Impact of Employee Engagement and Enablement on Individual and Workplace Outcomes in the Australian Agricultural Industry

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Declaration

This report contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any University, and, to the best of my knowledge, this report contains no materials previously published except where due reference is made.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

List of Tables

Impact of Employee Engagement and Enablement on Individual and

Workplace Outcomes: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

In recent times, there has been an increased focus on engagement and enablement research and their association with employee wellbeing, performance and productivity outcomes. Despite mounting evidence on the positive outcomes of a highly engaged and enabled workforce, there is limited knowledge about the extent to which sociodemographic factors are associated with engagement outcomes, and even more limited, is how these factors impact employee enablement outcomes. Research continues to emphasise the importance of increasing evidence-based knowledge of the antecedents to work stress and burnout, particularly in high risk industries. This review analyses the literature on employee engagement and enablement in the workplace and the sociodemographic factors associated with them in the high-risk industry of farming and agriculture. Recommendations are presented for future research into how sociodemographic factors associated with employee engagement and enablement may aid in the development of workplace interventions to improve wellbeing and productivity outcomes.

Introduction

Operating a business in today's global economy comes with many challenges. In today's modern world with the advances of communication and technology, organisations are competing across borders with both local and international markets. Not only do they have competitors with regards to their products and services, they have competitors to their most valuable resource; their employees. Attracting and retaining skilled and productive employees has never been so important and employers are appreciating that having engaged employees in the right roles can significantly increase the sales and profitability of their business (Heymann, 2015). Many employers are now looking to find ways to engage and enable their workforce with many undertaking regular staff engagement surveys aimed at developing initiatives to drive and improve employee and organisational outcomes. Further, most employers have a legal obligation to ensure that they do everything they can to support and nurture the wellbeing of their employees while they are at work (Work Health & Safety Act, 2012).

Through recent research, engagement has been found to be a positive construct that alleviates the negative state of burnout and psychological distress (Anthony-McMann et. al., 2016; Kubicek, Korunka & Ulferts, 2013). Extended exposure to psychological stressors can lead to disengagement, emotional exhaustion and burnout (Leonardi et. al., 2013). Research has also shown that enabling factors such as self efficacy, social support, job resources and optimised job roles has a significant effect on reducing psychological distress. Specifically, levels of burnout decrease when these factors are present in the workplace (Kim & Wang, 2018). Employees who work long hours, have demanding job roles or work in geographically and socially isolated areas, such as those working in the farming and agricultural industries, are at particular risk of physical and psychological distress (Thelin & Holmberg, 2010). Those working in farming and agriculture are a unique group as their work

is tied to most other aspects of their lives due to the tight-knit and often multi-generational communities within which they work and live (Gregoire, 2002). They are also faced with unique stressors such as adverse climate events and rapid and significant social and economic change which can have an adverse impact on agricultural livelihoods and wellbeing (Polain, Berry and Hoskin, 2011). Further, those working in farming or agricultural communities often will not admit to nor seek help for physical or mental health problems thus making it especially important for their employers to provide a supportive environment that fosters engagement and enablement to maximise employee wellbeing (Judd et. al., 2006).

When assessing employee engagement and enablement, it is important to also take into consideration individual differences and sociodemographic factors such as age, gender, job location and job tenure, which have been shown to affect engagement, enablement, wellbeing and organisational outcomes (Brooke and Taylor, 2005; Brumby, Kennedy and Chandrasekara, 2013; Maden, 2014; Schaufeli, Bakker and Salanova, 2006). This paper reviews the current research on employee engagement, enablement and sociodemographic factors affecting employee wellbeing, performance, and productivity outcomes in the workplace. In addition, this paper reviews current research into employee wellbeing, performance and productivity in the field of agriculture to identify areas where future research could support the development of workplace interventions aimed at improving engagement and enablement of employees in this industry.

Employee Engagement

Workplace engagement has received considerable attention in recent times, both within academic literature and organisations (Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova, 2006; Chalofsky and Krishna, 2009; Cusack, 2009). Conceptualised by Kahn (1990), employee engagement was defined as "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves, physically, cognitively, and emotionally

during role performances". Employee engagement has also been described as "a positive work-related state of emotional and intellectual involvement that motivates employees to do their best work" (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter and Taris, 2008). Other definitions include "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised with vigor, dedication and absorption" (Schaufeli, Salanova, Roma and Bakker, 2002), and "the employee's sense of purpose and focused energy that is evident to others through the display of personal initiative, adaptability, effort, and persistence directed toward the organization's goals" (Macey and Schneider, 2008).

Kahn's (1990) model of employee engagement proposes that for employees to fully engage themselves in their work, three conditions must be met; meaningfulness (an employee's job tasks are worthwhile), safety (a work environment that is supportive and trustworthy), and availability (psychological, emotional and physical enablers available to them to effectively engage in their job tasks). Townsend & Gebhardt (2007) suggest all three of these conditions are within the control of an organisation's management and that employee engagement is changeable and can vary widely from one organisation to another. Further, it can be traced back to an organisation's leadership from the top down.

More organisations are recognising the need to shift away from the deficit-based approach of highlighting problems and delivering negative messages to employees and move toward a need for positivity in the workplace that includes supporting an employee's wellbeing to improve performance outcomes (Luthans et. al., 2010). As a consequence, organisations have begun to research and report on demonstrated indicators of employee engagement such as affective and continuance commitment (Meyer, Allen and Gellatly, 1990), discretionary effort (Meyer and Hersocovitch, 2001), and intention to leave (Meyer, Standley, Herscovitch and Topolnytsky, 2002) as a way of predicting employee outcomes. A common method of researching and reporting on employee engagement is via an engagement

survey. These assess engagement by measuring positive employee behaviour and commonly measure engagement concepts such as organisational commitment and attachment (Meyer, 1997). Typical questions in an engagement survey include "The goals of my organisation make me feel my job is important", "I am committed to this organisation", I am enthusiastic about the job I do", "my opinions are listened to by my bosses at work", and "At work, I am prepared to work hard, even when things do not go well" (Robertson and Cooper, 2009).

In essence, employee engagement encompasses an employee's involvement with their job tasks, the enthusiasm for the tasks and their motivation to work.

Employee Enablement

Further to employee engagement, previous research has suggested that an employee's performance and wellbeing is fully realised when workplace enabling factors are present. Agut and Peiro (2005) found a link between an employee's engagement levels and the amount of necessary job resources available to them to perform their job well. When employees felt enabled in their job roles by having access to the necessary resources to get the job done along with a supportive work environment, perceived barriers were diminished and engagement increased leading to more positive business outcomes. Permana et. al., (2015) propose adequacy of work equipment and supplies, job design, supportive working environment and infrastructure as key drivers of enablement. In short, enablement is about ensuring the right employees are matched to the right job roles within an organisation where their skills and abilities are used to their full potential and where the employee feels their talents are being leveraged (Nohria, Groysberg & Lee, 2008). A supportive environment is one in which there is the right structure in place to facilitate employee productivity. A supportive environment is an environment providing work enabling resources (e.g. information technology, work equipment) to 'get the job done' as well as providing positive working conditions such as supportive leadership and flexible working arrangements,

creating an environment that encourages performance motivation (Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007).

As a whole, workplace resources encompass several organisational aspects such as physical, social and psychological, and woven together vastly improve facilitation of goal achievement, reduce job-related stress and workload as well as providing learning and development opportunities (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli, 2001). For example, positive relationships between employees and their managers and peers can reduce job-related stress (Humphrey, Nahrgng, and Morgenson, 2007), and cohesive teams aid job and task sharing, effectively easing the workload on each individual employee. If there is a lack of these positive relationships and cohesive teams within an organisation, low performance, disengagement and even burnout can prevail (Bakker, Demerouti, and Euwena, 2005).

Employee Engagement and Enablement and their influence on employee wellbeing

High employee engagement has been shown to have many benefits to not only the organisation, but to the employee themselves (Britt, 2003; Kubicek, Korunka & Ulferts, 2013; Salanova, Agut and Peiro, 2005). Achieving and maintaining a highly engaged and enabled workforce is becoming increasingly important as employees spend more and more time at work, either in the office or at home. Organisations with high levels of employee engagement often report higher levels of overall employee health and their employees report lower levels of job-related stress, important in reducing work-related psychological distress outcomes such as burnout and lost productivity (Harter, Schmidt and Hayes, 2012). Burnout is a state of becoming exhausted due to excessive demands on one's energy, strength and resources (Freudenberger, 1974; Bakker, Demerouti and Sanz-Vergel, 2014). Burnout often occurs from an individual's extended exposure to work-related psychological stressors culminating in emotional exhaustion, reduced personal accomplishment, depersonalisation

and disengagement (Leonardi, et. al., 2013). Burnout has been shown to negatively impact a person both at home and at work with correlated stress-related conditions and illnesses such as anxiety, depression and substance abuse spilling over into the workplace causing 'on-site' disruption and conflict with colleagues (Maslach et. al, 2001).

In fact, it has been suggested that employee engagement is an antithesis to burnout, and many of the negative consequences of stress in the workplace can be overcome by increasing engagement (Freeney and Tiernan, 2006; Maslach and Leiter, 2008; Rupert, Miller & Dorociak, 2015). A study by Britt, Castro and Adler (2005), noticed soldiers who were high in workplace engagement, when working long hours and managing difficult and challenging tasks, were able to ward off the negative consequences of stress more easily than those who were less engaged. The latest State of the Global Workplace analysis by Gallup (2017), an ongoing study of the impact of employee engagement on organisational and individual performance in workplaces in more than 140 countries, found only 15% of employees reported being engaged worldwide (Gallup, 2017). The need to further engage employees to aid in alleviating the negative consequences of job-related stress and drive has never been greater.

Employee Engagement and Enablement and Their Influence on Workplace Outcomes

According to Robinson, Perryman and Hayday (2004), engaged employees are "aware of business context, and work with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organization". Conversely, stressed, exhausted and disengaged employees are less productive and produce a much lower quality of work when compared to their engaged colleagues (George and Zakkariya, 2015). Employees who are not engaged can have a negative financial impact on an organisation. Organisations with high levels of employee engagement have been shown to have significantly higher rates of productivity, higher rates of customer loyalty and stronger profitability outcomes (Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina,

2002). Research by Christian, Garza and Slaughter (2011) found when employee engagement increased, so too did customer satisfaction, loyalty, employee turnover, productivity and profitability. In fact, Schauefli and Salanova (2007) suggest that team members can become engaged by 'catching' the positive emotions and behaviours from highly engaged others, suggesting it is both an individual and collective 'engagement' contamination.

It has been suggested that disengaged employees tend not to operate at their optimal performance level thereby working against the best interests of the organisation by taking up salary and benefit resources (Ayers, 2006). According to Ayers, disengaged employees are a liability and having a low engaged workforce can slowly erode an organisation affecting overall organisational outcomes.

A study by Demerouti, Bakker and Gevers (2015) found that employees who were engaged and sought resources at work were more likely to flourish and perform better in their job role. Similarly, Martinez-Tur, Peiro, and Ramos (2005), found when employees had a supportive environment with the necessary resources for them to perform their work effectively, workplace barriers were removed, engagement prevailed and a highly customer-focused workforce was ignited.

One way of improving employee engagement and enablement is to provide a supportive environment. A supportive environment is one in which necessary resources are available for an employee to get the job done and accomplish their role expectations effectively, such as person-job fit, performance enabling equipment and clarity of in-role tasks (Jex, Adams, Bachrach & Sorenson, 2003). A lack of these resources has been shown to have a negative impact on employees (Yunsoo et. al., 2017).   For the aforementioned reasons, employee engagement and enablement are constructs of increasing interest for employers. Further, these constructs are also of increasing interest to academics and

researchers, many of whom are acknowledging their superior predictive validity to employee

outcomes such as performance, when compared to other predictors in organisational

management such as commitment and job satisfaction (Barnes and Collier, 2013).

Sociodemographic and job-related factors and their influence on employee engagement

and enablement

Age.

There have been significant changes over the last couple of decades in demographics

worldwide. Specifically, there has been a gain of around 30 years in life expectancy in

Europe, USA, Canada, Japan, Australia and New Zealand (Christensen, Doblhammer, Rau

and Jaupel, 2009). The proportion of older people is growing, the age of the average

employee is increasing and organisations are becoming more age diverse with older

employees continuing to participate in paid work for longer (Fisher, Chaffee and Sonnega,

2016). As ageing affects biological, social and psychological functioning over time,

organisations are facing new challenges in managing employees across the age spectrum as

people of different ages perceive and react differently to their workplace environment

(Hertel, et.al, 2013). As we grow older, there are substantive age-related physical and mental

ability changes that occur and can be categorised as losses or gains in the workplace. For

example, age-related physical and mental gains, such as occupational expertise and wisdom,

and more effective coping mechanisms, are thought to improve an employee's functioning at

work (Jex, Wang and Zarubin, 2007). Older workers are however, likely to experience

stereotyping whereby they are discriminated against because of their age (Nelson, 2005).

According to Ng and Feldman (2012), they may be seen as less competent, less able to learn

new skills, less innovative and more resistant to change. These misconceptions can lead to

the older worker feeling disconnected from their peers culminating in a loss of motivation

and affective commitment leading to disengagement (Brooke and Taylor, 2005; Oliveira and Cabral Cardoso, 2018)

A more age diverse workforce provides unique sets of challenges for managers. For instance, some studies have shown that there is a negative impact on the workplace outcomes of those who have a younger supervisor (Tsui, Porter and Egan, 2002), however others have found that no such relationship exists (Liden, Stilwell and Ferris, 1996). Interestingly, a recent study by Yang and Matz-Costa (2017) found employees were more engaged with older supervisors than supervisors of a similar age, however when employees did not know the age of their supervisors, similar engagement levels were reported. Diverse teams promote creativity, problem solving and increased innovation. However, they also bring a higher need for communication, and improved coordination and conflict management between different working styles and perceptions (Hertel et. al., 2013). Employers are becoming increasingly more interested in ways to engage and enable their older employees in the global competition for talent in order to retain them in the workplace thus avoiding skill shortages and organisational specific knowledge loss (Lavin and Evans, 2013).

At the same time, there are challenges with finding ways to engage and enable multiple generations within the workforce at the same time. Millennials (those born 1982 – 2000), for example cannot be ignored as this generation of employees is critical to the future of an organisation as they move into management positions (Chou, 2012). Millennials, as a generation also have vastly different expectations than those of the baby boomers (those born 1946 - 1964) and earlier generations. Unlike their counterparts, millennials are entrenched in the use of, and advancement of, workplace technology and expect information sharing regardless of their position within the organisation (Hershatter and Epstein, 2010; Myers and Sadaghiani, 2010). Further, millennials seek meaning in their work and as asserted by Schullery (2013), engagement is crucial to gain and retain employees of this generation.

Therefore, to improve overall employee engagement and organisational outcomes across an age diverse workforce, it is imperative that these differences in work styles and perceptions are managed successfully.

Gender.

According to Gilbert et. al. (2003), although many companies have made changes and implemented practices to address inequality in the workplace, there may still be a level of inequality between genders. Employees need to feel that they are treated fairly and to get high levels of engagement, they need to also feel management are not exercising preferential treatment based on gender.

Research has shown that engaged employees often go above and beyond what is typically specified of them in their job contracts or position descriptions and have a vigor and enthusiasm that increased energy levels and mental resilience (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008; Markos and Sridevi, 2010). Some studies have found that males have a lower vulnerability to occupational stress and emotional exhaustion than females with females reporting more incidences of burnout than their male counterparts (Sprang, Clark, and Whitt-Woosley, 2007; Schadenhofer et. al., 2017). As previously mentioned, engagement has been shown to be an antithesis to burnout, and improving employee engagement and enablement may increase job satisfaction, decrease conflict and increase productivity (Kumar and Pansari, 2015). Of these three, employee job satisfaction in particular has been considered an indicator of engagement (Saks, 2006), however studies of gender differences in job satisfaction have found few significant results. Results from a study by Dole and Schroeder (2001) on job satisfaction in a group of professional accountants did not yield a significant overall difference between the genders, although it should be noted that occupational setting and decision-making authority were found to have influenced the relationship. Oshagbemi (2003) found similar results and when both males and females were provided with equal education (in conjunction with equal

opportunity to apply their learned knowledge and skills) and equal employment and advancement opportunities, there were no differences in job satisfaction. Few studies have specifically explored the relationship between gender and employee engagement and enablement as overall constructs. A study by Schaufeli, Bakker and Salanova (2006) of employee engagement in nine different occupations across 10 different countries yielded contradictory results. There was no relationship found between engagement and gender in the Australian, Canadian and French samples, however a weak relationship was found between work engagement and gender in the Belgian, Finnish, and Norwegian samples, showing the males to be slightly more engaged than the females. However the reverse was found in the South African, Dutch and Spanish samples with the results showing the females were slightly more engaged than the males. The Cohen's d effect size of the findings was very low, meaning whilst the findings were significant, the strength of the result was weak and the authors deemed the low effects hindered the practical significance of the findings.

Job Location.

Research has shown that people who live and work in rural areas face unique challenges when compared to their urban counterparts (Cosgrave, Hussain and Maple, 2015; Nickson, Gair & Miles, 2016). The geographical isolation or working in a rural town and living within a rural community can bring with it stressors such as trouble recruiting and retaining staff, workforce shortages leading to increased workloads, difficulty in distancing themselves from customers or clients, being constantly 'on call' and feeling isolated from other areas of the organisation (Bourke et. al., 2012). In addition, the proportion of younger adults moving from rural locations to urban locations is increasing, resulting in the loss of younger families in the community leading to smaller remaining work and family networks on which to draw for support (Beard et. al., 2009). These stressors can have a substantial impact on the psychological and physical wellbeing of employees working in these rural

locations and if not appropriately managed, can lead to psychological distress and increase

negative health behaviours such as a lack of physical exercise and increased alcohol

consumption (Brumby, Kennedy and Chandrasekara, 2013).

People working in the field of agriculture face additional unique challenges placing

them in a particularly vulnerable position when it comes to their psychological and physical

wellbeing. Agricultural employees often work long hours, take fewer vacations and have

workplace physical demands unique to their occupation such as handling livestock and heavy

machinery (Perceval, Fuller and Holley, 2011). They are also faced with stressors such as

excessive rain and drought (Alston and Kent, 2008), pests and disease (Peck, McArthur and

Godden, 2002), and climate change (Berry et. al., 2011). Incredibly, two-thirds of Australia's

vast land is used for farming, and the produce farmed on this land supplies around 90% of

Australia's food (Brew et. al., 2016). When one ponders these facts, it becomes clear how

very important the agricultural, farming and rural communities are to Australia as a whole.

As many of the individuals in these communities hold a wide variety of different occupations

such as farmers, salespersons, agriculturists, and healthcare workers to name a few, it is

important that their wellbeing and livelihood is looked after and supported by those who

employ them.

People living and working in farming and agricultural communities can be susceptible

to 'rural stoicism' and culture of 'self-reliance' whereby they fear the social stigma that may

come from seeking help from a professional, or to admit one's health is a sign of weakness

(Fuller et. al., 2001). A study by Barney, Griffiths, Form and Christensen (2006) sampled

from communities in New South Wales, Australia found that self- and perceived-stigma

significantly reduces the incidence of an individual seeking help from any source. These

factors substantially increase the risk, and contribute to, psychological and physical distress

going untreated potentially leading to detrimental health outcomes, including burnout (Judd et. al., 2006).

A study by Judd et. al. (2006), found that those working in farming and agricultural communities experienced a wide range of stressors that the individuals were unable or unwilling to acknowledge. They were less likely to express concerns about their levels of stress with others and were less likely to seek help than those working and living outside of the community. Further, it has been found that those working in agriculture and amongst farming communities lack confidence in health professionals and exhibit a strong preference to manage their health needs themselves (Staniford, Dollard, and Guerin, 2009). In addition, they may also face a lack of readily available services due to remoteness with barriers not experienced by their urban counterparts such as transport and distance (Brew et. al., 2016). Notably, where the culture in these rural or isolated areas influences the help-seeking outcomes of those living within them, it is even more critical that employers take an active approach by providing an alternative support network to inform and share information on mental health and wellbeing.

Job Role.

Work control has been shown in the literature to be an important aspect of the psychosocial work environment and perceived levels of control can vary according to job type (Chiang, Birtch and Kwan, 2010; Karkoulian, Srour and Sinan, 2016). Those in higher level occupations with a great deal of autonomy and decision making capability may perceive these aspects of the role as a low source of stress when compared to those in lower level occupations; e.g. clerical and administration workers (Narayanan, Menon and Spector, 1999). A study of registered nurses working in Dutch home-care organisations found that nurses who perceived more control and autonomy in their roles showed higher levels or work engagement and were less likely to leave their employer (Maurits et. al., 2015).

Stressors and coping mechanisms have also been shown to differ as a function of job type. A meta-analysis of levels of psychological distress across working-age populations by Milner et. al. (2018) found a stepwise-gradient of risk across job skill-level groups. An analysis of 34 studies found workers in blue collar, lower-skill professions such as packers, labourers and agricultural workers, were at an elevated risk of psychological distress than those in higher-skill professions, such as teachers, accountants and managers/executives. However, earlier research has shown some white collar professions such as doctors, dentists and veterinarians have been found to be at a significantly elevated risk of psychological distress and suicide (Charlton, 1995; Meltzer et. al., 2008). Contrary findings can also be found in recent research, suggesting risk of psychological distress is currently trending down in occupations such as dentistry (Jones, Cotter and Birch, 2016) and limitations and methodological flaws such as conflicting categories for specific occupations, undifferentiated skill levels and failure to take into consideration stressors not related to work have confounded the results of historical studies (Anderson et. al., 2010).

A review of the available research in this area indicates a clear imbalance in findings, with studies on the relationship between psychological distress and job role dominating the findings compared to those examining the more positive constructs of engagement and wellbeing. Additional research is recommended to investigate factors that promote workplace engagement and positive workplace experiences in line with the recent shift in organisational psychology toward fostering a more positive approach to employee wellbeing (Meyers, Van Woerkom and Bakker, 2013).

Tenure.

Job tenure is defined as the number of years an employee has spent in a job and has been shown to be a critical factor affecting engagement and turnover (Maden, 2014). Coffman & Gonzalez-Molina (2002) found when an employee starts a new job, they are

engaged, energised and are driven to take responsibility for their job tasks and outcomes, however after only six months, less than half still remain engaged (38%) and after ten years, only a fifth (20%). In fact, it is common that people may encounter a number of different workplace experiences as they move through their working life and that work attitudes will continue to change as they progress in their careers (Jans, 1989). Employees may experience new growth or disestablishment in their jobs as they cycle through their career leading them into a maintenance phase or into an exploration phase where they feel they are ready for a change of occupation and begin searching for a new job (Zunker, 2002). Nevertheless, career development and career experiences differ from individual to individual.

Unlike earlier career stage theories which were focused on more traditional, age-related hierarchical systems (Super, 1973), today's workforce is filled with vastly different cohorts encompassing young millennial entrepreneurs through to older generational employees with a lifetime of experience approaching retirement. Thus, traditional career progression theories solely associated with age are no longer as applicable as they once were in modern workplaces. For example a study by Bedeian, Ferris and Kacmar (1992), found that job tenure was a more stable predictor of job satisfaction than chronological age. However this does not necessarily mean that the longer someone is in a job role, the more satisfied they are in that role. Karatepe and Karatepe (2010) obtained data from a sample of front-line hotel employees and found that job tenure can inadvertently be used by an employee as a buffer to stress and job strain. As an employee's work experience in a role accumulates, their vulnerability to role conflict and stress declines leading them to develop stronger bonds with their job as well as the company in which they work. The downside is that this situation may make it more difficult for that person to leave their job even if they are feeling unsatisfied and disengaged leading to negative outcomes for the individual as well the company. In support, Clark, Oswald and Warr (1996) found that the longer an employee stays in their job, the

greater the chance they will become bored and locked into routine activity, leading to lost productivity. That said, overall the literature supports the general 'rule of thumb' that if an employee is dissatisfied in their job, they are more likely to resign, whereas those who feel satisfied will stay (Anuradha, Lakshmi and Ghuman, 2017).

Conclusion

Workplace factors promoting employee engagement are well documented in the literature, however less so, employee enablement. Sociodemographic factors such as age, gender, job tenure and job location and their impact on employee engagement and enablement remain underexplored. Gaining an understanding of how these sociodemographic factors impact employee engagement and enablement outcomes may be the key to mitigating the risks associated with those working in high risk industries such as the agricultural industry. Further research is recommended to gather sociodemographic data and engagement and enablement perceptions of those working in the field of agriculture. This will promote a better understanding of whether the aforementioned sociodemographic factors are able to provide a gateway to improving employee engagement and enablement of this workforce with the aim to improve the wellbeing of employees as well as promote performance and business outcomes.

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Impact of Employee Engagement and Enablement on Individual and Workplace Outcomes in the Australian Agricultural Industry

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Abstract

Research has shown that Employees who are engaged and enabled are more motivated, productive, and exhibit enhanced levels of wellbeing, important factors in working and operating in today's competitive global market. While having engaged and enabled employees has been shown to boost individual and organisational outcomes such as higher productivity, decreased turnover and better employee wellbeing, little is known about how these constructs are associated with wellbeing and productivity in the agricultural sector. This exploratory study investigated the overall levels of engagement and enablement of employees working in an Australian national agricultural organisation, and examined the extent to which sociodemographic variables such as age, gender, job location, job title and tenure contributed to their levels of engagement and enablement. The study utilised responses from an employee effectiveness survey completed by 1,469 permanent employees located across six states and territories in Australia. Results revealed level of engagement significantly differed according to gender and job role, however not according to age, job location or tenure. These results suggest that sociodemographic factors play a somewhat important part in understanding employee engagement and these findings support the development of future studies and workplace initiatives to improve engagement and enablement in the agricultural industry.

Keywords: employee, engagement, enablement, agriculture, sociodemographic

Introduction

Attracting and retaining engaged and productive employees has become increasingly important as an increasing number of organisations compete both locally and internationally. Operating in the ever-changing and competitive global market highlights the contribution engaged and enabled employees make to the success of a business and the critical value of the employee-organisation relationship (Eldor and Vigoda-Gadot, 2017). A working definition of employee engagement as described by Macey et. al. (2009) is an employee's focused energy and sense of purpose shown through initiative, adaptability, effort and persistence toward personal and organisational goals. Engagement has also been described as an employee's emotional and intellectual positive work-related state that drives motivation to do their best work (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter and Taris, 2008). There has been a recent shift away from the deficit-based approach of highlighting problems aimed at decreasing disengagement, to a more supportive approach of improving positivity and wellbeing to foster engagement and improved performance (Luthans, Avey, Avolio and Peterson, 2010). A supportive approach includes providing an environment where employees are matched to the right roles, where they feel their talents are being leveraged, and one where there is infrastructure in place to drive enablement (Permana et. al., 2015; Nohria, Groysberg and Lee, 2008).

Employees are spending more and more time at work either in the home or office (Dockery and Bawa, 2014). This inability to 'switch off' can lead to employees feeling exhausted, cynical, ineffective and chronically stressed progressively leading to psychological distress and even burnout (Maslach and Leiter, 2008). Burnout is a negative antipode to workplace engagement and enablement that has been shown to not only negatively impact an individual's physical and mental health, but also their overall wellbeing in the workplace (Peterson et. al., 2008). Exposure to these psychological and physical

stressors tends to be emphasised in industries such as agriculture (Hirsch and Cukrowicz, 2014) and those working in rural locations (Cosgrave, Hussain and Maple, 2015). Working in these industries and locations is demanding and workers are susceptible to a wide range of stressors such as isolation, financial stress and perceived lack of work and social support (Stain et., al., 2008). Further, they are exposed to adverse climate events such as drought and climate change (Alston, 2012). The rural communities in which they work and live have unique characteristics with multi-generational families working and living in close proximity often with significant overlap between workplace and home and intergenerational business partnerships (Handley et. al., 2012). These stressors and unique community characteristics are recognised risks to mental health and wellbeing and a study of rural workers in South Australia and Victoria in Australia found almost a third of the workers exhibited moderate to high levels of psychological distress (Kilkkinen et al, 2007). Further, farmers and agricultural workers are less likely than their urban counterparts to seek help and support for physical and mental health problems (Judd et. al., 2006).

Not surprisingly, these factors place those working in these environments at risk of emotional exhaustion, fatigue and disengagement from work potentially leading to psychological distress which can have a detrimental effect on the individual and the organisation (Demerouti, Mostert & Bakker, 2010). Therefore, it could be considered that agricultural workers are a vulnerable population and it may be particularly pertinent to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that may affect engagement and enablement outcomes and find ways of fostering engagement and enablement within the agricultural industry to aid in the livelihood and wellbeing of those employed in this industry.

Employee Engagement and Enablement

Employee Engagement is not a new term in organisational psychology and has been researched for nearly three decades since Kahn (1990) conceptualised the major terms of the

construct. Kahn (1990) described engagement as employees' expressing themselves physically, emotionally and cognitively during their work roles. He proposed that for an employee to fully engage themselves in their work, they must find meaningfulness in their job role, operate in an environment that is supportive and trustworthy and have psychological, emotional and physical enablers available to them. Through further research, engagement has also been found to encompass an employee's overall sense of purpose and focused energy (Macey et. al., 2009), is characterised by vigor, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli et. al., 2002), and is linked with performance outcome variables such as discretionary effort and overall performance (Rich, LePine and Crawford, 2010). Employee engagement in particular has been shown to improve overall employee wellbeing, increase productivity, decrease attrition, improve financial returns and improve a company's overall reputation (Sluss, Klimchak and Holmes, 2008). Contrary to this, stressed and disengaged employees are less productive (George and Zakkariya, 2015) and can have a substantial negative impact on the business (Brit et. al., 2007; Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina, 2002).

Environments that do not support and facilitate success can have a negative impact on individual and business outcomes leading to a disengaged workforce. Disengaged employees lose motivation, become frustrated and emotionally disconnected resulting in diminished performance increasing the risk of burnout (Britt et. al., 2007). Burnout has been compared with disengagement in that employees who are disengaged withdraw from the job physically, emotionally and cognitively which in turn, likens it to a state of burnout (Freeney & Tiernen, 2006). Therefore, it is important that workplaces find ways to maximise employee engagement to aid in mitigating the negative effects of disengagement in those working in potentially vulnerable industries such as agriculture.

Recent organisational psychology and management research has also found that to truly empower a workforce, employee enablement also needs to be cultivated (Del Rowe, 2018).

An enabled workforce is one in which employees are supplied with the necessary job resources, such as information technology and work enabling equipment to 'get the job done'. Employees will be truly enabled when these resources are also accompanied by supportive leadership, continuous learning opportunities and flexible working arrangements (Humphrey, Nahrgang and Morgeson, 2007). Job resources have been shown to alleviate some job-related strain indicating that companies could, to some extent, mitigate the impacts of stress by providing resources to their employees (Bakker & Demerouti, 2006). However, individual job roles should be considered when allocating resources; for example autonomy may be considered a resource in a corporate role, however for a regional/rural role, may be considered unsafe or isolating, therefore turning it from a resource into a demand (Bakker, Demerouti and Euwema, 2005).

Well designed and meaningful job roles that are aligned to the skills and abilities of the employee will improve employee wellbeing and performance (Nohria, Groysberg & Lee, 2008). Consideration should be given to the level of skill, amount of technical knowledge and level of responsibility and decision making capability required for a role. Junior roles given too much accountability can lead to the employee feeling overwhelmed and 'out of their depth' (Hay Group, 2003). Senior roles given too little accountability can lead to the employee feeling bored and unchallenged leading them to leave the business to seek greater responsibility elsewhere (McCormick, McMullen & Sperling, 2007). Work environments that support their employees with the resources they require to perform their job roles more effectively ignite performance motivation and aid in employees realising their full potential (Nohria, Groysberg and Lee, 2008). For the aforementioned reasons, more organisations are increasing their focus on establishing ways to maximise engagement and enablement in their workforces to improve employee and business-related outcomes (Anitha, 2014).

The Australian Agricultural Industry

As at 30 June 2017 there were 394 million hectares of agricultural land in Australia. Agricultural organisations operated across just over half (51%) of Australia's total land area during 2016/17 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Further, at the time of the latest Australian Census in 2016, 2.3 million people were living in small towns, almost 10% of the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Incredibly, two-thirds of Australia's land is used for farming purposes producing close to 90% of Australia's food (Brew et. al., 2016).

Agriculturalists and those working in agricultural and rural communities face unique stressors such as geographical isolation, workforce and skill shortages, overlap of workplace and home, and difficulty in maintaining professional boundaries with customers and clients (Bourke et. al., 2012). In addition, they are also exposed to adverse climatic events such as prolonged and severe drought, pests and disease, causing them great distress (Alston, 2012). In fact, farmers and agricultural workers in Australia are at a high risk of psychological distress and even suicide (Hirsch and Cukrowicz, 2014).

To date, a majority of empirical studies on the wellbeing of those working in rural and isolated areas have focused on employees working in the fields of healthcare (emergency services, youth and community health workers), mining and farming, and professions such as nurses, doctors and teachers (Lester et. al., 2016; Varker et. al., 2018; Newhook, 2010; Healy and Tyrell, 2011; Morrison, 2013; Gregoire, 2002). Research in this area also typically focuses on psychological stress, burnout and suicide. Less is known about factors associated with employee engagement and enablement of those who work in the field of agriculture, particularly in Australia. This study seeks to identify and better understand factors that may affect the levels of employee engagement and enablement of those working in agriculture to provide insight into how to improve and support wellbeing and productivity.

Sociodemographic and job-related factors

Understanding whether employee engagement and enablement differ according to individual differences and sociodemographic factors such as age, gender, job location and job tenure may help organisations better understand which specific behaviours and initiatives may be the most beneficial to maximise engagement and enablement outcomes. Age, gender, job location, job role and job tenure have all been shown to be associated with differences in levels of engagement and enablement in employees affecting individual wellbeing and organisational outcomes across industries (Brumby, Kennedy and Chandrasekara, 2013; Garcia-Bernal et. al., 2005; Maden, 2014; Walden, Jung and Westerman, 2017).

Age.

The research to date on the relationship between age and employee engagement and enablement has been limited and has yielded contradictory results. A study by Robinson, Perryman and Hayday (2004) found engagement levels declined with age, however contrary to this, Pitt-Catsouphes and Matz-Costa (2008) found older employees (those aged 45 and over) had higher levels of engagement than their younger counterparts. A more recent study indicated younger employees need to be intrinsically motivated and find meaningfulness in their work to be engaged whereas older employees are engaged whether these factors are present or not (Kordbacheh, Shultz and Olsen, 2014). Understanding age differences is becoming increasingly important as an ageing population increases the average age of working employees resulting in organisations harbouring more age diverse workforces (Hertel et. al., 2013). Older employees are also continuing to participate in paid work for longer (Fisher, Chaffee and Sonnega, 2016).

Employees from multiple generations such as baby boomers (those born 1946 - 1964) and millennials (those born 1982 - 2000) are now working together and can have quite different work styles and views on the importance of workplace technology, information

flow, and support affecting their work engagement and commitment (Walden, Jung and Westerman, 2017). Millennials in particular bring their technological expertise and creativity to the workplace and are seen as crucial to the workforce of the future (Schullery, 2013). Baby boomers however, are particularly important when it comes to retaining experience and skill in the workforce (Montague, Burgess and Connell, 2015). For example, age-related physical and mental gains, such as occupational expertise and wisdom, and more effective coping mechanisms, are thought to improve an employee's functioning at work (Jex, Wang and Zarubin, 2007). It is therefore important to understand how age differences affect employee engagement and enablement outcomes, better placing organisations in a position to improve employee wellbeing and performance outcomes as they spend a larger portion of their lives in the workplace. Due to the lack of empirical evidence of the relationship between age and engagement and enablement, the current study will examine this relationship.

Gender.

Despite ongoing research and workplace interventions, gender inequality in the workplace persists (Michailidis, Morphitou and Theophylatou, 2012; Williams, Kilanski and Muller, 2014). Engaged employees are often highly committed, both emotionally and by task, to their roles in the workplace and need to feel they are treated fairly by management regardless of their gender (Gilbert et. al., 2003). Studies on whether gender differences influence levels of employee engagement have found males are generally more engaged than females and less prone to workplace stress and burnout (Sharma, Goel, and Sengupta, 2017; Shadenhofer et. al., 2017). However, findings on gender vulnerability to workplace stress and burnout have been mixed with some studies finding a higher vulnerability for females than for males (Schadenhofer et. al., 2017; Sprang, Clark and Whitt-Woosley, 2007) while others have found little to no differences between the genders. (O'Neill and Davis, 2011).

At the time of this literature review, the author could not locate any previous studies directly examining the relationship between gender and employee enablement as a specific construct in the Australian agricultural industry, and few examining employee engagement. The lack of research to date specifically exploring gender differences and employee engagement and enablement, indicates a significant gap in the literature. Understanding if engagement and enablement differs by gender may help organisations understand how to tailor gender specific interventions, therefore this study will investigate the gender differences in employee engagement and enablement.

Job Location.

Employees who work in rural or isolated areas face additional unique challenges when compared to those of their urban counterparts (Cosgrave, Hussain and Maple, 2015). Of the 24 million people living in Australia, 8.8 million live in regional areas; approximately one third of Australia's population (Brown, 2017). Australia's rural communities consist of a variety of different workers such as farmers, agriculturalists, educators and healthcare workers, all of whom are operating in a climate where there is an elevated risk of physical and psychological distress (Caldwell, Jorm and Dear, 2004).

A proportion of young adults move from rural to urban locations due to touch climatic conditions and limited educational, career and recreational opportunities (Quine et. al., 2003). This leads to a loss of younger families in the community resulting in smaller social and work networks that are able to offer support (Beard et. al., 2009). Continuous exposure to such stressors can have a negative impact on employees working in rural locations increasing the risk of negative health behaviours such as lack of formal physical exercise and increased substance use (Brumby, Kennedy and Chandrasekara, 2013).

Employees working in rural locations are often separated physically from their managers/supervisors and their work peers and being geographically isolated can have a

significant impact on an employee's level of engagement and connectedness (Perceval et. al., 2018). Many express a desire to build professional support networks and to connect and build trusted relationships face-to-face rather than by telephone or online services (Mbemba, Gagnon and Hamelin-Brabant, 2016). When one considers the unique stressors of those working in rural locations, it appears especially important for employers to take an active approach by providing a strong source of occupational support to improve and enhance employee wellbeing.

Job Role.

Employees working in the challenging industry of agriculture face an elevated risk of psychological distress, however in addition, research indicates there may be a stepwise risk of psychological distress according to occupation (Milner et. al., 2018). Workplace stressors and coping mechanisms have been shown to vary across occupations due to unique situations and conditions specific to each job (Narayanan, Menon and Spector, 1999). Milner et. al. (2018) found that there was a greater risk of psychological distress in workers in lower skilled occupations such as packers and labourers, than higher level occupations. However, findings are mixed with some studies reporting significantly elevated risk of psychological distress and suicide for some higher skilled professions such as doctors, dentists and veterinarians (Charlton, 1995; Meltzer et. al. 2008), while others reporting the risk for these professions is significantly declining (Jones, Cotter and Birch, 2016).

Perceived levels of control can also vary according to job type (Thomas and Ganster, 1995) with those with more autonomy and decision making capability showing higher levels of work engagement and commitment (Maurits et. al., 2015). The majority of research to date in this area has focused on psychological distress and suicide with few studies researching factors associated with promotion of positive workplace experiences such as improving employee engagement and enablement. This study will examine the relationship

between job role and employee engagement and enablement. Stretching this research further may elucidate additional information to improve organisational capability systems aimed at increasing levels of engagement and enablement.

Tenure.

Job tenure is defined as the number of years an employee has spent in a job and has been shown to be a critical factor affecting job satisfaction and turnover due to its potential buffering effect on stress and job strain, reducing conflict and increasing greater engagement (Maden, 2014). In today's tough global economic conditions, it is important to retain your most skilled and productive staff suggesting tenure may be an important factor worthy of further investigation. In industries where a large amount of staff are located in rural and remote areas, recruitment and retention of skilled staff is hindered due to factors such as limited access to shopping, schools and medical services, therefore determining the factors that contribute to higher levels of employee engagement and enablement to retain skilled and engaged employees may be critical (Mone et. al., 2011).

While literature supports the notion that if an employee is satisfied in their role within an organisation, the more likely it is that they will stay (Anuradha, Lakshmi and Ghuman, 2017), this may not always mean the employee is engaged (Karatepe and Karatepe, 2010). In fact, it has been shown that that while an employee may be engaged and energised when commencing a role; this can quickly fade as they experience different workplace experiences affecting their work attitudes and outcomes (Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina, 2002). Further, while longer job tenure may act as a buffer to stress and job strain, it may also lead to boredom and a loss of productivity (Clark, Oswald and Warr, 1996). There has been limited research that has shown tenure as a significant variable on engagement and enablement outcomes and the results are inconsistent, begging the question as to whether increasing

engagement and enablement levels of longer term employees may improve retention of staff, particularly where there are skill shortages.

There appears to be a limited amount of empirical research on the relationship between employee engagement and enablement and sociodemographic variables such as age, gender, work location, job title and tenure. It may be important to further understand the impact of these variables on an individual's level of engagement and enablement to not only gain a better overall understanding of these two constructs, but also gain a deeper understanding of their impact on engagement and enablement outcomes both for individuals, organisations and industries that are at a higher risk of psychological and physical distress such as the agricultural industry.

Present Study

Previous studies have explored the phenomenon of workplace engagement in industries such as teaching, corporate business and healthcare; few have explored this in the agricultural sector and even fewer, if any, have explored engagement and enablement contemporaneously. Exploring engagement and enablement in employees working in the field of agriculture provides a theoretical framework from which to understand and enhance employee wellbeing and performance outcomes in this industry. The purpose of this study is to determine how work engagement and enablement outcomes are associated with employee sociodemographic factors such as age, gender, job location, job position and tenure.

This study extends research on employee engagement and enablement and will examine a range of factors associated with employee wellbeing and performance outcomes in the agricultural industry sector. Further, the study aims to further the invaluable research within organisational psychology aimed at improving wellbeing in the workplace to contribute a theoretical understanding of engagement and enablement as an antipode to psychological distress and to encourage individual wellbeing. Understanding which factors may improve

the wellbeing, performance and commitment of employees is an important requirement for

well-targeted workplace engagement and enablement interventions within the Australian

agriculture industry.

This study investigated the following research questions in the agricultural industry:

1.   To what extent does an employee's age affect reported levels of engagement and

        enablement?

2.   To what extent do male and female employees differ in their report of engagement

        and enablement?

3.   To what extent do employees in rural and urban locations differ in their report of

        engagement and enablement?

4.   To what extent does job role impact an employee's reported level of engagement and

        enablement?

5.   To what extent does an employee's years of service affect reported levels of

        engagement and enablement?

Method

Participants

To examine employee engagement and enablement, a web-based survey was distributed

in June 2018 to a group of 2,006 individuals employed in a national Australian agricultural

organisation. Employees across five states and two territories in both urban and rural areas

received the survey; Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales,

Queensland Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory. Of the 2,006 employees who

received the survey, 1,469 full and partial responses were obtained, representing a response

rate of 73%. Descriptive statistics of the respondent details and the categorical variables of

the survey relevant to this study are represented in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages for Categorical Variables

Variable	N	%	Variable	N	%
Gender			**Job Role**		
Male	844	57	Clerical/Admin	382	26
Female	624	43	Labourer	83	6
			Management	206	14
			Professional	96	7
Age			Sales	701	47
18 – 30 years	322	22			
31 – 40 years	305	21			
41 – 50 years	351	24	**Tenure**		
50+ years	490	33	Less than one year	288	20
			One year to two years	174	12
Location			Two to five years	321	21
Rural	1166	79	Five to 10 years	283	19
Urban	302	21	10 to 20 years	274	19
			20+ years	128	9

Procedure

The current study analysed a subset of data from a larger survey, focusing on the

measures of Employee Enablement and Employee Engagement. Data was collected between

14 and 29 June 2018. Employees were provided with information through internal company

communication channels (email, intranet) about the survey prior to the survey being sent to each individual.

Employees were sent an email that included information about the survey and advised that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time without consequence. Employees were requested to provide their informed consent, should they wish to do so, by electronic acknowledgement (in the case of this survey, ticking a consent box). Upon giving consent, employees could access a link to the survey. After accessing the secure website, they could point and click to complete the survey questions. Employees were advised that their responses would remain anonymous and they would not be individually contacted for follow-up following completion of the survey.

Measures

A survey known as the Employee Effectiveness survey, an online measurement tool forming part of the Hay Group's Engaged Performance Framework (formerly called Employee Effectiveness Framework) (Hay Group, 2016) was used to measure employee engagement and enablement. The Engaged Performance Framework model was designed to provide a valid measure of both employee engagement and enablement as contemporaneous outcomes. The model was born from data collected in 2006 and 2007 involving near 120,000 employees from 47 different countries across a variety of industries and sectors including financial services, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, retail and professional services.

Hay Group (2016) list five overarching drivers of employee effectiveness as part of their Engaged Performance Framework that lead to engagement, effectiveness and productivity, these being affective commitment, continuance commitment, discretionary effort, optimized roles and supportive environment. An extensive review of past research and theory was conducted by Hay Group to determine consistent predictors of employee engagement and enablement to align to the Engaged Performance Framework model. Their

research suggests that enablement is the missing link to productivity and consideration be given to the dual notions of engagement and enablement, both being essential in strengthening the valuable exchange between an employee and their employer.

The model comprises the aforementioned five overarching drivers of employee engagement and enablement and the survey contains items related to these drivers specifically designed to measure engagement (affective commitment, continuance commitment and discretionary effort) and enablement (optimised roles, supportive environment) (Table 2). The items were evaluated on a Likert rating scale that ranged from 1 (disagree) to 5 (agree). Higher scores on the scales indicated higher degrees of engagement and enablement. The psychometric properties of the engagement and enablement scales within the Engaged Performance model have an alpha coefficient between .70 and .80, indicating moderate to high internal reliability measures (Allen and Yen, 2002). The sociodemographic information of the employees including age, gender, job role, job location and tenure were auto-populated for each participant from individual employee data taken from the organisation's internal employee management system.

Table 2

Employee Engagement and Enablement Scale Items

Employee Engagement items	Employee enablement items
1. The company motivates me to do more than what is required	1. There are no significant barriers at work to my doing my job well
2. I would recommend the company as a good place to work	2. My job provides opportunities to do challenging and interesting work
3. I feel motivated to do more than is required of me	3. My job makes good use of my skills and abilities
4. I feel proud to work for the company	4. Conditions in my job allow me to be as productive as I can be
5. Given your choice, how long would you plan to continue to work for the company	

Data Analyses

Quantitative data retrieved from the company's survey portal was entered into SPSS and visually scanned prior to analysis. To protect the confidentiality of individual employees, the author was only permitted to retrieve grouped response data for the purposes of this study from the survey portal which was categorised into the following; branch/office, location, gender, age, job role and tenure. Individual employee response data was not provided.   Scores for Engagement and Enablement for each group per category were entered into SPSS.

A one-way between groups Analysis of Variance was used to analyse the associations between the variables for research question three which contained a scaled variable. Due to the nature of the categorical grouped data, linear mixed-effects model analyses were used to analyse the associations between the variables for research questions one, two, four and five. Mixed effects models are used to analyse data where the responses are grouped according to one or more classification factors and offer multiple advantages over other group analysis methods such as ANOVA and multiple regression, particularly when assumptions for these methods are unable to be met (Gang et. al., 2013). Histograms and scatterplots were examined and residuals and predicted values checked for equal variance prior to analysis and assumptions for a linear mixed-effects model were met (Faraway, 2016; Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007).

Results

The results of the analyses provided a combination of outcomes for the research questions. In terms of research question one - to what extent does an employee's age effect reported levels of engagement and enablement – the results revealed no significant differences between age groups. However, in terms of the second research question – to what extent do male and female employees differ in their report of engagement and

enablement – results revealed a significant difference between the genders and levels of engagement, however not enablement. In terms of research question four - to what extent does job role impact an employee's reported level of engagement and enablement – results revealed significant differences in engagement across the different levels of job roles of management, labourers and professionals, however this was not replicated for enablement. There were no significant differences found between levels of engagement and enablement across employee location or tenure.   Overall, 75% of employees reported that they were engaged and 77% reported that they were enabled.

The relationship between employee engagement and enablement and age

A linear mixed-effects model was used to explore the relationship between age and the employee's level of engagement and enablement. The greatest mean engagement score difference between age groups was between those in the 18-30 year age group who had mean engagement score 5.4% greater than those in the age group 50 and above (estimate=6.4, 95% confidence interval (CI): -3.2, 13.9). However, this was not significant (comparison P value=0.218). The greatest mean enablement score difference between age groups was between those in the 18 – 30 year age group who had a mean enablement score 3.1% greater than those in the age group 41 – 50, however this was also not significant.

The relationship between employee engagement and enablement and gender

A linear mixed effects model was used to examine this hypothesis and explore the relationships between male and female employee engagement and enablement scores. Results showed a significant difference (comparison P value=.016) between the genders on mean engagement scores with male engagement scores 5.7% higher than those of females (estimate – 5.7, 95% confidence interval (CI): 1.1, 10.2), indicating that overall, male employees felt more engaged than female employees. Whilst the results showed a mean enablement score difference of 3.2% between the genders, this was not significant.

The relationship between employee engagement and enablement and location

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether engagement and enablement scores differed between those working in rural locations ($n = 36$) and urban locations ($n = 15$). Results indicated there was a difference in mean engagement scores between those working in rural and urban locations with those working in rural locations ($M = 76.3$, $SD = 9.2$) reporting engagement scores 3.3% higher than those working in urban locations ($M = 73.9$, $SD = 8.6$), however statistically, this was not significant, $F(1,49) = .79$, $p = .377$. Similarly, results indicated there was a difference in mean enablement scores between those working in rural locations ($M = 77.7$, $SD = 6.8$) reported enablement scores 4% higher than those working in urban locations ($M = 74.67$, $SD = 8.9$), however this result was also not statistically significant, $F(1,49) = 1.78$, $p = .188$.

The relationship between employee engagement and enablement and job role

A linear mixed effects model was used to explore the relationship between job role and levels of employee engagement and enablement. Results showed a significant difference in levels of engagement (comparison P value=.006) between labourers and management with those in management positions 14.8% more engaged than those in labour positions (estimate – 14.8, 95% confidence interval (CI): 4.6-25.1). Results also showed a significant difference in levels of engagement (comparison P value=.05) between labourers and professionals. Engagement levels were 13.5% higher for those working in professional roles compared to those in labour position (estimate – 13.5, 95% confidence interval (CI): .01-26.9). These results indicate that those working in managerial or professional roles were more engaged than labourers. The greatest mean enablement score difference between job roles was between senior managers and clerical and admin employees (13.4%), however this result was not significant.

The relationship between employee engagement and enablement and tenure

Exploring the relationship between tenure and employee engagement and enablement scores, a linear mixed effects model showed the greatest mean engagement score difference was between employees with a tenure between one and two years and those with a tenure of over 20 years. Employees who had been working in the company for more than 20 years were 5.5% more engaged than those new to their roles (estimate – 5.5, 95% confidence interval (CI): -18.78-7.7). Similarly, 6.7% of employees with a tenure of over 20 years were 6.7% more enabled than those with a tenure between one and two years (estimate – 6.7, 95% confidence interval (CI): -5.6-19.1), however statistically neither of these findings were significant.

Discussion

The current study sought to investigate employee engagement and enablement levels within the Australian agricultural industry and explore the extent to which age, gender, job location, job role and tenure impact on those levels. This study extends existing engagement and enablement research by providing further insight into the ways different sociodemographic factors may affect wellbeing, performance and commitment outcomes within the agricultural industry, in particular the relationship between levels of engagement and job role and gender.

The results of this study found significant differences between two of the five sociodemographic variables and reported levels of employee engagement, namely that engagement scores differed according to gender and job role. Engagement levels were not found to differ according to job location, age or tenure. The results indicated no significant differences in levels of employee enablement across any of the sociodemographic variables. There could be several explanations for this; one of which may be an employee's low understanding or awareness of their skills and abilities and how those skills fit into the role in

which they are currently employed. They may also have a low awareness or understanding of how the organisation attempts to give the right jobs to the right people (Permana et. al., 2015).

Results of the study found male employees were 5.7% more engaged than female employees. Although this percentage difference may appear small, the difference was statistically significant, thereby supporting previous research which suggests lower engagement levels among female employees may be due to a struggle to find work/family balance increasing their vulnerability to emotional exhaustion and occupational stress, or a perception of discrimination against females in the workplace (Sharma, Goel and Sengupta, 2017; Schadenhofer et. al., 2017). According to *social role theory*, another explanation for these results may be the double burden of a career and a family that primarily women carry (Biddle, 1986). This may have resulted in women responding to some of the engagement items less favourably such as "I feel motivated to do more than is required of me" and "I would recommend the company as a good place to work".

Employee engagement scores differed across different occupational levels, with those in management positions reporting higher levels of engagement than those in labouring positions (14.8%). This is consistent with previous research (Andreassen, Ursin, Hege and Pallesen, 2012) suggesting those in management positions may be more absorbed by their work in a positive manner creating a greater sense of engagement in their roles and the organisation. However, due to the industry and the structure of the organisation involved in this study, several other explanations should be considered. It has been suggested that internal corporate communication is an important aspect of engaging and motivating employees across the organisation. Labourers who work in the rural areas of the business may be separated physically from their managers, who may be based in 'head office' in a major city and want to see and hear from their managers in person. This lack of opportunity

for face-to-face dialogue may have been a contributing factor for the labourers' lower scores

on some of the engagement measurement items, particularly those regarding motivation

(Ruck, Welch, and Menara, 2017).

Employees in professional roles such as financial planners, legal advisors and IT

specialists were also found to be significantly more engaged than labourers (13.5%).

Previous research has indicated that employees with higher educational qualifications exhibit

higher levels of work engagement than those with lower educational qualifications (Sharma,

Goel and Sengupta, 2017; Schadenhofer et. al., 2017). This hints upon the lower levels of

engagement of labourers, which may be an indication that in contrast to professional roles,

labourers may not be required to have the same higher level education requirements to obtain

their roles, but rather secured their positions with 'hands on' experience.

A noteworthy finding to emerge from the analyses is the insignificant role of job

location on engagement and enablement levels. In the present study, rural locations were

classified as any location outside of a CBD area. The findings of this study are generally

inconsistent with previous findings that report an increase in psychological distress and

disengagement of those working in rural locations when compared to their urban counterparts

(Cosgrave, Hussain and Maple, 2015; Nickson, Gair and Miles, 2016). Employees working

in the field of agriculture face additional unique challenges compared to other industries such

as dealing with ongoing drought conditions and other environmental pressures affecting

adverse affect livestock and feed putting additional pressure on the individuals to consistently

perform well during the 'tough times' in this industry (Vins et. al., 2015). It should be noted

however, that 79% of the company's employees work in rural locations. Therefore, the small

sample of urban employees may have played a factor in the results. However, there could

also be other factors at play such as an overall high level of organisational citizenship

behaviour among the employees. It has been suggested that where there is a presence of high

levels of engagement, there are high levels of personal commitment to the company outside of everyday contractual job tasks (Christian, Garza and Slaughter, 2011). Further, it is interesting to note that although not statistically significant, those working in rural locations felt slightly more enabled than their urban counterparts. With nearly 80% of the workforce working in rural areas, this may indicate that the work systems, support and job resources are set up to be conducive and effective in the rural locations within this organisation.

A study by Sharma, Goel and Sengupta (2017) of employees working in the IT industry found no difference in work engagement levels between employees with tenure of less than three years than those of three years or more. The findings of this study support their suggestion as the employees reported similar levels of engagement and enablement regardless of how long they had been employed at the organisation. This is contrary to several studies who have found that employees new to their role or organisation, are more engaged, motivated and find their new job challenging and interesting (Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina, 2002; Zunker, 2002). This suggests that overall, new employees are motivated and engaged and employees that have worked in the organisation for a longer period of time are as equally engaged and are not growing bored or locked into routine (Clark, Oswald and Warr (1996).

Implications

Previous to this study, few studies have examined the relationship between sociodemographic variables and levels of employee engagement and enablement within the agricultural industry. Therefore, this study aimed to determine how age, gender, job role, job location and tenure impacted engagement and enablement levels within an Australian agricultural company. The results of the overall study indicated that nearly three quarters of the entire workforce felt motivated, proud to work for the company, felt their job made good use of their skills, felt there were no barriers in doing their jobs well and opportunities were provided to do challenging and interesting work. From a practical standpoint, the findings

imply that the study company appear to be providing key psychological and physical conditions that are conducive to allowing their staff to feel engaged and enabled in their jobs.

The results from this study suggest that job role influences perceived levels of employee engagement. Previous studies have shown that job crafting, the process by which employees shape their jobs by changes to form, scope or number of job tasks as well as well as relational boundaries, may play a role in employee engagement. Bakker, Tims and Derks (2012) found when employees were provided with the opportunity to craft their roles, they stayed engaged and performed well. Similarly, Bakker, Rodriguez-Munoz and San Vergel (2015), found job crafting increased engagement by allowing employees to change job demands and resources to align with their own preferences and abilities. As a result of the findings in this study, it may be beneficial for this organisation to consider implementing person and capability initiatives whereby employees are involved in crafting their social and job resources to create a sense of job ownership and a level of autonomy to increase engagement amongst those in labouring positions.

Further, the findings from this study should help to inform Organisational Psychology/Management practitioners about the value and significance of engagement and enablement in the workplace, especially in high-risk industries. Further studies should be conducted however in other agricultural organisations and across other industries.

Limitations

A number of methodological limitations and considerations in the present study should be addressed. Firstly, the population used for this study comprised employees of an Australian agricultural business, and this may limit the generalisability of the findings across alternative industries. Further, Anthony-Mcmann et. al., (2016) suggest that it may be difficult to draw direct comparable conclusions to other engagement and enablement studies as more often than not the question items differ across the many different measures used.

The demographic variable location was not significantly associated with the enablement and engagement levels for urban and rural employees. This is largely inconsistent with previous research and may be due to 80% of the workforce being categorised as working in rural locations. Consideration should be given to the measure used in this study as those working outside of a CBD location were automatically categorised as rural, therefore it did not take into consideration distinguishing variations in location such as remoteness, isolation or proximity to urban counterparts. Additionally, the survey did not adress employment type; although the employees were all permanent employees of the company, it is unclear whether they were fulltime or part time potentially affecting responses.

It should be noted that the data used in this study was grouped data. It would have been advantageous to have access to the individual data which may have aided in fleshing out the research questions further. However, in defence of the study, the overall grouped dataset contained a large sample of participants from which to draw some valuable findings for this industry. Finally, the data was derived from self-report surveys which are susceptible to acquiescent and socially-desirable responding, and it is not known what frame of mind or mood the employees were in when they completed the survey.

Conclusion

Results from this study add to the ever growing body of knowledge on employee engagement and wellbeing. It extends research in this area further by aiming to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how sociodemographic factors may affect engagement outcomes in the agricultural sector. The results lend support to the notion that engagement may play a critical role in enhancing employee wellbeing and improving productivity outcomes. However further research is required to uncover more empirical evidence on the impact of sociodemographic factors across multiple industries, particularly those that are at a high risk of psychological and physical distress. Establishing interventions and workplace

initiatives based on this evidence aimed at not just minimising harm, but proactively seeking improvements in overall employee wellbeing will go a long way to enhancing the lives of many.

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Appendix A

Journal of Organizational Behavior

Submission

Authors should kindly note that submission implies that the content has not been published or submitted for publication elsewhere except as a brief abstract in the proceedings of a scientific meeting of symposium. Once the submission materials have been prepared in accordance with the Author Guidelines, manuscripts should be submitted online at https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/job.

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Aims and Scope

The Journal of Organizational Behavior (JOB) aims to publish empirical reports and theoretical reviews of research in the field of organizational behavior, wherever in the world that work is conducted. The journal will focus on research and theory in all topics associated with organizational behavior within and across individual, group and organizational levels of analysis, including:
- At the individual level: personality, perception, beliefs, attitudes, values, motivation, career behavior, stress, emotions, judgment, and commitment.
- At the group level: size, composition, structure, leadership, power, group affect, and politics.
- At the organizational level: structure, change, goal-setting, creativity, and human resource management policies and practices.
- Across levels: decision-making, performance, job satisfaction, turnover and absenteeism, diversity, careers and career development, equal opportunities, work-life balance, identification, organizational culture and climate, inter-organizational processes, and multi-national and cross-national issues.
- Research methodologies in studies of organizational behavior.

Manuscript Requirements

Research Article

Manuscripts submitted to JOB should not normally be more than 40 pages in length (including references, tables and figures). Manuscripts up to 50 pages will be considered, but authors should be aware that reviewers will expect to see a contribution commensurate with the extra page length. Authors considering submitting manuscripts of more than 50 pages

should discuss with the Editor-in-Chief before submitting. Manuscripts must conform to the style of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 6th Edition (www.apastyle.org/manual).

To be considered for publication, the article must be prepared according to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2009, 6th edition). Articles invited for revision are to be no more than 40 double spaced pages (12,000 words) including the title page, abstract, references, tables and/or figures. As with initial proposals, full-length manuscripts should be word processed, using Times New Roman 12 point font, with 1 inch margins surrounding each page of text.

All manuscripts will be evaluated primarily on the basis of adequate coverage of the research domain, originality in organizing our understanding of what we know and what we do not know, and significance or contribution for advancing understanding of human behavior in organizations. Other important considerations include the length-contribution ratio and the quality of written expression. Poor quality writing is sufficient grounds for outright rejection.

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Cover letters are not mandatory; however, they may be supplied at the author's discretion.

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The manuscript should be submitted in separate files: title page; main text file; figures.

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The title page should contain**:**
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1. Have made substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data;

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Research Context

Sometimes, the setting in which organizational research is conducted is unique in some way or consists of qualities that bear on the work. This would be the case, for example, if data are collected at a time in which major events occurred in the organization or in a foreign setting whose context or practices may be unfamiliar to most readers. On such occasions, authors should provide suitable descriptions of these settings so as to put their findings and their interpretation in an appropriate perspective for readers. As required, brief descriptions that do not disrupt the flow of major ideas should be inserted into the body of articles. Whenever detailed or protracted descriptions are called for, however, these should be included in an appendix that follows the references. Please note that the editors or reviewers may request such information as they deem useful.

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All references must be complete and accurate. Online citations should include date of retrieval. If necessary, cite unpublished or personal work in the text but do not include it in the reference list. References should be listed in the following style, in accordance with the APA Publication Manual.

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