



## **Antecedents and Consequences of Work Engagement among Professional Counsellors in Kenyan Institutions of Higher Learning**

James Kay and Gladys Kiptiony  
Kabarak University

Corresponding author: [kaykaytar@gmail.com](mailto:kaykaytar@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

Positive occupational health psychology research is rapidly taking center stage in the field of work and wellness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Consequently, researchers and practitioners are increasingly gravitating towards positive psychology research. However, person specific work-related variables such as work engagement and fulfillment have not received adequate attention in research within Kenya among professional counselors in the university setting. This paper explores the antecedents and consequences of work engagement among professional counselors in Kenyan higher learning. The study utilized cross-sectional survey design with a target population of 193 mental health providers in 75 higher education institutions in Kenya. Saturated sampling techniques were used to conduct a census of all respondents. Quantitative data was obtained using self-response questionnaire. Data analysis utilized both descriptive and inferential statistics. The study tested all posited hypotheses at 0.05 significant level and analyzed data using statistical tools with the aid of SPSS - 24. The response rate was 180 (94%). Work engagement among professional counselors was high (UWES = 4.23; sd = 1.48) and correlated positively with job satisfaction and fulfillment in life. Engagement was found to predict higher existential fulfilment (-0.084(p = 0.26 > 0.05) and low job burnout (-0.327(p = 0.00 < 0.05). Based on these findings, it the study recommended that Kenyan institutions of higher learning should strengthen established antecedents of work engagement to militate against adverse consequences at the workplace. These results have significant implications for workplace psychological health and functioning of professional mental health providers as well as other staff.

**Keywords:** Antecedents; work engagement; consequences; mental wellness; professional counselors

### **Introduction**

A global study that was carried out in 142 countries by Gallup (2013) on the state of work engagement in the workplace indicates that only 13.6% of employees worldwide are engaged at work, 61.7% disengaged and 23.3% actively disengaged. However, a report on trends in global work engagement by Aon-Hewitt (2014) indicates that 22% of workers globally are engaged, 39% moderately absorbed, 23% passive and 16% as actively disengaged. Gallup (2013) survey indicates that work engagement levels among employees vary across different global regions and among countries within those regions. Globally, Northern America has the highest proportion of engaged workers, at 29%, followed by Australia and New Zealand, at 24%. Research across 19 Western European countries observed that 14% of employees engaged, while a significantly higher 20% are actively disengaged. Aon-Hewitt (2014) report similar trends with Latin America



leading at 31% followed by North America (27%), Africa/Middle East 23% and the least work engagement levels reported in Europe (19%).

According to Gallup (2013), the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) presents the highest proportions of actively disengaged workers at 35% followed by sub-Saharan Africa regions at 33%. Aon-Hewitt (2014) indicates highest active disengagement in Europe and Africa/Middle East, at 19% and 16% respectively. Kenya was among the countries sampled in both global studies. Therefore, this study inferred that the bulk of employees in Kenya, as is elsewhere, are not engaged. Actively disengaged workers are unhappy, unproductive at work, and liable to spread negativity to coworkers. If the low level of engagement among workers continues, there is a threat to the achievement of millennium development goals as well as economic growth targets.

Makhanya (2012) contends that current socioeconomic and sociopolitical strategies inherent in our systems of government increasingly pose a deleterious impact on the availability of talent in Higher Education. The rapid expansion of institutions of higher learning that is being witnessed in Kenya today has grave implications for organizational loyalty and occupational wellbeing of university employees including counselors. However, much of the research on positive occupational health psychology in Kenya has mainly focused on High School set up (Kinga, Kariuki, & Njonge, 2012; Makewa, Elizabeth, Too, & Kiplagat, 2012; Sichambo, Marangia, & Simiyu, 2012). As indicated by van den Berg, Manias and Burger (2008), Higher Education all over the world is pivotal in the generation and dissemination of knowledge that is instrumental in perpetuation and sustainability of future talent and socioeconomic development. Studies conducted in higher learning tend to focus on the psychological well-being of the other staff and have not published much on professional counselors. There is a knowledge gap about work and wellbeing of the employees charged with the responsibility of occupational mental health through psychological interventions. This paper explores the antecedents and consequences of work engagement among professional counselors in universities in Kenya.

## **Literature Review**

Ardichivili and Kuchinke (2009) observe that work is central to human existence since it provides life necessities, sources of identity, opportunities for achievement, and determines social standing within the larger community. Unaldi and others (2013) support this argument by intimating that as an existential concern, work offers the possibility for a full range of human experiences, not only exhilaration, exuberance, satisfaction, and joy but also disappointment, regret, grief, and despair. Therefore, just as Jeung (2011) further indicates, it is the recognition of this fact that has led to the increasing interest in research on psychological wellbeing in the workplace. At least, as Bakker and Demerouti (2008) argue, part of this growth stems from a belief that positive mental health in organizations translates to the motivation of individuals and groups to perform better, which eventually lead to improvement in individual and organizational performance. Watkins and Stavros (2010) align this with the positive psychology paradigm that focuses on a strength-based rather than a deficit-based approach to solving problems by studying what is working well in organizations.

Altunel, Kocak, Cankir (2015) observe that research on positive psychology, focuses on the adaptive and efficient aspects of employees' feelings and features, is nowhere near at par with have with the literature on employees' adverse situations at workplace. However, there is rapid



growth in research in positive occupational health psychology. Albrecht, Bakker, Gruman, Macey and Saks (2015) observe that employee engagement has attracted enormous interest over the past decade or two. Macey, Schneider, Barbera, and Young (2009) commented that rarely has a term resonated as strongly with business executives as employee engagement has in recent years. Writers such as Bakker and colleagues (2014) have presented extensive meta-analyses and reviews on positive health psychology with particular reference to work engagement.

Macey and Schneider (2008) claim that antecedents of work engagement derive from both personal and environmental sources. However, theory and research on job characteristics as the primary precursor, consequently ignoring intrapersonal variables such as existential fulfillment. Shirom (2010) investigated key occupational variables such as autonomy, demands, conflicts and good relations with other people. Rich, Lepine, and Crawford (2010) added on the research by developing and testing a model incorporating organizational support.

Tomic and Tomic (2011) established a positive correlation between existential fulfillment work engagement and a negative relationship the two variables and job burnout. In their research on the relationship between existential fulfillment and job burnout (the opposite of work engagement) Hunnibell (2006) and Hunnibell, Reed, Quinn and Fitzpatrick (2008) found a significant negative correlation between self-transcendence and all three dimensions of job burnout. Research conducted by Palmer and colleagues (2010) showed that the higher the workers' scores are on existential fulfillment, the more energy they have towards their work and the higher their scores on work engagement dimensions. Existential fulfillment helps employees derive positive meaning from their job experiences and fosters work engagement. Therefore, theoretically as existential satisfaction increases, work engagement is predicted to increase and job burnout symptoms decrease.

Bakker and Leiter (2010) observe that the service economy of the 21st century has led to increasing importance of employees' psychological connection with their work. Sichambo, Marangia, and Simiyu (2012) observed that what people do (their job), how they do it (their behavior), and what they achieve (results) is all related to work engagement. Engaged workers, therefore feel positive about their job, but beyond mere satisfaction, they are motivated to expend energy on a task (Ndeti, Pizzo, Maru, Ongecha, Khasakhala, Mutiso & Kokonya, 2008). Bakker, Albrecht, and Leiter (2011) identified a growing consensus that defines work engagement as high levels of energy and elevated levels of involvement in work.

Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter and Taris (2008) view work commitment as a theoretical concept that has recently emerged in the field of Psychology. Takawira, Coetzee, and Schreuder (2014) support this notion by arguing that positive aspects of the workplace have been the focus of research for the past decade. Work engagement is an element that helps to facilitate change that leads to improvement of their performances (Kim, Kolb, & Kim, 2012). In a research by Saks (2006), work engagement is associated with an individual's attitudes, intentions, and behaviors while the study by Du Plooy and Roodt (2010) established work commitment is negatively related to turnover intention.

### **Consequences of Work Engagement**



Consequences of can be conceptualized in terms of erosion as well as flooding of work engagement. Erosion of work engagement leads to job burnout, which Maslach (2011) argues is the negative antipode of work engagement, which is conceptualised in theory as the incapacity to work (exhaustion) and the unwillingness to work (cynicism, disengagement). This forms, in part, the underpinning theoretical rationale and dimensionality of work engagement (Schaufeli, & Salanova, 2011; Maslach, 2011). However, Parker and Griffin (2011) propose the use of a wider nomological net to establish a clear conceptualization of work engagement as an active psychological state. To this effect, Bakker, Albreit and Leiter (2011) positioned work engagement in the circumplex model of affective wellbeing. This model views work engagement as combination of capability to work (energy, vigour) and the willingness to work (involvement, dedication).

On the other hand, although work engagement is a matter of concern in organizations across the globe as a vital element affecting organizational effectiveness, innovation and competitiveness (Welch, 2011), flooding can be a consequence too. George (2011) postulates that work engagement has a dark side when skewed more toward a managerial focus than an employee well-being focus. According to Gorgievski, Bakker and Schaufeli (2010), research has shown that engaged employees work hard, but they are not workaholics. This means that in the evenings they will likely prefer to do other things than working. Whereas George (2011), Maslach (2011), and Schaufeli and Salanova (2011) point at possible conflicting interests between employers and employees, it is believed that employees need actively try to keep the exchange relationship equitable. Employees contribute valuable time and effort and in return they receive important outcomes such as pay, but also opportunities to learn and meaningful work. It is known that Work engagement may foster work - family conflict (Halbesleben, 2011), and may even lead to more demands (Sonnetag, Binnewies, & Mojza, 2010). Sonnetag (2011) called on researchers to further explore the conditions under which negative outcomes of work engagement occur.

Sonnetag, Mojza, Binnewies and Scholl (2008) showed that high state work engagement was only related to reduce positive affect when employees did not detach psychologically from their work. Parker and Griffin (2011) suggested that work engagement may only be related to innovation if there are no constraints in the work environment that may inhibit innovative behaviours. Maslach (2011) proposed it is important to assess critical levels of work engagement to determine when employees show too little or too much work engagement.

### **3.0 Methods**

This study was quantitative in nature, and therefore quantitative methods were utilized. The study was *ex-post facto* and was conducted on a cross-section of 193 professional counselors in chartered public and private universities in Kenya. A total of 180 respondents returned their data collection tool, and this resulted in a response rate of 94%. Work engagement data was collected using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-17) while fulfillment was conceptualized using the Existential Fulfilment Scale. Burnout was measured using the Maslach Burnout Inventory – Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS). Since the same respondents responded to each of the data collection tools, all the items of each tool were consolidated into one structured questionnaire for ease of administration.

### **Reliability**



The Existential Fulfilment Scale (EFS), composed of the three dimensions of self-acceptance, self-actualization, and self-transcendence consists of 15 items (five items for each dimension). The internal consistency coefficients for this study were 0.76, 0.74 and 0.74, for self-acceptance, self-actualization, and self-transcendence respectively and an overall coherence of 0.81. Work engagement was made operational by the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale - UWES – 17 which contains three dimensions - vigor, dedication, and absorption. In this study, the vigor dimension yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.76, the Dedication dimension yielded 0.80 and the absorption dimension 0.76 respectively with overall reliability alpha of 0.91. Maslach Burnout Inventory which consists of 3 subscales: emotional exhaustion; depersonalization; and self-efficacy yielded reliability coefficients of 0.83, 0.94 and 0.71 respectively. The overall Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for this study was 0.83.

### **Data Analysis**

This research collected quantitative data and used descriptive and inferential statistics in the analysis. Initially, the analyses conducted descriptive statistics (means, standard deviation, cross-tabulations and internal reliability scores) as well as correlations for all targeted variables. A series of non-parametric equations (Kendall's tau\_b, Spearman's Rho and Chi Square) were calculated to test the assumed prediction of the counselors' existential fulfillment, work engagement on job burnout. The research generated a series of correlation matrices to explore potential relationships across personal attributes, and university category. The researcher used non-parametric data analysis procedures in considerations that this study produced data that did not follow a normal distribution curve and therefore standard parametric calculations would not present true picture for inferential statics to minimize the statistical error when making research inferences. The study analyzed data by use of statistical tools with the aid of computer software, SPSS - 24.0 and tested all hypotheses at 0.05 significant level.

### **Results**

#### **Demographic Characteristic**

The modal age group of participant respondents was 41 – 45 years which accounted for 25% of the sample followed by 46 – 50 years who represented 18.9% while the least age group was over 60 years which accounted for 0.6%. Married respondents accounted for 78%, 17% were single, 3% separated and 2% widowed. This study established that 63.9% had Master's Degree, 7.2% of the respondents have a doctorate and 15% possessed a Bachelor's degree in counseling psychology. Public universities accounted for 60.6% of respondents while private institutions accounted for 39.4% of the total sample. This study established that 52.2% of respondents had been working at their station for a maximum of 5 years, 25% had for 6 -10 years and those who had been working in their university for more than a decade by the time of study accounted for 11.4%.

#### **Existential Fulfilment as an Antecedent of Work Engagement**

Existential fulfillment was conceptualized as an antecedent of work engagement. The three dimensions of existential fulfillment were correlated with the three dimensions of work engagement to establish the contribution of existential satisfaction to work engagement, before correlating overall existential fulfillment with overall work engagement. A null hypothesis  $H_01$ : there is no statistically significant relationship between existential fulfillment and work engagement with related hypotheses that related the dimensions of existential fulfillment with



work engagement components as well as the overall relationship between the two most important variables. The research calculated Spearman's Rank order correlation coefficients and a correlation matrix generated to show how the variables and their components interact and the findings presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Correlation Coefficient between Existential Fulfilment and Work Engagement

	Correlation coefficient (p-value)			
	1	2	3	4
Self-acceptance				
Self-actualization	-0.035(0.646)			
Self-transcendence	-0.068(.364)	0.449** (0.00)		
Existential fulfilment	0.208** (0.005)	0.454** (0.000)	0.450** (0.000)	
Vigour	0.115(0.124)	0.063(0.404)	0.117(0.116)	0.168* (0.024)
Dedication	0.046(0.536)	0.089(0.235)	0.234** (0.002)	0.142(0.057)
Absorption	0.111(0.139)	0.118(0.114)	0.099(0.185)	0.069(0.358)
Work engagement	0.149* (0.046)	0.030(0.688)	0.225** (0.002)	0.173* (0.020)

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$  (2-tailed).

There was an observed correlation coefficient of 0.149 ( $p = 0.05 \leq 0.05$ ) between self-acceptance and overall work engagement. A weak positive correlation coefficient of 0.234 ( $p = 0.00 < 0.05$ ) between self-transcendence and dedication. There was a weak positive correlation coefficient of 0.225 ( $p = 0.00 < 0.05$ ) between self-transcendence and overall work engagement. At the fourth level, overall existential fulfillment presented a weak positive correlation coefficient of 0.168 ( $p = 0.02 < 0.05$ ) with vigor. A weak correlation coefficient of 0.173 ( $p = 0.02 < 0.05$ ) between existential fulfillment and overall work. All existential fulfillment dimensions presented significant positive correlations with all existential fulfillment except for self-actualization. Work engagement was also significantly and positively correlated to existential fulfillment. This observation confirmed the study assumption that existential fulfillment and work engagement mutually reinforced each other among Kenya Universities' professional counselors. The findings are in agreement with the assertion by Tomic and Tomic (2011) where conceptualization of work engagement as an active work-related state of well-being or existential fulfillment implies a positive correlation between the two variables. Palmer, Quinn, Reed and Fitzpatrick (2010) showed that the higher the workers' scores are on existential satisfaction, the more energy they have towards their work and the higher their scores on work engagement dimensions.

### Job Burnout as a Consequence of Low Work Engagement

A null hypothesis  $H_02$  which stated that at 0.05 significance level, there is no significant relationship between work engagement and job burnout among Kenya Universities' professional counselors was posited. Since Schaufeli and Salanova (2011) view work participation as the positive antipode of job burnout, the study expected that all work engagement and job burnout dimensions were negatively correlated except with professional efficacy. Negative correlations were mainly expected between emotional exhaustion and vigor as well as between depersonalization and dedication since they present of the activation and identification dimensions of the job wellness continuum respectively. Spearman's rho correlation coefficients and a correlation matrix generated to show how the variables and their components correlate and presented in Table 2.



**Table 2: Correlation Coefficient between Work Engagement and Job Burnout Dimensions**

	Correlation coefficient (p-values)			
	1	2	3	4
Vigour	-			
Dedication	0.644** (0.000)	-		
Absorption	0.690** (0.000)	0.649** (0.000)	-	
Work engagement	0.881** (0.000)	0.840** (0.000)	0.899** (0.000)	-
Emotional exhaustion	-0.224* (0.002)	-0.207** (0.005)	-0.145* (0.05)	-0.083(0.266)
Professional in-efficacy	-0.473** (0.000)	-0.251** (0.001)	-0.168* (0.024)	-0.327** (0.000)
Depersonalization	-0.146* (0.05)	-0.137(0.068)	-0.125(0.095)	-0.154* (0.039)
Job burnout	-0.197** (0.008)	-0.018(.816)	-0.135(0.071)	-0.129(0.085)

\* $p < 0.05$ ;  $p < ** 0.01$  (2-tailed).

It was observed that there was a weak negative correlation coefficient of -0.224 which was statistically significant ( $p = 0.00$ ). It was inferred that higher levels of work engagement dimension vigor predicted lower levels of job burnout dimension emotional exhaustion among Kenya Universities' professional counselors. This observation confirms the findings of the study by Bakker, Demerouti and Schaufeli (2005) on cross-over job burnout and engagement among working couples ( $n = 323$ ) where there was a weak negative correlation coefficient of -0.36 which was statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ . The findings are also in agreement with the observations in a study on burnout and work engagement by Langelaan, Bakker, van Doornen and Schaufeli (2006) on a sample ( $n = 572$ ) employees from three different samples where there was a weak negative correlation coefficient of -0.37 which was statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ . The observed negative correlation coefficient of -0.473 between work engagement dimension vigor and job burnout dimension reduced professional efficacy was statistically significant ( $p = 0.00$ ). It was inferred higher levels of work engagement dimension vigor predicted and higher levels of job burnout dimension professional efficacy (lower levels of reduced professional efficacy) among Kenya Universities' professional counselors. This finding confirms the assertion by Schaufeli and Salanova (2011) that vigor is characterized by high levels of energy, resilience and the mental flexibility while working.

An observed negative correlation coefficient of -0.146 ( $p = 0.05$ ) between work engagement dimension vigor and job burnout dimension depersonalisation which was statistically significant and ensured that the null hypothesis was rejected. It was inferred that higher levels of work engagement dimension vigor predicted lower levels of job burnout dimension emotional exhaustion among Kenya University professional counselors. These findings are in agreement with the observations of the study by Bakker, Demerouti and Schaufeli (2005) on cross-over job burnout and engagement among working couples ( $n = 323$ ) where there was a weak negative correlation coefficient of -0.43 which was statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ . The findings are also in agreement with the observations in a study on burnout and work engagement by Langelaan, Bakker, van Doornen and Schaufeli (2006) on a sample ( $n = 572$ ) employees from three different samples where there was a weak negative correlation coefficient of -0.41 which was statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ . The statistical test yielded a weak significant negative correlation coefficient of -0.197( $p = 0.00 < 0.05$ ) between work engagement dimension vigor



and overall job burnout which led to the decision to reject the null hypothesis. It was inferred that work engagement dimension vigor predicted lower job burnout levels among Kenya Universities' professional counselors.

Similarly, the second tier analysed correlations between work engagement and job burnout dimensions were based on four hypotheses. It was observed that the weak negative correlation coefficient of  $-0.207(p = 0.01 < 0.05)$  which was greater than 0.05 and therefore statistically significant. Accordingly, it was inferred that higher levels of work engagement dimension dedication predicted lower levels of job burnout dimension emotional exhaustion among Kenya University professional counselors. These findings are in agreement with the observations of the study by Bakker, Demerouti and Sanz-Vergel (2014) on cross-over job burnout and engagement among working couples ( $n = 323$ ) where there was a weak negative correlation coefficient of  $-0.33$  which was statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ . The findings are also in agreement with the observations in a study on burnout and work engagement by Langelaan, Bakker, van Doornen and Schaufeli (2006) on a sample ( $n = 572$ ) employees from three different samples where there was a weak negative correlation coefficient of  $-0.29$  which was statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ . The observed significant negative correlation coefficient of  $-0.251(p = 0.00 < 0.05)$  between dedication and professional efficacy. Schaufeli and Salanova (2011) define dedication as the commitment to work that is characterized by a sense of significance. Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Kantas and Demerouti (2012) also views dedication as a useful and meaningful experience, inspiring and challenging and that it invokes feelings of pride and enthusiasm. It, therefore, could be regarded as a means of strengthening professional efficacy among Kenya Universities' professional counselors.

There was an observed weak negative correlation coefficient of  $-0.145(p = 0.05 \leq 0.05)$  between absorption and emotional exhaustion which was statistically significant. According to Schaufeli and Bakker (2010) absorption could be viewed as a state of flow that leads to full concentration on and deep engrossment on the task in disregard of time. In other words, when a counsellor exhibits absorption in their role, they attain a sense of flow and this could a cushion from emotional exhaustion. The observed significant negative correlation coefficient of  $-0.168(p = 0.02 < 0.05)$ . It was inferred higher levels of work engagement dimension absorption predicted and higher levels of job burnout dimension professional efficacy (lower reduced professional efficacy) among Kenya Universities' professional counselors.

The fourth level analysed correlations between overall work engagement and job burnout dimensions (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced professional efficacy) were based on four hypotheses. The observed significant negative correlation coefficient of  $-0.327(p = 0.00 < 0.05)$  between overall work engagement and reduced professional efficacy meant higher work engagement predicted and lower levels of reduced professional efficacy among Kenya Universities' professional counselors. There was an observed negative correlation coefficient  $-0.154(p = 0.04 < 0.05)$  between overall work engagement and depersonalization. It was inferred that at 95% confidence level, higher levels of work engagement predicted lower levels of job burnout dimension depersonalization among Kenya Universities' professional counselors. Finally, a weak negative correlation coefficient of  $-0.129(p = 0.09 < 0.05)$  which implied that work engagement could not be used to statistically predict lower job burnout levels.





The findings in this section were found to support the expectations of the study. Schaufeli and Bakker (2007) argues that highly engaged employees work particularly hard and diligently because they enjoy their job, and not because of a strong, compelling inner motivation alone. Macey and Schneider (2008) also concurs that employees who are highly engaged might be expected to work harder and smarter because they have high levels of energy, are enthusiastic regarding their jobs, and often involve themselves deeply in their work. When they experience fatigue Schaufeli and Salanova (2008) indicates that they perceive the feeling as quite pleasant because of its association with positive achievements rather than failures. Therefore, the outcome as Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) propose is that such workers develop positive attitudes towards their work and organization; they experience job satisfaction, commitment to the organization and a lack of desire to turnover. Likewise, Sonnentag (2011) and Salanova and colleagues (2003) argue that work engagement leads to positive organizational behavior, such as displaying personal initiative, a high motivation to learn and proactive conduct.

### **5.0 Suggestions for Further Research**

Although this research established that high work engagement levels predicted low job burnout rates, it did not prove if the reverse was true for the variables under research. The direction of causation calls for further investigation. The study recommends a longitudinal survey that evaluates the possibility of causal relationships between existential fulfillment, work engagement and job burnout among university counselors. Applying this model would also reduce possible common method bias as observed by Doty and Glick (1998) and Podsakoff and colleagues (2003). Data in this study was collected using self-response scores. It is therefore not known to what extent these self-reported scores accurately reflect existential fulfillment, work engagement, and job burnout. Naturally, the results of the current study for the relationship between the variables should be interpreted with, caution but there are no indications that these findings solely reflect biased respondent reporting. Combining self-report data with data obtained in a more objective manner is recommended for further research that applies powerful statistical techniques for hypothesis testing.

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