

The Impact of Supervisor Support on Employee-Related Outcomes Through Work Engagement



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Abstract One of the main concerns for organization management is employee-related outcomes, given their impact on organizational performance. Relatively less attention is given to organizational features that may intervene in the process, such as organizational culture or climate and direct supervision. We study the impact of supervisor support perceptions on absenteeism and on burnout, through the mediation of work engagement, while controlling the effect of perceived organizational values. Hypotheses were tested on a 43,850-multicountry sample, through multiple regression-based analyses. Results show that supervisor support precedes work engagement, a relationship moderated by organizational values; supervisor support, partially mediated by work engagement, relates negatively with absenteeism and exhaustion, prevents cynicism, and increases perceptions of self-efficacy. The findings allow us to discuss the role of supervisor support on work engagement and their effects on employee outcomes.

Keywords Supervisor support · Work engagement · Organizational values

1 Introduction

Employee-related outcomes are important for organizations for their relationships with organizational performance, either directly or indirectly. This has been a well-established subject of research in several fields, with different theoretical and empirical frameworks, which comprise the study of human resource management practices, attitudes, and behaviors. In this study, we choose to address attitudinal outcomes, work engagement, and burnout, as well as behavior, specifically absenteeism, all of which have positive or negative impact on individual performance and consequently on general performance. Organizational characteristics, such as

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organizational culture or direct management actions, also intervene in those outcomes but are less studied. On the field of organizational behavior, research has showed evidence of a consistent relationship between work engagement and employee outcomes; however, the study of its antecedents has been focused more on individual characteristics than organizational context. Contrary to previous studies, which tend to neglect the organizational settings in favor of individual characteristics, we decided to analyze a causal chain from perceptions and attitudes to behavior taking into account two organizational traits, organizational support and values, proposing that the latter effectively contributes to shaping the effect of the perception of supervisor support on work engagement, thus filling a gap in literature. Therefore, our investigation followed a different path from the majority of studies; our research contributes to the debate concerning the linkages between organizational support, through the worker's perceptions of supervisor support on absenteeism and burnout, analyzing the mediating role of work engagement, while controlling for the interaction effect of organizational values on the supervisor support relationship with work engagement, suggesting this later effect as an additional explanatory mechanism. The main findings of the research are that the perceptions of supervisor support have an important role in decreasing absenteeism, exhaustion, and cynicism while increasing perceptions of self-efficacy on the job, directly, and promoting work engagement, therefore potentially enhancing organizational efficiency. Also, organizational values show a significant impact on the relationship between supervisor support and work engagement.

This study is organized as follows. The next section presents a theoretical background on supervisor support research domains and its predictable relationship with work engagement, as well as the foreseeable relationships between work engagement with burnout and absenteeism. We also establish the arguments for the moderation role of organizational values and present the hypotheses. The third section describes methods—sample, procedure, and measures. The fourth section reports data analysis and results, which are later discussed. The fifth section comprises not only discussion of the findings but also the contributions for theory and practice, along with the limitations. The last section contains the major conclusions.

2 Theoretical Background and Hypothesis

2.1 Supervisor Support Relationship with Work Engagement

The concept of organizational support is defined as employee's global beliefs "concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being" (Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002, p. 698). Employees also develop the same perceptions regarding supervisors that, while acting as organization agents, signal organizational support, and although coworker support is also related, it is considered to be less important (Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002).

Research in this area has brought evidence of a positive influence of organizational support on individual's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002). Empirical results mention identification with the organization, pleasant work experience, job satisfaction, self-efficacy (Kurtessis et al. 2017), organizational commitment, job-related affect, job involvement, reducing strains, desire to remain in the organization, less withdrawal behavior (Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002), a decreasing effect of organizationally relevant deviant behavior as well as deviant work behavior targeted at coworkers (Tuzun et al. 2017), and greater engagement (Leiter and Maslach 2003; Saks 2006). This would be explained by the reciprocity norm in the base of social exchange theory; being cared for by organization would lead to "caring back" and developing an effort–outcome expectancy and affective attachment (Eisenberger et al. 1986).

Different types of support have been associated with different outcomes; for instance, supervisor support has been associated with exhaustion and coworker support with efficacy, but in general terms support is positively associated with greater engagement (Leiter and Maslach 2003). Work engagement is defined as a persistent, positive affective–motivational state of fulfillment characterized by three components, vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004). According to the job resources and demand model (Demerouti et al. 2001), workers are confronted with job demands (physical, psychological, social, or organizational) that when excessive may turn into job stressors leading to negative responses such as depression, anxiety, or burnout; job resources are aspects of the job (physical, psychological, social, or organizational) that can reduce job demands, and its costs are instrumental in achieving work goals or stimulate personal growth, learning, and development (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004).

For Bakker and Demerouti (2008, p. 211), job resources such as "social support from colleagues and supervisors, performance feedback, skill variety, autonomy, and learning opportunities are positively associated with work engagement." These resources play a motivational role, either intrinsic, leading employees to growth and development or thus fulfilling basic human needs, or extrinsic, when helping to achieve work goals, raising the willingness to use efforts and abilities to work tasks; either way, individuals are likely to experience engagement (Bakker and Demerouti 2008). Consequently, on the antecedents of work engagement, we can find besides the job resources already mentioned others, such as task variety, task significance, high-quality relationship with the supervisor, transformational leadership, organizational climate, or social environment (Bakker et al. 2014; Christian et al. 2011; Bakker and Demerouti 2008; Maslach 2017).

Research has gathered empirical evidence on the relationship between job resources and work engagement, taking into account different forms of organizational support. This is the case of the study by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) where we find a positive relationship between social support from colleagues and supervisory coaching and work engagement. This result was replicated in Hakanen et al. (2006), in a teachers' sample, with a positive result for the relation between job resources and engagement; research from Caesens and Stinglhamber (2014) also finds a positive relationship between perceived organizational support and work

engagement, both directly and mediated by self-efficacy, in a sample of service sector employees. Similar results are presented by Gupta et al. (2016) with a positive relationship between perceived organizational support and work engagement, directly and mediated by affective commitment, using a sample of nurses; the study of Gillet et al. (2013) with two samples of police officers brings evidence that both perceived organizational support and perceived supervisor support are positively related to the three dimensions of work engagement. Longitudinal studies by Mauno et al. (2007) with healthcare employees and Schaufeli et al. (2009) with telecom managers also establish positive relationships between job resources and work engagement; the latter specifies that the increase in job resources predicts work engagement, whereas its decrease predicts burnout, and also engagement negatively predicts absenteeism by sick leave.

The work of Vander Elst et al. (2016) with a sample of healthcare employees also brings evidence that job resources are associated with higher levels of work engagement and lower levels of burnout. Also, social support moderates the positive relationship between workload and burnout, making it nonsignificant for higher levels of social support. We would like to stress that all this empirical evidence was gathered in different national settings and socio-professional groups. Therefore, our hypothesis is as follows:

H1

Supervisor support has a positive relationship with work engagement.

2.2 Work Engagement Relationships with Burnout and Absenteeism

Burnout and engagement are independent and negatively related concepts (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004; Bakker et al. 2014); burnout is defined as “a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job, and is composed by three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy” (Maslach et al. 2001, p. 397) or, more generally, as a state of exhaustion and cynicism toward work (Bakker et al. 2014) and has a significant impact on the functioning of organizations and on the lives of individuals.

There are several burnout outcomes that have negative implications for organizations, such as absenteeism, turnover, lower productivity and effectiveness at work, and lower levels of job satisfaction and commitment; furthermore, burnout can have a contagious effect through interpersonal conflict and job disturbance. There are also consequences in personal life, specifically in mental health, causing depression anxiety and lower self-esteem (Maslach et al. 2001), so it is reasonable to expect that burnout correlates positively with absenteeism.

As for the antecedents of burnout, we find, among others, role ambiguity, conflict and stress, stressful events, workload, work pressure (Bakker et al. 2014), and lack of resources (Alarcon 2011), in particular, deficient social support from supervisor

(Maslach et al. 2001). For preventing burnout, several types of job resources are mentioned in the literature, such as feedback, social support and high-quality relationship with supervisors (Bakker et al. 2014), and job engagement; engaged workers cope better with challenging situations and better recover from stress (Maslach 2017).

Also, Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) find negative relations between job engagement and burnout, as well as between job engagement and turnover intentions; in addition, Hakanen et al. (2006) study reports a negative result for the relation between job resources and burnout.

Moreover, in Schaufeli et al. (2009), work engagement negatively predicts absenteeism (sick leave). Therefore, we propose the following:

H2

Work engagement has a negative relationship with absenteeism, burnout (exhaustion and cynicism), and a positive relationship with burnout, efficacy.

H3

Work engagement partially mediates the relationship between supervisor support with absenteeism and burnout (negative with exhaustion and cynicism and positive with efficacy).

2.3 The Moderating Role of Organization Values

From the motivational point of view, values are paramount to people's relation to their work, surpassing the utilitarian exchange; the congruence between individual and organizational values is a strong motivational driver and a way to support work engagement (Leiter and Maslach 2003). Literature has not given enough attention to organizational values as context for organizational support, although organizational values can enhance performance, through positive effects on individuals' attitudes and behaviors, namely, the sense of social support transmitted by mutuality and fostered by trust (Jurkiewicz and Giacalone 2004).

Since work activities and tasks take place in organizational settings, Maslach et al. (2001) called attention for the broadening of context in which burnout occurs, underlining the importance of values and "how they shape the emotional and cognitive relationship that people develop with their work" (Maslach et al. 2001, p. 409). In our view, the same rationale can be applied to work engagement. According to Bourne and Jenkins (2013), organizational values embody the general values that guide its members while selecting and/or evaluating behavior; shared values can be viewed as an aggregation of the values of organization members, created by socialization, when the new members are exposed to the customs, norms, and practices in a way that organization's characteristics are internalized by members.

One of the areas where organization values have been discussed is the person-organization fit (or person-culture fit), which can be defined in general terms as the

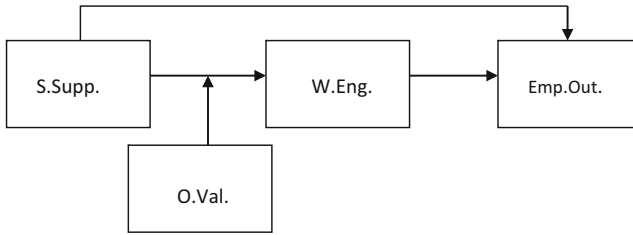


Fig. 1 Research model. Source: author

compatibility between individuals and organizations (Ostroff et al. 2005). This compatibility was reported to relate positively with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, citizenship behavior, and career success and negatively with turnover (Ostroff et al. 2005). Management role in the process of value sharing influencing is recognized in several works. For Maierhofer et al. (2000), there are several ways this influence process can occur; there can be value congruence between managers and employees, in which manager's values may indirectly relate to employees behavior; a value-behavior consistency, where for both managers and employees there is a relation between values held and behavior adopted; manager's values and employees values, when through a process of social influence employees adjust their values to the organization, in which managers are paramount as role models, demonstrating value-consistent behavior, and explicitly stating desired values, as well as reinforcing desired values through reward and recognition (Maierhofer et al. 2000, p. 419). There is also mentioning of behavior modeling between managers and employees, those choosing behaviors that are rewarded or associated with more power and status; finally, there are manager's behavior and the modeling of employees' values, where through the observed behavior of managers individuals come to believe that these are the normal or right thing to do.

In our view, the perception of value congruence between organization's espoused values and manager's behavior will have a positive and increasing effect on the attitudes of employees, as we can infer from the literature (Ostroff et al. 2005; Posner 1992).

Hence, our hypothesis is:

H4

Organizational values moderate the relationship between supervisor support and work engagement such that the indirect effect of supervisor support on absenteeism and burnout (exhaustion, cynicism, and efficacy) through work engagement will be stronger when perceptions of organization values are higher.

The hypothesized relationships and research model are summarized in Fig. 1.

3 Method

3.1 Sample

The study was based on a sample of 43,847 individuals from 35 European countries. The average age of respondents was 43.34 years old, and 50% of the sample was male; most respondents worked in the private sector (69%), 77% had a permanent contract, and the most frequent level of education was upper secondary education (42%).

3.2 Procedure and Measures

We used secondary data provided by the European Working Conditions Survey 2015 questionnaires.

Participants were asked to rate their supervisor support (the immediate manager), organizational values (trust, recognition, fairness, cooperation), work engagement, and absenteeism on Likert-type scales (with values from 1 to 5). Where appropriate, questions were recoded so that to the higher value of the scale, it corresponded to higher agreement.

3.2.1 Supervisor Support

Supervisor support was measured with a scale based on six items (sample item included "...encourages and supports your development"), each with a with a Likert-type scale of 1 ("strongly agree") to 5 ("strongly disagree"). The assessment of the one-dimensionality of this measure was made with EFA, using principal component analysis, which showed the existence of item correlation (Bartlett test with significance of 0.000 and KMO of 0,909); the total percentage explained by the single factor was 65.6. This measure showed good levels of internal reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha = 0.89. The mean of these items formed the immediate manager support score.

3.2.2 Organizational Values

Organizational values were measured using a six-item scale (sample item included "The management trusts the employees to do their work well") each with a Likert-type scale of 1 ("strongly agree") to 5 ("strongly disagree"). The assessment of the one-dimensionality of this measure was made with EFA, using principal component analysis that showed the existence of item correlation (Bartlett test with significance of 0.000 and KMO of 0.891); the total percentage explained by the single factor was

60.0. This measure showed good levels of internal reliability, with a Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$. The mean of these items formed the organizational value score.

3.2.3 Work Engagement

Work engagement was measured using a three-item scale (sample item included "Time flies when I am working") each with a Likert-type scale of 1 ("strongly agree") to 5 ("strongly disagree"). The assessment of the one-dimensionality of this measure was made with EFA, using principal component analysis that showed the existence of item correlation (Bartlett test with significance of 0.000 and KMO of 0.760, which is still acceptable); the total percentage explained by the single factor was 65.7. This measure showed acceptable levels of internal reliability, with a Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74$. The mean of these items formed the work engagement score.

3.2.4 Absenteeism

Absenteeism was measured through the number of health-related leave days in the last 12 months.

3.2.5 Burnout

The three burnout dimensions were measured with one item each, each with a Likert-type scale of 1 ("always") to 5 ("never"): exhaustion with "I feel exhausted at the end of the working day," cynicism with "I doubt the importance of my work," and efficacy with "In my opinion, I am good at my job."

Given that all variables were collected from the same source, the data are vulnerable to common method variance. Therefore, we used Harman's single test factor (1967), of which the unrotated factor solution resulted in 18 factors, the first explaining only 30% of the total variance. Hence, although common method bias cannot be completely discarded, it should not affect the validity of the findings.

4 Results

Hypothesis testing was conducted through multiple regression-based analyses in order to measure direct effects, mediation, and conditional indirect effects. Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables are reported in Table 1.

All correlations among variables are statistically significant and in agreement with the hypothesized relationships. We resorted to PROCESS, an SPSS software macro that estimates conditional indirect effects in moderated mediation models

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alphas, and correlations of independent variables with dependent variables

Variables	Mean	S.D.	Alphas	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Sup.Support	3.949	0.787	0.89	-						
2. Org. Values	4.017	0.680	0.86	0.661*	-					
3. W.Engagement	3.910	0.742	0.74	0.343*	0.378	-				
4. Absenteeism	5.723	16.226	-	-0.068*	-0.077*	-0.053*	-			
5. B.Exhaustion	3.178	1.056	-	-0.136*	-0.167*	-0.157*	0.077*	-		
6. B.Cynicism	1.889	1.095	-	-0.124*	-0.173*	-0.234*	0.0001*	0.202*	-	
7. B.Efficacy	4.409	0.673	-	0.142*	0.208*	0.375*	0.002*	0.031*	-0.215*	-

Source: author

* $p < 0.01$; $N = 43,847$

(Hayes 2017) as proposed in the model, to test the relationships between variables. The evaluation of indirect effects is done through bootstrapping to compute confidence intervals (CI).

Using PROCESS, we examined a model 7, with 5000 bootstrap samples, 95% bias-corrected bootstrap CI for indirect effects, for the conditional indirect effect of supervisor support on employee outcomes (absenteeism and burnout—exhaustion, cynicism, and efficacy) through work engagement; all the conditional indirect effects were analyzed at different values of the moderator variable (the mean and one standard deviation above and below the mean). A model 4 was also examined with 5000 bootstrap samples, 95% bias-corrected bootstrap CI to assess total, direct, and indirect effects for all employee outcomes. All variables were mean-centered.

Hypothesis H1 stated that supervisor support was positively associated with work engagement, and hypothesis H2 proposed the existence of negative relationships between work engagement and absenteeism, burnout (exhaustion and cynicism), and a positive relationship with burnout, efficacy. Table 2 shows that supervisor support is positively associated with work engagement ($B = 0.164, p < 0.000$) and work engagement is negatively associated with absenteeism ($B = -0.737, p < 0.000$), exhaustion ($B = -0.178, p < 0.000$), and cynicism ($B = -0.320, p < 0.000$) and positively associated with efficacy ($B = 0.335, p < 0.000$). Thus, results supported H1 and H2.

Table 3 presents the results regarding the mediation effect of work engagement in the relationship between supervisor support and employee outcomes; the indirect effects of supervisor support through work engagement were also significant and negative with absenteeism ($B = -0.238, p < 0.000$), exhaustion ($B = -0.057, p < 0.000$), and cynicism ($B = -0.103, p < 0.000$) and positive with efficacy ($B = 0.108, p < 0.000$), therefore supporting H3.

Finally, Table 4 demonstrates that H4, proposing the moderation by organizational values of the relationship between supervisor support and work engagement, was also supported; the interaction term between supervisor support and organizational values on work engagement is significant ($B = 0.022, p < 0.000$); furthermore, the conditional indirect effects of supervisor support on absenteeism and burnout through work engagement are always significant and stronger for one standard deviation (1SD) of organizational values.

5 Discussion

These findings allow us to discuss the role of supervisor support on employee outcomes; supervisor behavior toward workers decreases absenteeism, exhaustion, and cynicism while increasing the perceptions of self-efficacy on the job. This occurs both directly and indirectly through work engagement although with different patterns; the direct relationship between supervisor support and absenteeism and exhaustion is stronger than the indirect effect through work engagement, whereas the indirect effect is stronger in the relationships with cynicism and efficacy.

Table 2 Conditional process results—unstandardized coefficients

Dependent variables	Work engagement	Absenteeism	Burnout—exhaustion	Burnout—cynicism	Burnout—efficacy
Supervisor support	0.164* (0.0057)	-1.163* (0.1046)	-0.125* (0.0067)	-0.070* (0.0069)	0.014* (0.0040)
Mediator—work engagement	—	-0.737* (0.1109)	-0.178* (0.0071)	-0.320* (0.0073)	0.335* (0.0043)
Moderator—organizational values	0.297* (0.0064)	—	—	—	—
Supervisor support X organizational values	0.023* (0.0043)	—	—	—	—
R-squared	0.159	0.006	0.032	0.057	0.141
F for change in R-squared	27549.381	1238.888	733.353	13191.122	35656.081

Source: author

* $p < 0.000$; standard error coefficients in brackets; $N = 43,847$

Table 3 Indirect effect of supervisor support through work engagement

Absent	B.Exhaust			B.Cynicism			B.Efficacy								
	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot UCLI	Effects ^a	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot UCLI	Effects ^a	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot UCLI				
-0.2384	0.0402	-0.3181	-0.1613	-0.0576	0.0028	-0.0630	0.0521	-0.1033	0.003	-0.1093	-0.973	0.1083	0.0024	0.1035	0.113

Source: author

^aUnstandardized effect

Table 4 Conditional indirect effects

O. Vals.	Absent			B.Exhaust			B.Cynicism			B.Efficacy						
	Effects ^a	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot UCLI	Effects ^a	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot UCLI	Effects ^a	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot UCLI				
-1 SD	-0.1093	0.0192	-0.1477	-0.0730	-0.0264	0.0017	-0.0298	-0.0231	-0.0474	0.0025	0.0477	0.0523	0.0496	0.0024	0.045	0.0544
M	-0.1207	0.0209	-0.1616	-0.0807	-0.0292	0.0017	-0.0326	-0.0258	-0.0523	0.0024	0.0517	0.057	0.0548	0.0023	0.0504	0.0593
+1 SD	-0.1322	0.0231	-0.1776	-0.0881	-0.0319	0.002	-0.0359	-0.0282	-0.0573	0.0028	0.0426	0.0627	0.06	0.0028	0.0546	0.0655

Source: author

^aUnstandardized effect

The more pronounced direct effect of supervisor support on absenteeism and exhaustion reflects its impact on the workload and has been found previously in literature (Leiter and Maslach 2003). The stronger indirect effect of supervisor support through work engagement could mean that engagement is a better predictor of cynicism and efficacy (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004). According to the self-determination theory (Deci et al. 2017), all employees have the psychological need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness; satisfying these needs would promote autonomous motivation, high-quality performance, and well-being.

Work context and supervisor support can lead to perceptions of autonomy support; thus, supervisor support and organizational values would act as a motivational force increasing work engagement. This study held with a large sample contributes to the field of human resource management emphasizing the role of supervisor support in reducing absenteeism and burnout—exhaustion and cynicism—while increasing efficacy, both directly and indirectly, by fostering work engagement. Organizational values come forth as a contextual factor sustaining the relationship between supervisor support and work engagement.

These findings show that there is a cumulative effect of supervisor support and organizational values that organizations should take into account in their efforts to reduce costs associated with absenteeism and burnout, contributing to achieve better performance. The importance of supervisor support should be recognized and encouraged, either with formal training programs or valuing support, cooperation and helping behaviors, and an organizational culture that includes values such as mutual trust, cooperation, fairness, and recognition.

While considering the contributions of this research, one should also consider a number of limitations. The first limitation, being intrinsic to the cross-sectional design of the study, is that it impedes us from drawing causal inferences between the variables in our model that are established based on literature. To overcome this problem, future studies should replicate the model using longitudinal designs.

In addition, another limitation is that the proposed theoretical model was tested with data only from self-reported measures. For that reason, we cannot exclude the influence of common method bias on our results; nonetheless, the Harman single-factor test was performed, and the results indicate that common method bias should not be a problem to the results pertaining to our model (Podsakoff et al. 2003). By showing that organizational support, embodied by supervisor, increases work engagement and that both have a beneficial effect on employee's outcomes, we believe that the results of this study have valuable practical implications for managers. Managers should implement policies and measures in order to increase perceptions of organizational support. As suggested by the meta-analysis work of Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002), beneficial treatment in the form of fairness, organizational rewards, and favorable job conditions is associated not only with less withdrawal behavior but also with job satisfaction, positive mood, and affective commitment and better performance. According to our results, organizational values that are associated with or mirror organizational support should also be cultivated, given the reinforcing and positive role they play on employee outcomes.

6 Conclusion

In order to attend to important organizational and human resources management concerns, our research analyzed the relationship between organizational support and employee outcomes while including work engagement as mediator and organizational values as moderator variables in the model studied. We concluded that in fact organizational support, in the form of supervisor support, has an influence on employee's outcomes, by means of work engagement, also fostered by support, and in itself, which underlines its relevance. We also established that the influence of organizational values in the relationship between organizational support and work engagement leads to better outcomes. This way, when organizations want to reduce burnout and absenteeism, they should not only invest in support provided by supervisors but also to reflect on their context, the espoused values, and organizational culture as an important setting in which attitudes and behaviors are developed.

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