

Engaging liquid knowledge workers: causes, concerns and consequences

Introduction

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To survive in today's highly dynamic marketplace, knowledge-intensive organizations expect their workforce to adapt to ever-changing customer needs (Gupta *et al.*, 2018). For this, organizations are relying on liquid workforce comprising part-timers, freelancers and casual knowledge workers (Naik, 2016). To outperform, some companies – including Accenture, Google and General Electric – have taken a lead to align their existing human resource practices as per the requirements of liquid knowledge workers (Petac and Petac, 2016). A liquid knowledge worker could be a nurse, an accountant, a teacher, a lawyer, an engineer or any other professional whose job description involves acquiring and applying information as a part-timer, a freelancer or a casual worker (DeCenzo *et al.*, 2010; Gupta, 2017). The “liquid” component connotes at least one of the following two things:

- (1) absence of job demarcations; or
- (2) working as part-timers, freelancers or casual workers.

The main challenge for the managers of liquid knowledge workers is to keep them engaged in their job. They need to have workplace mobility, flexible work times, colleagues with an accommodating nature, a keen attitude to learning and the ability to multitask (Klewes *et al.*, 2017). Managers often struggle to ensure effectiveness and efficiency of their liquid knowledge workers; they are highly sensitive to contextual factors, which is also the foundation of systems theory. It is this distinct nature of liquid knowledge workers from conventional workers that calls for in-depth analyses of the antecedent and consequences of engaging liquid knowledge workers (Gupta and Shaheen, 2017a, 2017b).

Objective

The purpose of this special issue is twofold. The first objective is to understand the motivating factors for engaging liquid knowledge workers. The second objective is to understand the possible individual- and organization-level outcomes of engaging knowledge workers.

Contribution of this special issue

Though there are several recent studies on engaging workforce (Gupta, 2018; Gupta and Shaheen, 2018; Gupta and Shukla, 2018; Gupta *et al.*, 2018; Gupta *et al.*, 2019), this special issue includes studies that have investigated the antecedents and consequences of engagement at work in the case of liquid knowledge workers. The subsequent paragraphs describe each of these in brief.

One of the articles, “Transformational leadership and knowledge sharing behavior in freelancers: a moderated mediation model with employee engagement and social support,” explored the relationship of transformational leadership with knowledge-sharing behaviors among freelancers in North India. Work engagement was proposed as a mediator and social support as a moderator of the aforementioned relationship. Using rigorous analytical techniques on survey data from 250 freelancers, the results supported the moderated mediation model, linking transformational leadership with knowledge-collecting and knowledge-donating behaviors. The study identified work engagement as a necessary mechanism via which transformational leadership affected knowledge-sharing behavior and also emphasized on the significance of social support in the process.



Another article, “Examining the role of perceived investment in employees’ development on work-engagement of liquid knowledge workers: moderating effects of psychological contract,” investigated the role of perceived investment in employees’ development on work engagement of liquid knowledge workers in diamond cutting and polishing in Surat district of India. The study identified relational psychological contract as opposed to transactional contract as a moderator of the aforementioned relationship. The study recommended a “star matrix of engagement” which carries implications for HRM policy formulation and implementation of employee management in the organizations.

The paper titled “The factors behind working in virtual community” presented a systematic examination of the literature on virtual teams and also presented results of a qualitative study of the benefits of working in part-time jobs. The paper began by discussing various definitions of virtual teams and then proposed an integrative definition. The differences between traditional and virtual teams, as well as benefits, were also discussed. Based on a thematic analysis of 12 respondents, the study identified six main benefits of virtual teams identified, namely, pliability, opportunities, increased earnings, vigor, family and transportation.

“Linking the home-work interface, work engagement, PsyCap, and customer advocacy,” a dyadic study, examined the link between employee-level variables such as home-work interface, work engagement and psychological capital (PsyCap) and a customer-level variable, namely, customer advocacy. The study examined 200 nurses and patients, each from different health-care service providers of India. The results confirm that the home-work interface has a positive impact on work engagement and PsyCap. The findings also confirmed positive impact of PsyCap on customer advocacy, but the effect of work engagement on customer advocacy was not significant. The findings confirmed that personal psychological resources facilitate pro-social helping behavior, which keeps customers closer and maintains them as true representatives of the organization.

The article titled “Turnover intention among liquid knowledge workers: a study of Indian insurance professionals” hypothesized that turnover intention is influenced by the support from the supervisor, organization and coworker, as perceived by the employees. Also, according to the authors of this paper, affective commitment mediates the relationship between the three types of support and turnover intention. The results of this study were drawn by structurally analyzing responses from a sample of insurance agents. The examination confirmed the aforementioned mediation assumption.

Another article titled “Does work engagement mediate the perceived career support- and career adaptability- work performance relationship?” used liquid knowledge workers as a sample to find out the extent to which the direct relationship between perceived career support work performance, as well as between career adaptability and work performance, is affected by the introduction of work engagement as a mediating variable. The results suggested support for most of the hypotheses. Work engagement fully mediated the perceived career support-work performance relationship and partially mediated the perceived career support-career adaptability relationship.

Causes

The several precursors to the engagement of liquid knowledge workers identified in the aforementioned studies included pliability, opportunities, increased earnings, vigor, family, transportation, perceived investment in employee development, psychological contract enhancement, transformational leadership, perceived career support, career adaptability, home-work interface and perceived support from the coworkers, supervisor and the organization. These factors either directly or indirectly influence the engagement levels of the employees.

Concerns

The papers contributed to this issue raised several concerns that can be addressed by the researchers in the future. First, capturing only the liquid knowledge workers' opinion may not be sufficient to identify the factors that drive liquid knowledge workers. Second, there is still scope to control for the diversity liquid knowledge workers have in terms of their work role, social status and financial condition. Third, as the trend of embracing liquid knowledge workers is increasingly becoming popular among emerging economies with a demographic dividend, it is suggested that studies examining the engagement factors among such countries be conducted in the future.

Consequences

This special issue enlightens the readers in two ways. The first one is the theoretical contribution and the other is the practical implications of engaging liquid knowledge workers. As indicated in the discussion section of the papers contributed to this issue, theories, including organizational support theory, social exchange theory, transformational leadership theory and job demand–resource theory, were used to explore and examine fresh antecedents and consequences of engaging liquid knowledge workers. However, the social exchange theory and organizational support theory were the two that were used the most. Thus, this special issue has a major contribution in augmenting these theories.

Another side of the consequences includes implications for the organizations. For example:

- suggesting different factors that may help organizations reduce costs of hiring liquid knowledge workers;
- recommending a star matrix for enhancing the engagement levels;
- emphasizing on the role of transformational leaders in engaging liquid knowledge workers; and
- encouraging managers to provide career and other supports for engaging the liquid workforce.

Conclusion

The objective of understanding the causes, concerns and consequences of engaging liquid knowledge workers was realized in this special issue. The articles of this special issue are expected to help academics, researchers and practitioners understand the factors that promote the engagement of liquid knowledge workers and what the possible consequences of having an engaged workforce could be. The commonality across the articles is that engagement at work is a strong precursor to positive employee behaviors and is driven by support extended in the workplace.

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