Employee Experience: An Evolving Concept

GREAT LAKES
INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT, GURGAON

Nidhi Singh[1] [iD] **and Kumarsawan Shakya**[2]

Abstract

This conceptual article attempts to trace the conceptual evolution of employee experience over the years. The article focuses on the changes in employee experience in response to the changes in the nature of work and the workplace. This article may inspire future researchers to explore variations in employee experience, and the factors contributing to the same. Practitioners and organisations can benefit by understanding and managing employee experience based on the nature of work and the workplace. We hope these insights enable managers to accentuate the employee experience in organisations.

Introduction

Employee experience has always been important for organisations. This is reflected in recent research on employee experience (e.g., Farndale & Kelliher, 2013; Malik et al., 2022; Tucker, 2020). The work and workplace—two major contributors to employee experience—have been changing over the years (Nuvolari, 2019; Von Tunzelmann, 2003). This article traces how employee experience has been captured under different paradigms of the changing nature of

[1] ACE Business Consultants, Thane, Maharashtra, India
[2] Indian Institute of Management Bangalore (IIMB), Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

Corresponding author:
Nidhi Singh, ACE Business Consultants, Thane, Maharashtra 401107, India.
E-mail: nidhi@acebconsultants.com

work. It further attempts to identify the conceptual evolution (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017; Mahoney & Deckop, 1986) of 'Employee Experience, Alienation and Engagement' (Welch, 2011), and prevent potential conceptual proliferation (Morrow, 1983; Nikolaidis, 2020).

Era of Alienation

The industrial revolution at the beginning of the 20th century led to the emergence of large organisations with a greater workforce performing specialised tasks (Nuvolari, 2019; Von Tunzelmann, 2003). The increased task specialisation led to the separation of the producer (i.e., worker) from the produce (i.e., work), leading to employees experiencing alienation (Blauner, 1964; Seeman, 1959).

It was largely the thinkers and researchers (e.g., Erikson, 1986; Goffman, 1957; Seeman, 1959) who were interested in and concerned about the employees experience in the workplace—which was largely reflected in the concept of alienation. The practitioners and organisations seemed less concerned—perhaps owing to the availability of slaves as workers, individual production-linked wages and utter disregard for the employee experience at the workplace.

Workplaces have conditions that alienate workers rather than engage them (Kanungo, 1979). Inability to engage in meaningful tasks results in emotional unavailability and apathy towards work (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Employees across sectors experience alienation (Gerth & Mills, 1946). The focus of employers in this era was on manual labour, and they did not care about the experience of employees. Alienation and involvement (i.e., engagement) impact the quality of experience at work (Kanungo, 1983).

Alienation comprises five dimensions: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement (Seeman, 1959, 1967). These dimensions have been measured in various contexts (e.g., health care professionals) using different scales (Kartal, 2018; Marques et al., 2022; Rayce et al., 2018).

Era of Engagement

Towards the second half of the 20th century, manufacturing processes transitioned from being labour-intensive to leveraging managerial decision-making and collaboration (Von Tunzelmann, 2003). Many organisations had transitioned from production-based wages to time-based wages, necessitating increased productivity (Voth, 1996). Organisations needed employees to be more productive during work hours and to apply their whole selves to the workplace. In this era, practitioners and researchers were concerned about the (lack of) positive employee experience at the workplace—captured by the concept of employee engagement (Kahn, 1990).

Employee engagement is defined as 'the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles' (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). This reflects the increasing expectations of organisations from employees to provide not only their bodies and

minds to their organisations, but also immerse their hearts in their work. The feeling of identification with the job was found to be lacking when employees were alienated from their work (Seeman, 1967). Employees who do not experience meaninglessness are more engaged in their work (Han et al., 2021). Meaningful tasks are a means of reinstating employee involvement and motivation for their work (Seeman, 1972).

Engagement is characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Vigour encompasses having a resilient mind along with an energetic and unrelenting approach towards their work. Dedication involves being excited and experiencing pride towards one's tasks. Absorption can be described as being completely engrossed and involved in the tasks at hand without consideration of time (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

Engagement can be associated with experiences at work and is predicted by positive emotions such as hope (Ouweneel et al., 2012). Engagement is a positive state of well-being and fulfilment (Bakker & Leiter, 2010). Engaged employees are emotionally attached to their organisation (Kompaso & Sridevi, 2010).

Era of Experience

The 21st century is marked by the age of information and technology. Technology has permeated all aspects of life, including work. The extensive use of technology has enabled employees to work from anywhere (i.e., no fixed workplace) at any time (i.e., no fixed work hours). Employee experience includes a gamut of feelings experienced by the employee towards their employer (Tucker, 2020). Employee experience focuses on daily interactions within the organisation, which includes tacit as well as practical experience of employees (Artusi & Bellini, 2022). Employee experience involves employees' perception, which includes their physical and psychological well-being obtained from their work (Kong et al., 2019).

Usage of technology and the resultant change in nature of work enabled the application of artificial intelligence (AI) in human resources (HR) practices to enhance employee experience (Malik et al., 2022; Pillai et al., 2024). Employee experience surveys, along with traditional engagement tools, are being used by practitioners across different sectors to achieve positive engagement outcomes (Tucker, 2020). The introduction of AI tools such as chatbot to enhance employee experience is an upcoming HR practice (Pillai et al., 2024). AI-assisted HRM applications are found to improve employee experience as well as enhance productivity (Malik et al., 2022).

Conceptual Evolution and Proliferation

Alienation and engagement are variations of the same core concept about employees' states of mind (Pati & Kumar, 2015). Alienation and engagement are two different perspectives on the same phenomenon (Kanungo, 1979, 1982, 1983, 1990; Mendonca & Kanungo, 1994; Sanaria, 2013). Researchers focused on

alienation at the beginning of the 20th century and engagement in the second half of the 20th century, owing to the changing nature of work and the workplace. Sociological and psychological influences in varied cultural contexts and different temporal eras have resulted in variations in research focus between alienation and engagement (Kanungo, 1979).

Employee experience is the employee's psychological perspective relating to employee engagement at work (Lemon, 2019). Employee engagement and alienation are found to measure empirically similar experiences (Pati & Kumar, 2015). Hence, employee engagement and alienation seem to represent negative and positive aspects of employee experience, which is a holistic perspective of the employees' perception regarding work (Artusi & Bellini, 2022).

Based on the above discussion, we suggest that the concepts of alienation and engagement are different ways of capturing negative and positive aspects of employee experience, respectively. Therefore, concepts of employee experience, alienation and engagement (Welch, 2011) seem to be a result of conceptual evolution (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017; Mahoney & Deckop, 1986) across eras. Using these concepts in current times may lead to concept proliferation (Morrow, 1983; Nikolaidis, 2020).

Conclusion and Contribution

Researchers are attempting to revive earlier concepts (e.g., alienation and engagement) (Rathee & Sharma, 2019; Shantz et al., 2015). As an alternative, researchers can focus on the commonalities and differences amongst them to avoid proliferation (Morrow, 1983; Nikolaidis, 2020). This article may inspire future researchers to explore variations in employee experience, and factors contributing to the same. Practitioners and organisations can benefit from understanding and managing employee experience based on the nature of work and the workplace. We hope these insights enable managers to accentuate the employee experience in organisations.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

ORCID iD

Nidhi Singh https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5142-061X

References

Artusi, F., & Bellini, E. (2022). From vision to innovation: new service development through front-line employee engagement. *Innovation*, *24*(3), 433–458.

Bakker, A. B., & Leiter, M. P. (Eds). (2010). Where to go from here: Integration and future research on work engagement. In *Work engagement: A handbook of essential theory and research* (pp. 182–185). Psychology Press.

Blauner, R. (1964). *Alienation and freedom: The factory worker and his industry*. University of Chicago Press Ltd.

Boxenbaum, E., & Jonsson, S. (2017). Isomorphism, diffusion and decoupling: Concept evolution and theoretical challenges. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, T. B. Lawrence, & R. E. Meyer (Eds), *The Sage handbook of organizational institutionalism* (2nd ed., pp. 77–101). Sage publications.

Erikson, K. (1986). On work and alienation. *American Sociological Review*, *51*(1), 1–8.

Farndale, E., & Kelliher, C. (2013). Implementing performance appraisal: Exploring the employee experience. *Human Resource Management*, *52*(6), 879–897.

Gerth, H. H., & Mills, C. W. (1946). *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology*. Oxford University Press.

Goffman, E. (1957). Alienation from interaction. *Human Relations*, *10*(1), 47–60.

Han, S. H., Sung, M., & Suh, B. (2021). Linking meaningfulness to work outcomes through job characteristics and work engagement. *Human Resource Development International*, *24*(1), 3–22.

Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, *33*(4), 692–724.

Kanungo, R. N. (1979). The concepts of alienation and involvement revisited. *Psychological Bulletin*, *56*(1), 119–138.

Kanungo, R. N. (1982). Measurement of job and work involvement. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *3*, 341–319.

Kanungo, R. N. (1983). Work alienation: A pancultural perspective. *International Studies of Management and Organization*, *13*, 119–138.

Kanungo, R. N. (1990). Culture and work alienation: Western models and eastern realities. *International Journal of Psychology*, *25*, 795–812.

Kartal, N. (2018). Evaluating the relationship between work engagement, work alienation and work performance of healthcare professionals. *International Journal of Healthcare Management*, *11*(3), 251–259.

Kompaso, S. M., & Sridevi, M. S. (2010). Employee engagement: The key to improving performance. *International Journal of Business and Management*, *5*(12), 89.

Kong, F. Z., Zhao, L., Zhang, X. B., Tsai, C. H., & Lin, D. D. (2019). Farmers' work-life quality and entrepreneurship will in China. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *10*, 787.

Lemon, L. L. (2019). The employee experience: How employees make meaning of employee engagement. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *31*(5–6), 176–199.

Mahoney, T. A., & Deckop, J. R. (1986). Evolution of concept and practice in personnel administration/human resource management (PA/HRM). *Journal of Management*, *12*(2), 223–241.

Malik, A., Budhwar, P., Mohan, H., & Srikanth, N. R. (2022). Employee experience–the missing link for engaging employees: Insights from an MNE's AI-based HR ecosystem. *Human Resource Management*, *62*(1), 97–115.

Marques, T. M., Narciso, I., & Ferreira, L. C. (2022). How do family court judges theorize about parental alienation? A qualitative exploration of the territory. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(13), 7555.

Mendonca, M., & Kanungo, R. N. (1994). Managing human resources: The issue of cultural fit. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, *3*(2), 189–205.

Morrow, P. C. (1983). Concept redundancy in organizational research: The case of work commitment. *Academy of Management Review*, *8*(3), 486–500.

Nikolaidis, A. C. (2020). Concept proliferation as an educational good: Epistemic injustice, conceptual revolutions, and human flourishing. *Educational Theory*, *70*(4), 463–482.

Nuvolari, A. (2019). Understanding successive industrial revolutions: A 'development block' approach. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, *32*, 33–44.

Ouweneel, E., Le Blanc, P. M., Schaufeli, W. B., & van Wijhe, C. I. (2012). Good morning, good day: A diary study on positive emotions, hope, and work engagement. *Human Relations*, *65*(9), 1129–1154.

Pati, S. P., & Kumar, P. (2015). Work engagement & work alienation: Distinct or opposites? *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, *51*(1), 17–29.

Pillai, R., Ghanghorkar, Y., Sivathanu, B., Algharabat, R., & Rana, N. P. (2024). Adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) based employee experience (EEX) chatbots. *Information Technology & People*, *37*(1), 449–478.

Rathee, R., & Sharma, V. (2019). Workplace spirituality as a predictor of employee engagement. In S. K. Mishra & A. Varma (Eds), *Spirituality in Management: Insights from India* (pp. 153–168). Springer.

Rayce, S. B., Kreiner, S., Damsgaard, M. T., Nielsen, T., & Holstein, B. E. (2018). Measurement of alienation among adolescents: Construct validity of three scales on powerlessness, meaninglessness and social isolation. *Journal of Patient-Reported Outcomes*, *2*(1), 1–12.

Sanaria, A. D. (2013). *Exploring the conceptualization of work alienation in different cultural contexts*. Proceeding of the International Conference on Marketing Paradigms in Emerging Economies at iFEEL, Lonavala, India, 16 Feb 2013, pp. 1–35.

Schaufeli, W. B., Salanova, M., González-Romá, V., & Bakker, A. B. (2002). The measurement of engagement and burnout: A two sample confirmatory factor analytic approach. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *3*, 71–92.

Seeman, M. (1959). On the meaning of alienation. *American Sociological Review*, *24*(6), 783–791.

Seeman, M. (1967). On the personal consequences of alienation in work. *American Sociological Review*, *32*(2), 273–285.

Seeman, M. (1972). Alienation and knowledge-seeking: A note on attitude and action. *Social Problems*, *20*(1), 3–17.

Shantz, A., Alfes, K., Bailey, C., & Soane, E. (2015). Drivers and outcomes of work alienation: Reviving a concept. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, *24*(4), 382–393.

Thomas, K. W., & Velthouse, B. A. (1990). Cognitive elements of empowerment: An 'interpretive' model of intrinsic task motivation. *Academy of Management Review*, *15*(4), 666–681.

Tucker, E. (2020). Driving engagement with the employee experience. *Strategic HR Review*, *19*(4), 183–187.

Von Tunzelmann, N. (2003). Historical coevolution of governance and technology in the industrial revolutions. *Structural Change and Economic Dynamics*, *14*(4), 365–384.

Voth, H. J. (1996). *Why did working hours increase in eighteenth-century London? Labour supply decisions and consumer durables during the industrial revolution* (Working Papers 008). University of Oxford.

Welch, M. (2011). The evolution of the employee engagement concept: Communication implications. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, *16*(4), 328–346.