselves and the organisation.

Robinson et al. (2004) in defining employee engagement, identify that the relationship is reciprocal in nature. The results from the present study can effectively demonstrate that a reciprocal relationship with the University is in evidence; the participants draw attention to the fact that there are differing levels of reciprocity with the organisation. Two of the participants stress that there was not a reciprocal relationship; they felt that they did not have a personal reciprocal relationship with the University. The University could not provide them with anything that would reflect reciprocation. The ‘division of labour’ can identify with the present results; it is one of the
components of the norm of reciprocation as developed by Gouldner (1960). Reciprocation will be made in terms of the goods and services that are of value to the employee and within the capacity of the providing organisation. The two participants that felt that there was not a reciprocal relationship and this could be due to the University not providing them with any goods or services that they wanted that were within the Universities capacity. This is also a reflection of the individuality of the employee engagement relationship. What may impact the engagement levels of one person may not necessarily impact the engagement levels of another.

Tenure at the University needs to be acknowledged as important to the engagement relationship. The participants that believed that there was not a reciprocal relationship had the longest and third longest tenure. This again links tenure to employee engagement. In research presented by Wolfe (2004), it is suggested that employees have their highest engagement levels to the organisation in their first year of work, and then it subsequently plateaus, with the lowest falling in the 5-10 year bracket. Wolfe (2004) also identified the that people within differing positions within the organisation have differing levels of engagement, for example, managers had higher engagement than clerical workers, and those that fell between these classifications in the organisation hierarchy had engagement levels between the classification levels.

Further Research

There are many variations on having reciprocity in the workplace. When discussing reciprocation, Bishop et al. (2000) discuss the degree that the organisation is committed to the employee, based on the measure of ‘Perceived Organisational Support’ (POS) as articulated by Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson, and Sowa (1986). POS focuses upon the value that the organisation places on the employee and that the organisation cares for the employee (Eisenberger et al. 1986; Eisenberger, Fasolo & Davis-LaMastro, 1990); this in turn will lead to a reciprocal attachment. The relationship experience has also been found to impact upon employees believing that the organisation supports them. Employees have a positive affective experience with the
organisation when they perceive that the organisation supports them (Bishop et al. 2000). This identifies further reciprocation.

Items of reciprocation are discussed further by Tsui, Pearce and Hite (1995) who found that the introduction of new and innovative human resource policies would have a positive effect on levels of OC, and employees would form a greater attachment to the organisation. Tsui et al. (1995) have termed this the ‘exchange relationship’; this is viewed as the strategy between the employee-organisation-relationships. It is evident from this research that there is a reciprocal relationship between the employee and their employing organisation, the research presents variations to the reciprocity, through commitment from the organisation (POS) (Bishop et al. 2000), the exchange relationship (Tsui et al. 1995) and employee engagement as articulated by Robinson et al. (2004). The challenge exists to model a true reflection of the reciprocity, beyond that of a transactional relationship.

The limitations of this research are evident in the small sample size, restriction to one University department. The time constraints and end of semester timing, created difficulty in trying to recruit greater participation for the study. However, the research has provided some indication of the evidence of reciprocity in the workplace, and in particular for employee engagement. This research would benefit further from greater testing in other parts of the University and in differing professions.

CONCLUSION

Employee engagement is the relationship between an employee and their employing organisation; this relationship is based on reciprocity (Robinson et al. 2004). Engagement encompasses the employee putting in the extra effort for the benefit of the organisation, identifying with the goals of the organisation. The relationship develops based upon what items and initiatives that the organisation provides to the employee, which the employee will reciprocate through the demonstration of enhanced commitment and enhanced exhibition of citizenship behaviours (Robinson et al. 2004).
The results have highlighted the need for further research and clarification of employee engagement. This study investigated the existence of a reciprocal relationship with the organisation as the Robinson et al. (2004) definition identified. The perceived existence of an engagement relationship based on reciprocity was determined through structured interview questioning. However, the results must be treated with some caution due to the small sample size. The results highlighted the existence of a reciprocal relationship with the University, although the participants believed that they had a greater engagement relationship with their Department rather than the University as a whole. This raised the issue of engagement to the immediate workgroup, and also issues of personal engagement to co-workers as identified by two of the participants.

Another interesting finding was that Robinson et al. (2004) have defined employee engagement as a reciprocal relationship between the organisation and the employees. Upon closer scrutinisation of their measure of employee engagement; the measure takes into account OCB and OC, but lacks a reciprocity measure. The results have highlighted the need for further research and clarification of the definition of employee engagement. As well as noting various ways in which to measure reciprocity, as an example POS. Finally, the results indicate that a more thorough examination of employee engagement needs to occur, in an effort to further validate the present results and extend them further and to provide some further clarification of employee engagement.

REFERENCES


