In this conceptual discussion paper, we explore how passion, the innate capacities, talent and potential inherent in an organization’s employee base could be unleashed for the purposes of the firm’s capacity to shape and adapt to, and with, its environment. We approach the topic from the lens of employee engagement. We view engagement as a key able to unlock the dormant potential within individuals. Though practically relevant, much used, and referring to a dire current organizational concern, this term has to date received scant research attention. Basing ourselves on research on engagement at work, co-evolutionary theory, positive organizational scholarship, and chaos and complexity theory, we posit propositions on the nature of high engagement, and in so doing, argue for a capabilities-perspective to employee engagement. This requires an engagement capability both at the level of the individual employee as well as at the level of the employing organization. We argue that the capacity for organizational adaptation peaks when organizations exhibit high levels of employee engagement. Drawing from their intuitive source, employees self-direct and self-organize their activities and in so doing, create organizations that shape, co-create their environments. We argue that such behaviors are critical in turbulent environments. In so doing, we raise the question – does employee engagement withhold potential for becoming an adaptation-determining organizational competence? If so, what are its underpinnings as an organizational capability?
INTRODUCTION

Be it at the level of individuals or organizations, over the recent decade and years, the term engagement has been gaining currency. Amongst individuals, we are witnessing an increasing tendency to seek ways to live meaningful lives, be it by immersing ourselves into our career, hobbies, special causes, philanthropy or family. In parallel, in companies, this trendy word has also been making inroads over the recent years. There is concern over employee engagement, reported at low levels in corporate surveys, despite the same organizations possibly reporting positive financial results (see e.g. Towers Perrin 2007-2008 work engagement survey). Not only is this situation unsustainable employee-wise, it also represents corporate-wise potential losses in creativity, innovativeness, customer satisfaction and ultimately corporate performance (Britt et al., 2005; Salanova and Schaufeli, 2008). It should thus not come as a surprise that globally reputed, high-performing organizations such as Nokia are taking engagement seriously: in their recent renewal of corporate values project in 2007, ‘engaging you’ emerged as one of the four new corporate values to be implemented in the forthcoming years (source, Nokia corporate website).

In contrast to the term having gained societal and corporate currency, its direct research attributes are scarce. Though practically relevant, much used, and referring to a dire current organizational concern, this term has to date received scant research attention (Macey and Schneider, 2008).

In this paper, we start looking into this apparent gap. We ask ourselves – what is engagement? Further, we wish to critically explore why does it matter? If it does,
what could be its underpinnings as tomorrow’s organizational (or managerial) capability? We argue that employee engagement withholds potential keys for a new organizational form, as called for by Daft and Lewin (1993), in so doing enabling organizations to adapt to, shape and co-create their environments (Lewin and Volberda, 1999).

Our paper is structured as follows. We start with an overview of why the concept of engagement has become of increasing interest and importance. Thereafter, we undertake a review of existing research on engagement. In the third section, we start developing tentative propositions regarding characteristics of high engagement instances and ways of initiating them. We end the paper with proposals for future research, challenges lying ahead, as well as an overview of the paper’s contributions.

WHY ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

We wish to begin our reflection on engagement by considering why it matters. In so doing, we have identified trends at the societal, organizational and individual levels that in our view shape the need for an engaged workforce.

Today’s world is increasingly characterized by turbulence in its many forms. As a result of ever broader globalization and an increasingly e-based world, the shift has been toward knowledge-based societies increasingly dependent upon human capital as a means of survival and success in a global competitive landscape. In other words, competition is based on ideas, knowledge and the effective utilization of talent. For corporations, this means that unleashing the employees’ creative potential is gaining importance as a source of corporate performance and innovativeness.

For individuals, this trend has been paralleled with a search for meaningful life paths and careers (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). The resulting growth in employee
willpower has been forcing managers to move further away from traditional authoritative hierarchy-based management styles toward empowerment and employee engaging-management styles (Conger and Kanungo, 1998). For example, it has been argued that one cannot manage a global organization such as IBM by giving people detailed orders what to do. Instead, organizations need employees that can opt in and use their own judgment and creativity to determine the suitable course of action.

Frederick Taylor’s dictum that we should not misuse human talent in organizations led to building robotic, ‘automaton-like’, organizations that many of today’s ‘knowledge workers’ do not approve of or wish to work in. They echo Henry Ford’s often-cited words: “every time I ask for a pair of hands, a brain comes with them”. Today, smart employees want to use their brains, they want to get satisfaction out of their work, and use their creative capacities in their work. Following Taylor, the issue for modern organizations is moving from the present 10% to utilizing the dormant 90% potential within the organization’s workforce.¹

For corporations, these changes have been paralleled by a gradual shift toward novel, more fluid organization forms (Daft and Lewin, 1993), witnessed for example by the prevalence of dispersed, virtual forms of organizing (Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1999). It has been estimated that 60% of today’s professionals work virtually (as quoted in Gibson and Gibbs, 2006). Yet, globally dispersed organizations are more difficult to manage than traditional ones: managers are faced with the conundrum of how to motivate and manage employees in this context where face-to-face time is limited. All the while, calls for learning, adaptive organizations are being made

¹ Financial Times reports that 41% of employees surveyed in 3100 organizations feel demotivated by their managers according to a survey by Hay Group (Financial Times, August 5, 2008, p. 10, in an article titled “Keep up motivation levels through long summer days” by Stefan Stern).
(Argyris and Schön, 1978; Fiol and Lyles, 1985), bringing forth the notion of organizations as active agents in contrast to being passive nests of obedience readily amenable to control.

All these changes translate themselves into a seemingly turbulent corporate environment. Faced with a context of ongoing turbulence, organizations need to constantly reinvent themselves to survive and thrive. Traditionally organizations have gone via crises to reach new ways of working and to find new meanings and goals. Such transformations are costly and demotivating to employees however. Faced with turbulence, the new managerial quest (Hamel and Valikangas, 2003) is about bypassing a crisis mode, whilst actively pursuing changing targets. In other words, flowing with change rather than against it. This requires an active agent-based view to organizations. Could the promise of highly engaged employees make the traditional way of change through a series of large-scale crises unnecessary or at least less prevalent? Recent calls for novel ways of seeing organizations, e.g. through a co-evolutionary perspective (Daft and Lewin, 1993; Lewin and Volberda, 1999; Lewis et al., 1999) tap into this need; they see successful organizations as ones that both adapt to the contexts at hand and actively shape their direction and movement.

These considerations leave us with the following overall conclusion – how can organizations successfully compete and thrive in a context of turbulence (a) characterized by fluid, adaptive, virtual and dispersed work organizations that need to ‘live’ change rather than ‘try to’ change, (b) wherein the role of human agency, human capital and creativity as means of surfing effortlessly in turbulence is of increasing importance, and (c) wherein meaningfulness and empowerment matter to employees. It seems that this dawning era calls for new ways of seeing, being and organizing, new ways of perceiving organizations and the managerial function. It
seems that the traditional schools of theorizing have left managers with a toolkit fitting the Middle Ages, whereas the present era calls for a toolkit of altogether a different kind. In light of the individual employees’ increasing search for meaning, we posit engagement as a lens to exploring opportunities in the employee dimension of organizations facing turbulence. Further, we see that in this context, it would seem to matter to start considering a capabilities-perspective to engagement. Beyond specific managerial actions, we call for an organizational capability to engage the workforce.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON ENGAGEMENT

In this section, we proceed to an overview of existing research on engagement.

What is engagement?

To begin to understand what engagement is about, let us first draw on the Oxford English Dictionary. Their definitions of engagement fall broadly into two camps. The first category relates to more superficial facets and uses of the term, whereas the second category calls for deeper levels of emotional commitment and presence. It is this second connotation that we refer to and discuss in the present paper. Here, engagement is defined as a ‘formal promise, agreement, undertaking, covenant’, ‘the fact of being engaged to be married; betrothal’, a ‘moral or legal obligation; a tie of duty or gratitude’, an ‘attachment, prepossession’, ‘the fact of being entangled; involved or entangled condition’, ‘the action of crossing swords’, ‘the state of being engaged in fight; a battle, conflict, encounter; also formerly, a single combat’. What these definitions share is a reference to ‘engagement’ as a personal, deeper level, formal, moral involvement, promise or agreement to a relationship, situation such as a combat, or an obligation.
It is this type of engagement that is referred to between the lines in the prevailing managerial discourse on engagement. The fundamental question is, whether corporations can expect to gain this level of employee commitment to their tasks and the organization. What are the risks involved, what is the promise in return? As the lifelong employment guarantee no longer holds, companies must find new returns on employees spending their intellectual, emotional and career resources on the company. And is it possible to be highly engaged to a job, purpose, or organization, and then move on, or do such short-term commitments take away from the fundamental quality of what engagement is all about?

Interestingly enough, engagement per se has not been studied as much research-wise as its everyday usage would suggest. The study of engagement has been strongest in the areas of applied psychology and sociology, with an increasing interest from organization science. Psychologists have studied the relationship between engagement and performance, as well as the relationship between engagement and burnout. Moreover, they have looked into students’ engagement in their studies as well as the nature of engagement in sports. In parallel, sociologists have been interested in various forms of engagement, and thereby have studied political, civic, school, and volunteer work engagement.

The seminal work on engagement in organizations is by Kahn (1990), who launched the concepts of ‘engagement’ vs. ‘disengagement’ at work. Kahn argued that whilst prior literature has taken a static view on a person’s fit to one’s job, as in job involvement, commitment to work, or work alienation literatures, his stance is one wherein the dynamic nature of engagement is accounted for. Basing himself on the works of Goffman (1961), Maslow (1954) and Alderfer (1972), Kahn defines personal engagement as ‘the harnessing of members’ selves in their roles, i.e. employing and
expressing oneself physically, cognitively and emotionally during work role performances’. This is contrasted with personal disengagement, likened to automatic or robotic behaviors, effortlessness, defensive, unexpressive, impersonal or closed behaviors (Kahn, 1990, p. 701).

Subsequent studies have found that engagement is positively related to employee performance at work (Britt et al. 2005, Salanova and Schaufeli, 2008), positively related to firm performance and customer satisfaction (Salanova et al. 2005), and moreover positively affects team creativity (Gilson & Shalley, 2004). Interestingly, similar positive performance effects have been found as regards concepts close to engagement such as the meaning of work (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003), psychological presence (Kahn, 1992), work as calling (Hall and Chandler, 2005), job involvement (Brown and Leigh, 1996) and intrinsic motivation (Grant, 2008). In essence, the more one is attuned and emotionally attached to one’s job, the better not only one’s own, but also one’s team’s and ultimately the organization’s performance. Judging from these findings, we start to understand why it may appear that engaged employees are the ‘ultimate goal’ of management. Engaged workers are creative, alert, energetic, present, available, bring their selves to work, happy all the while, and what is best, very effective at their work. In this setting we understand why engagement has become the ‘de rigueur’ managerial goal.

**How to achieve engagement**

If engagement matters, what can be done to boost and enable it? Can engagement be ‘managed’? Or would it require novel leadership practices, whilst shunning away from traditional managerial ones? Is engagement a capability organizations can and need to develop?
Based on his longitudinal research work in two different organizations, Kahn (1990) identifies psychological conditions of dis/engagement as resulting from psychological, inter-group and organizational factors. First, how psychologically meaningful is the work to the individual, with regard to the task and role characteristics and the amount of rewarding interpersonal work interactions? Second, how psychologically safe is the workplace in terms of interpersonal relationships, group and inter-group dynamics, management style and the clarity of organizational norms? Finally, engagement depends upon the person’s psychological availability, in turn dependent upon one’s physical and emotional energy, the degree of personal security vs. insecurity at work and the extent to which one’s outside life supports work efforts.

Comparing these findings against concepts such as the meaning of work (e.g. Pratt and Ashforth, 2003), psychological presence (e.g. Kahn, 1992), work as calling (e.g. Hall and Chandler, 2005), job involvement (e.g. Brown and Leigh, 1996) and intrinsic motivation (e.g. Grant, 2008), broadly speaking, we find similarities. These cousin-concepts can also, by and large, be attributed to psychological, inter-group and organizational factors, Figure 1. Through this comparative exercise, to the organizational and interpersonal level we need to add concepts such as the prevailing organizational culture, organizational identity, the prevailing organizational climate, the degree of leadership/organizational integrity, types of leadership, and types of employee involvement practices. To the individual factors, we need to add the notion of job as a calling, and the extent to which individuals understand the factors governing job design and performance.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE
In essence, based on existing research, we see that engagement is a result of an individual’s life choices and job-fit as well as the prevailing interpersonal and organizational dynamics at work. Drawing a parallel to the capability discussion, this would mean that the development of engagement requires co-creation (cf. Lewin & Volberda, 1999) - a capability both at the level of the individual employee as well as at the level of the organization, perhaps even the exploration of new organizational forms (Daft & Lewin, 1993). The next sections, as well as Figure 1, open up these debates more.

An organization’s engagement capability

Let us begin by exploring an organization’s engagement capability. Prior research suggests that an organization can support employee engagement by enabling and fostering (a) supportive work interactions, (b) a supportive management environment, (c) and supportive tasks. We briefly touch upon each of these next.

Starting with supportive work interactions, largely based on Kahn’s (1990) work and supported by findings from positive psychology, we know that engagement requires:

- Rewarding work interactions (Alderfer, 1972);
- Supportive, open, positive, and trusting interpersonal relationships at work (Schein, 1987; Kahn, 1990). This has been supported by recent findings in positive psychology (e.g. Layard, 2006) – positive interactions create positive spiral and connectivity to make it easier to find your own way;
- Supportive group and inter-group dynamics while realizing the role of destructive, unconscious drama therein (Bion, 1961; Hirschhorn, 1988);
Continuing with supportive management, largely based on Kahn’s (1990) work, we know that engagement requires:

- A supportive, resilient, and clarifying management style inspiring safety and trust and supporting the individual’s bringing his/her full self into the role (Louis, 1986; Kahn, 1990), i.e. a management style that enables and supports the creation of a psychologically safe climate;

- Role performances that stay within the boundaries of organizational norms (Kahn, 1990);

Finally, as regards the individual’s task at work, again based largely based on Kahn’s (1990) work, we know that engagement requires:

- Challenging, delineated, varied, creative and autonomous tasks (Kahn, 1990; Hackman and Oldham, 1980);

- Feeling valued and special – i.e. the degree of influence and status associated with one’s work role (Kahn, 1990).

Cartwright and Holmes (2006) position the present and future managerial challenge as regaining employee engagement. They argue that there is increasing employee cynicism, as demands for work increase at the expense of personal life. In parallel, transactional employment contracts offer little in return in terms of opportunities for self-expression and emotional rewards. Perceptions of companies lacking integrity and authenticity further contribute to such disenchantment. The lack of alignment of one’s personal values with those of the company purpose (Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1997) and practices arguably also lead to disengagement. Reasons for employees taking distance from the company they work for are thus many, Table 1. Many of these reasons have to do with basic decency of corporate management, the
perceived lack of authenticity (or perhaps integrity) of their leaders, and the lack of a meaningful purpose for the toil at work. Whilst these may be good starting points for curing the engagement deficit, what can we learn from situations where employees or participants are truly ‘fully’ engaged? Is the lack of engagement only the organization’s fault? What about individual responsibility?

**INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

In sum, basing ourselves on existing research, we posit that an organization’s engagement capability depends on its ability to enable and foster (a) supportive work interactions, (b) a supportive management environment, (c) and the right tasks. This brings us to propose:

*Proposition 1a. An organization’s engagement capability results from its ability to provide a work environment that enables engagement.*

**An individual’s engagement capability**

An organization’s support is good, but not enough, though. We argue that given the closeness of engagement with notions such as the meaning of work (Vecchio, 1980) or leading a meaningful life (e.g. Baumeister, 1991), becoming engaged is primarily the responsibility of each individual, to be supported – to whichever extent – by the organization one works in. What prior research suggests regarding an individual’s engagement capability is that engagement is positively influenced by (a) a fit with one’s organization and work, (b) security at work, and (c) supportive energy balancing.

As regards one’s fit with the organization, Kahn (1990) posits that an individual’s engagement often requires:

- A personal fit with one’s work role (Goffman, 1961);
A degree of security about one’s work and status, a low degree of insecurity in terms of self-consciousness and worry about how one is perceived by peers, a low degree of ambivalence regarding one’s fit with the organization and its purpose (Gustafson and Cooper, 1985; Kahn, 1990).

Given that being engaged requires both physical and emotional energy, an individual’s engagement is influenced by:

- One’s physical and emotional energy (Goffman, 1961; Hochshild, 1983; Kahn, 1990);
- The degree of support vs. distraction from the individual’s outside-work life (Hall and Richter, 1989; Kahn, 1990).

In sum, basing ourselves on existing research, we propose:

*Proposition 1b. An individual’s engagement capability stems from her ability to engage productively, energetically and meaningfully with one’s work activities and the organization.*

Critically speaking, we see that these dimensions of individual engagement are rather objective and external, whereas we know from experience that instances of high engagement suggest linkages to individual willpower and passion, both of which are seemingly absent from Kahn’s (1990) conceptualization. From this perspective, Kahn’s (1990) now established view of engagement would seem to take a rather objective, external managerial stance to engagement (as something that ‘can be managed’), thereby largely disregarding the individual’s role in unleashing one’s inner treasury of engagement and taking responsibility for one’s engagement. The latter dimensions are all the more important given that the present trend is toward seeking meaningfulness at work and in life. We hence posit that the present conceptualization of engagement, as stemming from Kahn (1990), would need to be
enlarged with notions taken e.g. from the ‘meaning of work’ (Vecchio, 1980) and ‘career as calling’ (Hall and Chandler, 2005) discussions. We enter this discussion next by proposing an enhanced view of high engagement.

**TOWARD A CONCEPTUALISATION OF HIGH ENGAGEMENT**

Based on the discussion afore, we set out to explore and further deepen our understanding of engagement by focusing on high engagement – what it is, what are its outcomes, and how to enable it.

**Characteristics of high-engagement instances**

How does one know that someone is engaged? What are characteristics of high-engagement situations? If the reasons for disengagement are demotivators – or so called hygienic factors, what are the defining characteristics of full engagement instances? In this section, based on prior research, we propose a set of tentative propositions that highlight instances of engagement surplus, instances wherein an individual is (more than) fully engaged in her/his activity. What was seemingly absent from the views in previous literature on engagement is that engagement requires from the individual her/himself a heightened degree of awareness and responsibility-taking as to one’s dis/likes and hopes for life and career, in order to make a decision toward a dream work role and set of activities. This is the focus of our tentative suggestions.

Kahn’s (1990, p. 694) defined engagement as the ‘harnessing of a person’s self to her work role; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances.’ He distances engagement from ‘disengagement’, seeing the difference between the two in the degree to which an individual brings her/his own self into the work activity or role
being undertaken. In essence, in high-engagement situations, an individual is fully in
the role with their own self and personality, whereas in low-engagement or
disengagement situations the individual brings in a robot-like facet of oneself, keeping
one’s true identity and desires hidden deep within. Kahn (1990) reflects this onto
Goffman’s (1961) work on role attachment vs. detachment as well as into social
scientists’ work on ‘self-in-role’ (Freud, 1922; Goffman, 1961; Smith and Berg,
1987). The latter discuss individuals’ parallel need to belong to and retreat from the
groups they belong to. In essence, being fully in a role means being authentic (Baxter,
1982), i.e. being genuinely oneself in a given situation. To reflect these established
streams of research, we propose a first proposition on engagement as follows:

Proposition 2. People are fully engaged when they are authentic and bring
their true selves and their personalities fully into the activity and roles that
they are performing.

\[\text{Image: Opera singer e.g. Pavarotti singing vs. factory worker on an assembly line.}\]

This idea relates closely to recent work in the domain of systems thinking,
wherein Senge et al. (2005), echoed in Jaworski (2002), launched the notion of
‘presence’ as qualifying those instances of stillness that characterize the creative heed
of successful and award-winning inventors, scientists and entrepreneurs. Based on
their research, Senge et al. (2005) claim that most successful creative workers are
ones who are able to link in and draw from the present moment as a source of
authentic inspiration. This brings us to our next proposition:

Proposition 3. People are fully engaged when they are creatively present
during their work performance.

\[\text{Image: A researcher in a lab vs. people walking busily on big city’s street.}\]

Prior research has further shown that aspiration and inspiration is drawn from
a ‘higher’ source, a deeper value, or a more intense commitment. This echoes
Maslow’s (1954) well-known work about the pyramid of fundamental human needs, and the hence greater need for self-expression in industrialized societies. In this setting, engagement could be the natural longing of the modern individual, whose more basic needs, according to Maslow, have already been met. Zohar (2002) calls this ‘spiritual intelligence’, stating that in modern societies the Maslow pyramid should be reversed given that our most fundamental need is self-expression. This relates to the work of e.g. Baumeister (1991) on the pursuit of meaningful lives. This brings us to our fourth proposition:

**Proposition 4.** People are fully engaged when they feel the ideology that the activity symbolizes or the activity itself presents them with deep meaning or resonates with a higher purpose in their life.

→ *Image: Ideologically Meaningful (Martin Luther King)*

Looking at full engagement situations from another angle, we see that people are fully engaged when they are involved in something of utter urgency or importance, such as survival or a competitive victory. In such instances, using the metaphors of chaos and complexity theory (e.g. Stacey, 2002), we are ‘at the edge of chaos’. Systems, when confronted with extreme situations in which everyday rules do not work have been found to self-organize and emerge into new, improved forms (see e.g. Prigogine’s Nobel-winning work on dissipative structures in the field of chemistry in Prigogine, 1998). In human organizations, a similar example is shown in Weick’s (1993) analysis of fire-fighters in the midst of a disastrous fire where the firemen drop their tools, and hence their identities, and seek escape (though many perish). Here, we could draw a parallel with modern organizations, caught in turbulence and seeking to survive. We hence posit fifth proposition as follows:

**Proposition 5.** People are fully engaged when they spontaneously enter a mode of improvisation, or self-organization, as in moments of survival, abrupt change, or systemic disruption.
Given the novelty of such instances, though, individuals involved do not have a ready, proforma behavior to cope with the situation. They do not have time to rely on rational reasoning; rather, they act instinctively, and in so doing can only rely on their gut feeling and intuition (Isaack, 1978; Dane and Pratt, 2007). This brings us to propose:

*Proposition 6. Engaged individuals act out of their gut feeling and intuition rather than relying solely on rational reasoning.*

A potential paradox related to high-engagement situations stems from the fact that there exists an interesting relationship between intensity vs. effortlessness that characterizes high-engagement situations. Indeed, whilst engagement means being intensively focused on one’s activity, in parallel, engaged persons appear to work effortlessly. In a philosophical discourse, this would avail to be close to a ‘zen’-type attitude and presence. Hence, our seventh proposition:

*Proposition 7. People are fully engaged when they are intensively focused on their activity whilst the performance appears seemingly effortless.*

In line with what we posit in the above propositions, we see that a defining characteristic of engaged individuals is that they have made a conscious choice and done reasoning with regard to their purpose in life. In essence, what they do has meaning to them. Here, we link in with an ongoing debate about the meaning of work (Vecchio, 1980), meaning of life (Baumeister, 1991) and meaningfulness in and at work (e.g. Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). Despite the fact that this term is oft-studied, it is and has been rarely been defined, and when it has been defined, different lenses have...
emerged (Wrzesniewski, 2003). A recent orientation is the link between positive psychology and the meaning of work. Here, Bellah et al. (1985) identify three dominant orientations to work, these being (a) work as a job, (b) work as a career, and (c) work as calling. The way we see engaged individuals at work comes close to the notion of ‘work as calling’, where work is not an end in itself, but associated with the idea that by working, one contributes to a greater good and to the improvement of the world. In her review, Wrzesniewski (2003) shows that a calling orientation toward work is related with a higher workload, high job satisfaction, and results in top performing individuals. We hence posit:

*Proposition 8. Engaged individuals have identified a passion in life they wish to fulfill and strive for.*

Taking a step back to understand the work of some of the most engaged individuals across history, namely artists, writers, poets, philosophers, we find that their work is characterized by inspiration, often characterized as ‘drawing from an inspiring, or creative source:

*Proposition 9. Engaged individuals draw (their momentum) from a source of creative inspiration.*

**The result of high engagement**

What are the results or outcomes of high engagement? Research on engagement has evidenced that engaged teams are more creative in the solutions they come up with (Gilson and Shalley, 2004). We propose:

*Proposition 10. High engagement results in creative solutions.*

Based on the work of Losada (Losada, 1999; Losada and Heaphy, 2004) on the effect of positive interactions on the degree of member connectivity and
performance of high-performing teams, and Wrzesniewski (2003) on the transfer effects of persons who have a ‘work as calling’ attitude toward the entire group, we claim that engaged individuals radiate enthusiasm into the immediate surroundings, thereby increasing the performance of the workplace, and potentially indirectly creating engagement-supportive micro-climates into the larger organization. In formal terms, this leads us to propose:

*Proposition 11. High engagement results in contagious enthusiasm, it engages others.*

Drawing again from chaos and complexity theory and more particularly from the notion of self-organizing (e.g. Stacey, 2002), we know that complex systems at the edge of chaos perform at their best when allowed to self-organize. This results in disruptive outcomes, ones that did not befit the pre-edge of chaos situation, i.e. outcomes that could not be anticipated. This parallels coevolutionary dynamics of firms (Lewin and Volberda, 1999) in that organizations faced with turbulence operate best when allowed to self-organize. This leads us to posit:

*Proposition 12. High engagement results in solutions that best fit the situation at hand although they might seem otherwise counter-intuitive or even ‘absurd’.*

**Characteristics of environments geared toward high engagement**

The above enabled us to understand high engagement instances and their outcomes. What about characteristics of environments capable of harnessing engagement? Indeed, how to nurture or initiate engagement?

Based on recent knowledge about involvement and empowerment at work, we argue that the degree to which employees are allowed to involve themselves in the activity being performed will impact their willingness to engage into performing this
activity well. Here, we do not refer to the civic empowerment literature (Putnam, 1995), but to the more recent employee empowerment literature (Conger and Kanungo, 1998). The focus of this research stream has been on studying the impacts of empowerment on individuals and the organizational consequences of empowerment as regards e.g. creativity, flexibility and performance (Feldman and Khademian, 2003). We argue that given the positive individual and organizational benefits of empowerment, employees are likely to become engaged to their work, if and when they are involved in it. Involvement has also been posited as a defining characteristic of emerging organizational forms capable of thriving in turbulence (Daft and Lewin, 1993). This brings us to propose:

*Proposition 13. People are fully engaged when they are allowed to involve themselves into the activity at stake.*

Following recent knowledge in the area of positive psychology (see e.g. Cameron et al. 2003; Cameron, 2008), the impact of positive interactions on the effectiveness of virtual teams (Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1999) and of high-performing teams (Losada, 1999; Losada and Heaphy, 2004), we argue that engagement is likely to occur when (work) interactions are positive:

*Proposition 14. People are fully engaged when (work) interactions are positive and rewarding.*

Our tentative propositions are summarized in Figure 2 below.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE
A capability perspective to enabling employee engagement

Summarizing the above discussion, we see that existing research findings as well as ongoing managerial practice both point to the positive work outcomes and performance implications of an engaged workforce. An engaged workforce is characterized by employees utilizing their inherent talent to its highest potential. The resulting creative work solutions answer calls on the need for innovative solutions in an era based on knowledge and brain work.

If engagement matters, does it withhold potential to be a critical capability organizations should nurture, enable and develop as a means of succeeding in the global competitive, increasingly knowledge-, innovation-, and idea-based landscape? If so, what would a capability-perspective to employee engagement resemble? How do employees and organizations co-create such a capability?

What emerged from our research review is a view of engagement as a deeply personal resonance with one’s deeper self which is to a greater or lesser extent initiated and/or supported by the external environment wherein one operates. The question is – how are the individual and organizational dimensions of engagement interrelated, can one have one and not the other? In the following, we look into this question by identifying four alternative capability scenarios to engagement, Figure 3.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Scenario A: LOW ENGAGEMENT. In the first scenario, the individual employee is disengaged and the practices, structures and culture of the employing organization do not support the engagement of its employees. This results in robot-like organization consisting of disengaged, apathetic employees. We argue that this scenario is likely to represent the situation in many a modern organization today. This
scenario is the allegory of the bureaucratic, machine-like organization that treats its employees as mere resources without seeing that the employees have a will-power of their own. In this example, there is a lacking capability to engage at both the level of individual employees as well as the organization at large. No co-creation takes place.

Scenario B: ENGAGED INDIVIDUALS. In this second scenario, the individual employee is engaged to her role, yet the employing organization has not yet realized its role in supporting its employees in this pursuit. As a result, engaged individuals either (a) exit the organization in due time, or (b) develop personal adaptation strategies to avoid being discouraged by the organization’s lack of support mechanisms and in so doing, indirectly starts creating an atmosphere of positive organizational engagement in her/his immediate organizational vicinity that then, as a positive spiral, encourages other colleagues’ engagement (Wrzesniewski, 2003). We claim that this scenario represents the present reality in many an organization facing turbulence, where enlightened individual employees have become engaged by their own will, yet the organization has not yet awakened to the need for novel, fluid managerial practices to fit the dawning era. In this scenario, the capability to engage is strong at the level of individual employees, but weak on the level of the organization. No co-creation takes place.

Scenario C: ENGAGED ORGANIZATION. In this scenario, the individual employee is not yet engaged. However, the employing organization has realized its role in awakening and supporting its employees’ engagement. It develops and nurtures an organizational-level engagement capability. In such an organization, employees have greater potential to flourish and become engaged than in others, yet this is not guaranteed. We claim that few organizations are here yet. No co-creation takes place.
**Scenario D: ENGAGED INDIVIDUALS IN AN ENGAGED ORGANIZATION.** High engagement occurs as both the individual is engaged and the employing organization supports her efforts. The microclimate effect (see scenario B) further enriches the existing engagement efforts, as positive contagious engagement spirals are continuously created. This results in increasingly flourishing individuals, who intuitively self-organize themselves for the best outcome. We ask, are organizations that perform this way to be found? In this scenario, the capability to engage rests both at the level of the individual employee as well as at the level of the organizational employer. Engagement is constantly co-created in their interactions.

**Routes to engagement**

From a capability perspective, we conclude that high engagement requires an engagement capability both at the level of the individual employee as well as at the level of the employing organization. We hence identify two alternative routes toward high engagement, Figure 4.

*INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE*

The *first route* refers to situations wherein high levels of engagement capability at the level of individual employees gradually radiate and transform toward higher levels of employee engagement across the organization. Here we refer to a ‘revolution’ through individual action and individual engagement. Examples of such behavior are provided by quadrants A and D in Figure 5. Based on the work of Losada (Losada, 1999; Losada and Heaphy, 2004) and Wrzesniewski (2003), we claim that in quadrants A and D – high engagement situations, engaged individuals radiate enthusiasm into the immediate surroundings, thereby increasing the performance of the workplace, and potentially indirectly creating an engagement-supportive micro-
climate into the larger organization. Hence, larger organizations could be argued as consisting of nests that are to different degrees implicitly engaged, depending on the degrees of personal engagement within their leaders and key personnel.

The second route refers to situations wherein high levels of engagement capability in the employing organization, when practiced over time, result in high degrees of employee engagement across the organization. Here we refer to a ‘revolution’ through ‘orchestrated action’. Our suggestion is that rather than attempting to ‘manage’ or ‘force-control’ engagement, managers should learn to invite and attempt to enable situations wherein engagement is possible. In addition to developing dependence (addiction) or dominance (ideology), high engagement is voluntary and fragile. Clearly, if used wrongly or superficially, engagement encouragement efforts can contribute to employee cynicism.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Is engagement, then, the ‘silver bullet’ of management? Our point of view is rather than a silver bullet, employee engagement is more like the managerial Achilles heel. Organizations routinely manage 10% of employee contributive capacity, but getting them to give 100% is much harder. Yet, especially in increasingly turbulent, knowledge, human-capital and innovation-driven societies, world-class organizations cannot afford to compete with only 10% of their workforce. Moreover, when referring back to Figure 1, we claim that at present, managerial techniques for engagement - i.e. inviting voluntary contribution beyond the observable, measurable, enforceable minimum - are much less developed than managerial techniques that stem from hierarchy, control, or structure and that rest on formal order.
From managerial implications toward future research directions

The question becomes, to what extent can and do global organizations, caught up in a constant minute-to-minute battle and pressure for enhanced quarterly results, truly embrace the engagement of their employees, and possibly ‘manage’ engagement?

If they do not, or cannot, is engagement a much-used word in today’s corporate jargon that, if looked at in greater detail, will burst up to portray emptiness? Or are there presently unidentified yet practiced patterns of employee engagement taking place in today’s organizations regardless of what the organizations do? If so, what can organizations do to possibly leverage the dormant potential within employee engagement? What managerial or leadership practices would prove most suitable?

In sum, are the nature and dynamics of engagement sufficiently understood in today’s corporate context? Or has engagement become a much-used, instrumental yet short-lived, yet commonly acceptable way of motivating the employee base, disregarding the essence of engagement? Will this approach, on the long run, end up having detrimental and counter-productive effects as compared to what was sought?

We see that there is a need to understand the nature, significance, facets, and practices of engagement in the context of globally dispersed organizations. We wonder, does high engagement commonly exist in global corporations today? If yes, what forms does it take? Is it possible to foster engagement through organizational levers and managerial practices? Does this require a shift in our management paradigms? What kind of a shift?

There is a need to understand how to leverage the dormant potential in employee engagement in the context of dispersed organizations as a means for better work performance, enhanced creativity, and employee motivation. We find that the
issue of ‘engagement’ in the context of modern organizations reveals an underlying paradox where the simple instrumentality of managing people as a means to corporate goals takes away from the employees the ability to assign meaning to the work experience itself (see the logic of appropriateness by Cyert and March, 1963, also Valikangas & Jett, 2006), the solving of which would seem to highlight the need for a new management paradigm, a new way of thinking.

**Limitations and challenges with regard to engagement**

The nurturing of engagement, however, does not go without difficulties in the context of modern, globally-spread organizations. Several challenges lie ahead, if we wish to conceive of future organizations embracing engagement.

The *first managerial challenge* is that many of the factors contributing to employee motivation have been known for a long time and yet they are difficult to manage successfully. Will this prove the case with engagement as well?

The *second challenge* is shifting away from the perception that engagement is related to life-long job security. The bargain needs to be reconceived and renegotiated to reflect the time-limited nature of most positions inside corporations. There are two options available. One view is that by becoming immersed in one’s passion, a corporate career path in one organization is a part of one’s life journey, to be followed by career paths in other organizations. In this scenario, individuals ‘utilize’ organizations to fulfill their own engagement targets. This mirrors the views that many multinationals, e.g. Shell, openly advertise to their employees, as they cannot guarantee life-long employment anymore. In the other and possibly parallel scenario, the question is not engagement during the course of a career but during a course of a perhaps short yet intense work commitment. How to give and get more during a work
interlude? How to really invest in a project (and the let go)? A corollary to this is the phenomenon that many professionals work for many organizations at the same time, thus building portfolios of multiple commitments and parallel engagements.

The third challenge is enabling engagement in the larger context of virtualization of work, wherein face-to-face management practices must yield to ways of interaction between an employee and a manager, and between employees (or colleagues and peers) that allow for rich and trusting communication across time and space. These ways of virtual managing are still largely not analyzed for their implications for employee engagement. Fourthly, coupled with virtualization is the increasing intercultural contact. Does the nurturing of engagement follow universal codes, or are there culturally embedded variants to account for? To be highly engaged may mean something very different in Finland, for example, than in the United States for its overt behavioral expressions. The fifth challenge is the ethical responsibility companies and managers may bear by inviting employees to give more of themselves, be more exposed and hence perhaps vulnerable, and therefore be subject to potential burn-out.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we seek to open up the widely used term ‘employee engagement’ for discussion. We provide a summary of the existing literature, and begin to develop research propositions to describe the possibility of characteristics of high engagement situations or instances (“passion for work”) from the perspective of the individual and the organization. We also link with some of the related ideas in extant literature, including empowerment and meaningfulness, positive organizational scholarship, chaos and complexity theory as well as coevolutionary dynamics of the firm. We consider the managerial possibilities and challenges of managing for high
engagement. We suggest the underpinnings of employee engagement are a matter of organizational capability, created together and sustained in interaction between the organizational members. We conclude that employee engagement offers complexity worth further conceptual development and a rich field for empirical research while the phenomenon is potentially of great importance to global companies competing on ideas, talent, and the creative presence of their work force. The increasing virtualization of work only makes the managerial understanding of engagement more acute. Finally, we raise the question – does employee engagement offer potential as tomorrow’s key organizational capability to enable thriving in an environment of increasing turbulence where adaptation and persistence (or inertia) both come together as demands for co-evolutionary behaviors? We see that the concept of engagement, by taking the employee as an active agent shaping her environment to centre stage, offers opportunities to explore the co-evolutionary dynamics of organizations, in particular, in the holistic renewal of the organization (Volberda & Lewin, 2003). We suggest employee engagement, and passion for work, will form an important organizational capability.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A – Figures

FIGURE 1

Summary of ‘engagement’ vs. ‘meaning of work’ literatures.

Teerikangas & Valikangas, 2009
FIGURE 2

Overview of high engagement – what, how, why?

(P1) Engaged peers

(P10) Creative solutions
(P12) Best solution for the situation at hand

High engagement results in

(P2) Authenticity & full self-in-role
(P3) Creative presence
(P4) Activity related to deeper meaning in life
(P5) Instance of crisis or survival leading to improvisation & self-organization

High-engagement instances

(P8) Passion to thrive for
(P6) Intuitive behavior
(P7) Zen – intensity & effortlessness

(P9) Source of creative inspiration

High engagement is enabled by

(P13) Involvement enables engagement
(P14) Positive work interactions enable engagement

(P11) Engaged peers
**FIGURE 3**

A capability perspective to employee engagement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engaged Individuals</th>
<th>Engaged Individuals in Engaged Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ENGAGED INDIVIDUALS</td>
<td>Engagement as selected employees' personal capability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOW ENGAGEMENT</td>
<td>Dominate engagement capability at individual &amp; organizational levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOW</td>
<td>LOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGH</td>
<td>HIGH</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Employee engagement as an organization’s capability*
FIGURE 4

Alternative routes to engagement.

Route 1 to high engagement

EDUCATED INDIVIDUALS
Engagement as an individual employee's personal capability

ENGAGED INDIVIDUALS IN ENGAGED ORGANIZATION
Engagement as an individual and organization's capability

LOW ENGAGEMENT
Dormant engagement capability at individual and organizational levels

ENGAGED ORGANIZATION
Engagement as the organization's capability

Route 2 to high engagement

Employee engagement as an organization's capability
TABLE 1

An Engagement Audit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contributing to engagement deficit?</th>
<th>Contributing to engagement surplus?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Radical restructuring &amp; programmatic change</td>
<td>Interesting work, a feeling of accomplishment, friendly and helpful colleagues, adding something to peoples' lives (Bibby, 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Break-up of the traditional commitment and loyalty</td>
<td>A greater sense of meaning and purpose in working lives (Guevara &amp; Ord, 1996) (alignment with one’s values)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of work-life balance &amp; more demanding work conditions</td>
<td>A source of community and a place to feel connected (Conger, 1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of interpersonal relationships and social support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A purely transactional work contract</td>
<td>A source of feeling of self-worthiness (Seligman, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of trust in the leadership and/or lack of transparency</td>
<td>Achieve a “sort of immortality” (Handy, 1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of integrity in living the company values</td>
<td>Emotional engagement (“a type of positive arousal” and passion (i.e., the work is enjoyable and meaningful) (Boverie and Kroth, 2001)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>