Employee Work Passion

Connecting the Dots

By Drea Zigarmi, Dobie Houson, David Witt, and Jim Diehl

For years, researchers, organizations, and leaders have been grappling with both the challenge of how best to create a motivating work environment and with the role of leadership in inspiring and maximizing the work passion and performance of others.

Several years ago, The Ken Blanchard Companies® began exploring these issues as well as the relationships between leadership, employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction, and organizational performance. The first study included the creation of a model that we titled The Leadership-Profit Chain. This model was grounded in a literature review of hundreds of studies and meta-analyses from 1980 through 2005.

The study concluded that Strategic Leadership indirectly influenced Customer Devotion and Employee Work Passion by establishing policies, procedures, vision, and values and that Operational Leadership directly influenced Employee Work Passion and Customer Devotion through the daily operationalization of Strategic Leadership policies. The study also found that Employee Work Passion, in turn, was a key factor in creating Customer Devotion and Organizational Vitality.

Further research allowed The Ken Blanchard Companies to create a model of how Employee Work Passion is formed, a definition of what Employee Work Passion is, and a core set of factors that must be present in the organizational and job environment in order for Employee Work Passion to be optimized.

Our initial research surfaced eight key factors responsible for driving Employee Work Passion. These included Meaningful Work, Autonomy, Collaboration, Fairness, Recognition, Growth, Connectedness to Colleagues, and Connectedness to Leader.

While these eight factors were not all inclusive, they represented a majority of the influencers of Employee Work Passion and accounted for approximately 64 percent of the variance that explained Employee Work Passion.

A subsequent study was devoted to understanding what additional factors might drive Employee Work Passion. A review of the literature produced a list of 33 possible factors. Using factor analysis, a final list of factors was narrowed to 12. These included six of the
original eight factors (Growth, Connectedness to Colleagues, Connectedness to Leader, Meaningful Work, Autonomy, and Collaboration). In addition, some factors no longer correlated to the existing six and new factors emerged. And in the final analysis, Recognition was replaced by Feedback; Fairness split into two new factors: Distributive Justice and Procedural Justice; and two new factors emerged, which were labeled Task Variety and Performance Expectations. This gave us the final set of 12 factors.

Regression analysis showed that each of the factors was interdependent of each other, and all must be present for Employee Work Passion to be maximized. While there was no statistically significant ranking among the factors (meaning one was not more important than another), Meaningful Work was generally perceived to be the most present in the minds of our survey population, while Procedural Justice and Growth were generally perceived to be the least present.

Through further statistical analysis, we learned that the factors could be grouped as either organizational factors, job factors, or moderating factors. Organizational factors are influenced by the organization’s senior leadership, policies, procedures, and organizational systems. Job factors are influenced by aspects of the job, colleagues, or leader. Moderating factors influence an individual’s perception of both organizational factors and job factors. See Figure 1.

In addition to the 12 factors, five key areas of intent also emerged from our research. These include the intent to perform one’s job well, the intent to remain with the organization, the intent to be a good organizational citizen, the intent to endorse the organization as a great place to work, and the intent to put forth discretionary effort. Intent is vital to understand and measure as it is instrumental in predicting behavior.

**How Is Employee Work Passion Different than Engagement?**

We make several distinctions between the concepts of Employee Work Passion and engagement. First, Employee Work Passion is supported by a theory and model that explain how work passion is formed.

Second, both organizational and job factors influence an individual’s level of Employee Work Passion. Not simply one or the other. Engagement is generally associated with either job commitment (burnout, well-being, etc.) or organizational commitment (intent to stay, endorsement, etc.) but typically not associated with both. We feel Employee Work Passion is better explained by social cognition, appraisal theory, and research—and encompasses both job commitment and organizational commitment; therefore, it is a different and more expansive concept than engagement.

Third, Employee Work Passion measures both cognition and affect as opposed to measuring satisfaction. Engagement studies tend to measure employee satisfaction as “engaged,” “disengaged,” and “actively disengaged,” but fail to measure “actively engaged.” Measuring employee satisfaction on its own does not provide a measure of what the employee intends to do. Since Employee Work Passion measures not only affect and cognition but also intention (and the degree to which individuals are actively engaged), it provides a clearer sense of how the individual intends to behave on behalf of the organization.
Understanding How Employee Work Passion Is Created—
A Review of the Appraisal Process

In order to understand how Employee Work Passion occurs, one must first understand the process an individual goes through in deciding to engage in a specific behavior. As stated earlier, much of the research does not take the full scope of this process into account.

Through deeper exploration of the literature, we began to incorporate significant ideas found in cognitive psychology.

An individual’s choices are driven by his or her understanding of how the experience or event being appraised impacts his or her well-being. Since all people are meaning-oriented and meaning-creating, they are constantly evaluating the environment from the standpoint of their own well-being and reacting rationally (cognition) and emotionally (affect) to those evaluations.

Cognition and affect go hand in hand, happening almost simultaneously, over and over, as individuals make sense of a situation to reach their conclusions about what is happening, what it means to them, how it will affect them, how they feel about that, what they intend to do, and, finally, what they actually do, all filtered through the lens of who they are. See Figure 2.

As one reviews the model, it is clear that the appraisal process begins with an assessment of the job and organizational environmental antecedents (the 12 Employee Work Passion factors). During the appraisal process, an individual makes sense of a situation to reach their conclusions about what is happening, what it means to them, how it will affect them, how they feel about that, what they intend to do, and, finally, what they actually do, all filtered through the lens of who they are. See Figure 2.

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**Figure 2: The Employee Work Passion Model**
**Employee Work Passion Defined**

An individual’s persistent, emotionally positive, meaning-based state of well-being stemming from continuous, reoccurring cognitive and affective appraisals of various job and organizational situations, which results in consistent, constructive work intentions and behaviors.

**Understanding How the Factors Influence Intent and Behavior**

Much of our study in regard to what creates Employee Work Passion has been focused on understanding which organizational and job factors are important to employees. Our research has also focused on which intentions and resultant behaviors are characteristic of individuals who are passionate about their work and their organizations. But, it is just as important to understand the connections of specific factors to specific intentions.

The following table allows us to understand the relationships between the 12 Employee Work Passion factors and the five Intent scales. Using statistical analysis to analyze the connection between the Intent scales (dependent variable) and the 12 factors (independent variable) enables us to understand to what extent the 12 factors influence the five intentions, which in turn influence behavior. It also allows us to understand which factors have the most impact across all five intentions. To interpret the correlation values, .500 represents a large correlation, .300 is a medium correlation, and .100 is a small correlation. See Table 1.

**Table 1: Correlation Analysis between Employee Work Passion Factors and Intentions in the Workplace**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Discretionary Effort</th>
<th>Intent to Perform</th>
<th>Employee Endorsement</th>
<th>Intent to Remain</th>
<th>Organizational Citizenship Behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>.460</td>
<td>.298</td>
<td>.545</td>
<td>.618</td>
<td>.345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectedness to Leader</td>
<td>.417</td>
<td>.305</td>
<td>.431</td>
<td>.417</td>
<td>.319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectedness to Colleagues</td>
<td>.513</td>
<td>.346</td>
<td>.450</td>
<td>.286</td>
<td>.506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workload Balance</td>
<td>.137</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>.243</td>
<td>.234</td>
<td>.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task Variety</td>
<td>.603</td>
<td>.520</td>
<td>.491</td>
<td>.359</td>
<td>.526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Expectations</td>
<td>.388</td>
<td>.336</td>
<td>.465</td>
<td>.412</td>
<td>.345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>.450</td>
<td>.376</td>
<td>.535</td>
<td>.468</td>
<td>.540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful Work</td>
<td>.488</td>
<td>.475</td>
<td>.505</td>
<td>.492</td>
<td>.477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributive Justice</td>
<td>.396</td>
<td>.262</td>
<td>.496</td>
<td>.519</td>
<td>.333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedural Justice</td>
<td>.511</td>
<td>.377</td>
<td>.635</td>
<td>.530</td>
<td>.476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>.531</td>
<td>.390</td>
<td>.539</td>
<td>.524</td>
<td>.483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>.385</td>
<td>.338</td>
<td>.483</td>
<td>.454</td>
<td>.370</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All correlations are significant at the 0.01 level.
The table shows that all 12 factors have a certain degree of correlation ranging from trivial or small to large. This supports earlier statistical analysis that allowed us to conclude that all factors must be present in order for Employee Work Passion to be optimal.

For the purpose of this article, we will focus our explanation and rationale of the correlations by highlighting the larger correlations.

An individual’s intent to expend Discretionary Effort on behalf of the organization is directly influenced by all of the 12 factors. The top four, listed in order of both importance and correlation strength, are

1. Task Variety
2. Autonomy
3. Connectedness to Colleagues
4. Procedural Justice

What This Means

This means that the extent to which individuals perceive that they have variety in their jobs and that they are doing different types of tasks that go beyond routine, have personal and professional connections to their fellow workers, perceive that policies and procedures are equitably applied to all, and have a certain level of autonomy in the way they approach their job all influence an individual’s desire to exert discretionary effort in their job and on behalf of their organization.

Why

Task Variety correlates to Discretionary Effort because people are more engaged, less bored, and more apt to go the extra mile when they have autonomy and variety in their role. Individuals who have a greater degree of Task Variety are more inclined to exert Discretionary Effort because they tend to have a greater degree of interest in their jobs and they find work engaging.

Peer pressure can also play a role in influencing Discretionary Effort, so the more connected an individual is to their colleagues, the more likely they are to expend extra energy on behalf of the organization. Individuals who perceive that their colleagues are willing to expend extra energy on behalf of the organization are more likely to do the same.

Additionally, the concept of Procedural Justice (or the extent to which individuals feel involved in decisions that affect them and feel that decisions, policies, and procedures are equitably and fairly applied to all) influences Discretionary Effort because if people perceive there is a lack of fairness in the work environment they are inclined not to be fair or expend additional energy on behalf of the organization. On the other hand, people feel good about working extra hard when the organization they are working for treats them fairly. Research in the area of procedural fairness has shown that people are more willing to accept decisions when procedural fairness is alive and well in the work environment.
An individual's Intent to Perform at peak levels is directly influenced by all of the 12 factors. The top three, listed below in order of importance and correlation strength, are

1. Task Variety
2. Meaningful Work
3. Autonomy

*What This Means*

This means that the extent to which individuals perceive that the work they do has meaning to the organization and that the work the organization does has meaning to the customer, the extent to which there is variety in their work and tasks, and the degree to which they have autonomy to decide how to best approach tasks.

*Why*

In looking at the correlations, we believe that when individuals find meaning in their work, they are more compelled to perform the tasks and roles of the job.

Task Variety influences Intent to Perform because the more that individuals feel their jobs contain variety, keep them from being bored, and include more than routine tasks, the more likely they are to work efficiently and effectively and to do their jobs well. Autonomy is correlated to Intent to Perform because most people feel the need to have the ability to decide how their tasks are performed and to have the authority to do their jobs; the more this is the case, the stronger their intent to do their jobs well.

An individual's intent to endorse the organization as a great place to work and to do business with is directly influenced by all of the 12 factors. The top three, listed in order of importance and strength of correlation, are

1. Procedural Justice
2. Growth
3. Autonomy

*What This Means*

This means that the extent to which individuals perceive that policies and procedures are equitably applied to all, the extent to which they have growth opportunities in their roles and to grow within the organization, and the extent to which they have some amount of freedom when deciding how to approach roles and tasks.
Why

Endorsement correlates highly with Procedural Justice because fairness in the work environment is important to people and its presence causes people to form an attachment to the organization or group. This attachment makes individuals more likely to endorse and speak positively about their organization. People want others they care about to come to work in a place that is fair, offers people a voice, and utilizes decision-making processes that focus on the benefit for all.

The connection between Growth and Autonomy and the intent to endorse the organization stems from people’s need to feel that they can see a future for both their job and career growth and that they have the autonomy to make decisions about how they accomplish their work. This influences their willingness to endorse the organization as a good place to work and to recommend the organization to their family and friends, as well as to potential customers.

An individual’s intent to remain with the organization is influenced by all of the 12 factors. The top four, listed below in order of importance and strength of correlation, are

1. Growth
2. Procedural Justice
3. Autonomy
4. Distributive Justice

What This Means

This means that individuals’ intent to stay with an organization is influenced by their perception that there are opportunities to grow within their current role and within the organization; by their perception that benefits, resources, and compensation are fairly and equitably distributed to all; and by the degree to which they have autonomy to do their jobs.

Why

We generally find that Intent to Remain with an organization has the lowest ranking of any of the intention scales. People see their intent to stay with an organization as a right and a statement of confidence in leadership as well as the organization. If individuals don’t perceive that there are growth opportunities in the organization or that benefits and pay are not equitably distributed, their intent to stay diminishes over time. There is a prevalent school of thought that presumes it is an individual’s relationship to his or her leader that is the key determinant of retention. While this relationship is important, it is not as important as the presence of growth opportunities, autonomy, and the presence of fairness or Distributive Justice. Procedural Justice is also important in regard to retaining key talent. Leaders need to be careful that policies and procedures are consistently applied to all and that people are involved in the decisions that affect them.
An individual’s intent to be a good organizational citizen is directly influenced by all of the 12 factors. The top four, listed in order of importance and strength of correlation, are

1. Collaboration
2. Task Variety
3. Connectedness to Colleagues
4. Autonomy

What This Means

This means that people’s willingness to be a valuable organizational citizen is influenced by the extent to which they feel connected to their colleagues, the degree to which they feel they have variety in their tasks and their job, the degree to which they feel that their work and the organization’s work is meaningful and provides value to the customer, the degree to which they feel that their work environment is collaborative, and the degree to which they feel that they have freedom to approach their goals and task.

Why

Individuals who feel more highly connected to their colleagues and see their workplace as collaborative tend to focus more on the welfare of the organization. This connection is due to the concepts of sportsmanship, fair play, and taking care of those they care about. Organizational Citizenship is the goodwill that an organization keeps in the bank, which, in turn, offsets sabotage, stealing, and abusing organizational resources.

Task Variety correlates to Organizational Citizenship because it has a sense of “justness” to it that makes individuals feel good about their roles, which, in turn, translates to feeling good about the organization. Additionally, a sense of Task Variety tends to make people feel more engaged about their jobs and therefore their organizations.

Meaningful Work and Autonomy connect to Organizational Citizenship because individuals are more invested in their organizations when their work has meaning and they have a certain amount of freedom to choose how to approach their projects and tasks. When individuals feel more invested in their organizations, they are more inclined to act in ways that benefit the organization.
Summary

While we know from our research that all 12 factors must be present in the work environment in order for Employee Work Passion to be optimized, the data in Table 1 clearly shows that some factors are more influential than others in regard to intentions and their resulting behavior.

A caveat to the data and conclusions is that the analysis was conducted using a random sample of employees from many organizations. When we look at these same correlations within a specific organization and also compare organization-to-organization correlations, we find that culture is the most powerful influencer of how the 12 factors are represented and those results differ not only from organization to organization but also from the results of our national sample.

When looking to create environments that encourage people to have positive intentions in the work environment, organizations and leaders should examine the extent to which the 12 organization and job factors are present in their current culture. In particular, leaders should ask themselves the following questions:

• To what extent does the culture allow individuals to find meaning in their work and their roles, and also in the organization’s purpose?

• To what extent are policies, procedures, benefits, and compensation transparent and equitably applied to all?

• To what extent is the organization providing growth opportunities for individuals in their current jobs and in their careers? And do the feedback mechanisms allow individuals to improve and advance?

• To what extent are individuals clear about what is expected of them and have a reasonable amount of autonomy when engaging in projects and tasks? And are they provided opportunities to collaborate with others?

• To what extent are job roles balanced and reasonable with enough variety to challenge people to stretch and perform at optimal levels?

Employee Work Passion is an individual’s persistent, emotionally positive, meaning-based state of well-being stemming from reoccurring cognitive and affective appraisals of various job and organizational situations, which results in consistent, constructive work intentions and behaviors.

Therefore, we recommend that organizations provide a sense of meaning beyond simply making a profit; the autonomy and flexibility for individuals to give their all at work; opportunities for growth, collaboration, and recognition; and a sense of connectedness. In addition, organizations must ensure that processes and procedures are fairly and consistently applied to all employees.

While it may seem daunting to address the 12 factors and to incorporate them into the workplace, organizations that support the development of Employee Work Passion will be rewarded by passionate employees who are dedicated to creating devoted customers, achieving sustainable growth, and increasing profits.
About the Ken Blanchard Companies

With more than three decades of helping leaders and organizations, more than 18 million books in print, programs offered in more than 12 languages, and clients across six continents, The Ken Blanchard Companies is recognized as one of the world's leading training and development experts. Our groundbreaking thinking and memorable learner experiences create lasting behavioral change that has measurable impact on the organizations with which we work—companies that wish to develop leadership capacity, improve workplace cultures, drive organizational change and strategic alignment, and become high performing organizations. Using a collaborative diagnostic process, we help identify each organization's unique needs and business issues, and then help to develop an appropriate leadership strategy to drive results and profits.

As the innovator of Situational Leadership® II—the most widely used leadership development system in the world—our behavioral models add a situational context to the training experience so individuals learn to be more productive in real-world scenarios and make the shift from learning to doing more quickly and effectively. Learning takes place through both instructor-led and virtual experiences offered by our worldwide network of consulting partners, trainers, and coaches.

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End Notes


About the Researchers

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