Working in the ward: The link between job resources and work engagement

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A R T I C L E I N F O	**A B S T R A C T**
	Background: Within healthcare organizations, nurses as customer-contact employees play an important role in care delivery and health quality**.** Their attitudes and behavior has a significant impact on patients' satisfaction and perception of the quality of healthcare services. **Objective:** The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between social support and job autonomy with work engagement. A total of 523 staff nurses working in four general hospitals in Malaysia participated in this study. **Results:** Significant positive relationships were found between supervisor support, job autonomy and work engagement. In contrast, co-worker support was shown to have no significant impact on work engagement. **Conclusion:** Supervisory support and job autonomy were significant predictors of work engagement among nurses.

INTRODUCTION

In a healthcare organization, nurses play a vital role to portray the organization's competence as they spend most of their time directly with patients (Moritz *et al*., 1989). Hence, nurses' attitudes and behaviours toward patients would have significant influence towards patients' perceived service quality and satisfaction. Moritz *et al*. (1989) further noted that the quality of nursing care has a strong impact on healthcare organizations' ability to provide services at the desired professional standard. For this reason, nurses should involve in a favourable attitude in the form of work engagement. According to Bargagliotti, (2011), work engagement in nursing is becoming important because of (1) a global shortage of nurses who are the main group of healthcare providers; (2) political resolve to restrain the growth of rising healthcare costs; and (3) a medical error rate that threatens the health of people.

Based on the development of positive psychology: the scientific study of human strength and optimal functioning (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), work engagement has been recognized as the exact opposite of the sense of burnout (Maslach and Leiter, 1997). Schaufeli *et al.* (2006), argued that engaged employees are energetic

and have effective relation with their work activities, and able to cope effectively with their job demands. A study by Schaufeli and Van Rhenen (2006) has found that engaged employees often experience positive emotions, and this may be the reason why they are more productive. In addition, Karsan (2011) proposed that engaged employees are regularly go the extra mile, love their jobs, and proud to be part of the organization. He further argued that greater engagement leads to better financial performance and better financially-performing organizations have higher engagement. Generally, organizations expect their employees to be proactive and show initiative, greatly involved in their work and committed to high quality performance standards. Thus, these organizations require employees who feel energetic and dedicated, and who are absorbed by their work (Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008).

To increase high work engagement within the nursing workforce, nurses as boundary-spanners of healthcare organizations need to have higher job resources. Bakker and Demerouti (2007) argued that job resources are assumed to have a motivational potential which can lead to low cynicism, high work engagement, and excellent performance. Particularly, job resources might have either an extrinsic motivational role as they are instrumental in

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achieving work goals, or having an intrinsic motivational role as they encourage employees' growth, learning and development (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). As nurses' jobs will always surround with elements of stressful, difficult situations, and episodes of hardship, therefore, job resources are important elements for nurses in dealing with their daily work activities. Job resources such as performance feedback, skill variety, autonomy, social support from supervisors and co-workers, and learning opportunities have been positively related to work engagement (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli and Salanova, 2007). Similarly, cross-sectional studies found that job resources such as supervisory coaching, autonomy, and opportunities for development have positive relationship with work engagement (Hakanen *et al*., 2006; Saks, 2006; Xanthopoulou *et al*., 2007). Moreover, Sahin *et al*. (2014) stated that employees would continuously improve their performance and committed to their jobs if they are given suitable jobs, authority and responsibility, and also supported by the supervisors. Hence, this study sought to examine the effect of social support and job autonomy on work engagement among Malaysian nurses.

Literature Review:
Work Engagement:
     Work engagement refers to "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption" (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004, p. 295). Vigor is a state where individual experiences a high degree of energy, a strong work ethic and an ability to persevere when confronted with challenging work (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Meanwhile, dedicated individuals have an enthusiastic attitude and being motivated and proud of their work. They also experience a sense of significance, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Finally, absorption in work is being fully immersed in work and feeling happy about one's work roles. Individuals who are absorbed in their work perceive time to pass quickly and find it difficult to separate themselves from works (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Meanwhile, Vinje and Mittlemark's (2008) qualitative study of community health nurses' work engagement defined work engagement as 'searching for, experiencing, and holding on to the meaningful work that enables one to lives one's values' (p. 200). According to Bakker *et al*. (2008), work engagement is essential as engaged employees experience (1) pleasure, joy, and enthusiasm, (2) good physical and psychological health, (3) better job performance, (4) increased ability to create job and personal resources, and (5) capability to transfer their engagement to others.
     Numerous studies provided empirical evidence on the relationship between work engagement and work-related outcomes. For instance, work engagement has been found to be positively related to customer satisfaction (Salanova *et al*., 2005), job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviours (Saks, 2006), in-role performance (Schaufeli *et al*., 2006), and financial returns (Xanthopoulou *et al*., 2009).

Job Resources:
     Job resources refer to those physical, social or organizational aspects of the job that may (a) reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs; (b) be functional in achieving work goals; and (c) stimulate personal growth, learning and development (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Bakker *et al*. (2003) suggested that job resources may be located at different levels in an organization. For instance, at the organizational level, job resources include career opportunities, pay and job security. Meanwhile, at the level of the interpersonal and social relations, job resources take place in the form of supervisor and co-worker support and team climate. Then, at the level of organization of work, job resources include role clarity and participation in decision making. Finally, at the task level, job resources include skill variety, task significance, task identity, autonomy and performance feedback.
     According to Deci and Ryan (1985), job resources fulfil basic human needs, including the needs for autonomy, relatedness (Baumeister and Leary, 1995) and competence (White, 1959). For instance, appropriate feedback promotes learning, thus increasing job competence, while decision latitude and social support satisfy the need for autonomy and the need to belong, respectively. Additionally, the job resources' intrinsic motivational potential is also recognized by job characteristics theory developed by Hackman and Oldham (1980).
     Moreover, Meijiman and Mulder (1998) stated that job resources can also play an extrinsic motivational role, since a resourceful work environment will create an individual's willingness to dedicate one's efforts and abilities to the work task. Hence, the task will be completed successfully and that the work goal will be achieved. For instance, co-workers support and performance feedback will increase the likelihood of being successful in achieving one's work goals. Either through the basic needs' satisfaction or through the accomplishment of work goals, the outcome is positive or work engagement is expected to increase (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli and Salanova, 2007).
     One job resource that has a significant impact on work engagement is social support. Social support has been defined as "the overall level of helpful social interaction available on the job from both co-workers and supervisors" (Karasek and Theorell, 1990, p. 69). Social support has been found to be an important antecedent of work engagement (e.g., Hakanen *et al*., 2006; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004;

Bakker *et al*., 2003). For instance, Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) conducted a study among employees from four different Dutch service organizations: an insurance company, a pension fund company, an occupational health and safety service and a home-care institution. In their study, job resources which include social support from colleagues and performance feedback were found to be associated with work engagement. Meanwhile, in a study by Hakanen *et al*. (2006) among a sample of over 2000 Finnish teachers, supervisory support was found to be positively linked to work engagement. Similar results were reported by Llorens *et al*. (2006) in a Spanish context.

Besides social support, job autonomy has been also found to be an important predictor of work engagement. Job autonomy represents the freedom individuals have in carrying out their work, including freedom regarding scheduling work, decision making and work methods (Hackman and Oldham, 1975; Morgeson and Humphrey, 2006). A study by Bakker *et al*. (2003) among employees from a pension fund company found that job resources such as social support and job autonomy are positively related to work engagement which is measured two years later. This study also revealed that engaged employees are successful in mobilizing their job resources.

Hackman and Oldham (1980) proposed the positive relationship between job resources and work engagement are aligns with Job Characteristics Theory. This theory assume that job characteristics such as autonomy, feedback and skill variety have motivating potential which leads to positive outcomes, and this intrinsic motivation is similar to the concept of work engagement. Likewise, self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) suggested that job resources fulfil basic human needs, for example, the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. Accordingly, work environments that provide resources such as job control (autonomy), feedback (competence), and social support (relatedness) improve well-being and increase intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Frederick, 1997). Furthermore, Schaufeli and Salanova (2007) noted that job characteristics theory by Hackman and Oldham (1980) is the most explicit theory in predicting particular strategies of redesigning jobs that have positive effects on employee well-being, motivation and performance.

Based on these arguments, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1: Supervisor support is positively related to work engagement.

Hypothesis 2: Co-worker support is positively related to work engagement.

Hypothesis 3: Job autonomy is positively related to work engagement.

Methodology:
Samples and Procedures:

Participants in this study were staff nurses working in four general hospitals in Malaysia. A total of 584 self-administered questionnaires were distributed with the assistance of the Matron's Office of the four hospitals since the researchers could not have direct access to the lists of nurses. The distribution and collection of the completed questionnaires took about one month. Of the 584 questionnaires distributed, a number of 523 questionnaires were returned, yielding a response rate of 89.55%.

Measurements:

A shortened nine-item version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) developed by Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) was utilized to measure work engagement. This UWES-9 consists of three underlying dimensions, which are measured with three items each: vigor, dedication and absorption. Respondents reported on a seven point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "never" to 7 = "always". Cronbach's alpha for this scale is 0.90. For the purpose of analyses, an overall work engagement factor score will be computed. Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) argued that the total score for work engagement may sometimes be more practical in empirical research as the moderate to high correlations between the dimensions. A scale by Susskind *et al*. (2003) which include supervisor support (4 items) and co-worker support (3 items) were used to measure social support. All items were measured on a seven point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree". Meanwhile, job autonomy was measured using 3 items developed by Hackman and Oldham. (1975). All items were measured on a seven point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "very inaccurate" to 7 = "very accurate". Demographic information such as gender, marital status, age, race, organizational tenure, job tenure and educational qualification were also requested.

Results:
Profile of Respondents:

Table 1 represents the profile of respondents. Of the 523 respondents, 10 (1.9%) were males and 513 (98.1%) were females. Most of the respondents (344 staff nurses or 65.8%) were married, while the remaining 34.2% of the respondents were unmarried. The mean age of the respondents was 32.71 years (SD=7.41). In terms of ethnicity, the majority of the respondents were Malays (88.5%), followed by Indians (5.9%), Chinese (3.5%), and other races (2.1%). Education-wise, 396 respondents (75.7%) had basic training, and 127 respondents (24.3%) had post basic training. As for organizational tenure, the mean value was 6.12 years (SD=6.53). Meanwhile, the mean value for job tenure was 7.52 years (SD=6.82).

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	513	98.1
	Male	10	1.9
Marital Status	Married	344	65.8
	Unmarried	179	34.2
Ethnicity	Malay	463	88.5
	Indian	31	5.9
	Chinese	18	3.5
	Others	11	2.1
Educational	Basic Training	396	75.7
Qualification	Post Basic Training	127	24.3
		Mean	SD
Age (year)		32.71	7.41
Organizational Tenure (year)		6.12	6.53
Job Tenure (year)		7.52	6.82

Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities and Correlation of the Study Variables:

Descriptive statistics such as mean scores, standard deviations, reliabilities, and intercorrelations of the study variables are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Reliabilities of the Study Variables

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Work Engagement	Supervisor Support	Co-worker Support	Job Autonomy
Work Engagement	5.68	0.94	(0.89)			
Supervisor Support	5.33	1.09	0.38**	(0.78)		
Co-worker Support	4.78	0.90	0.13**	0.46**	(0.65)	
Job Autonomy	4.70	1.28	0.26**	0.22**	0.15**	(0.85)

Note: ** $p<0.01$, * $p<0.05$. Figures in parentheses denote the reliability coefficients for the study variables.

As shown in Table 2, on the average, the level of work engagement (M = 5.68, SD = 0.94), and supervisor support (M = 5.33, SD = 1.09) was slightly high. On the other hand, the mean value for co-worker support (M = 4.78, SD=0.90), and job autonomy (M = 4.70, SD = 1.28), was found to be moderate. The Cronbach's alpha values for the study variables were considered acceptable as the values were above Sekaran's (2003) threshold value of 0.60. Meanwhile, correlations between the study variables were found to be significant (p < 0.01).

Regression Results:

Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to test the two hypotheses of this study. Demographic variables such as age, marital status, education, organizational tenure and job tenure were statistically controlled (Koyuncu *et al*., 2006; Mauno *et al*., 2007). The result of the analysis is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Regression results of job resources on work engagement

Dependent Variable	Work Engagement	
Independent Variables	Model 1 Std. ß	Model 2 Std. ß
Step 1: Control Variables		
Age	- 0.08	- 0.05
Marital Status	- 0.14**	- 0.14*
Education	- 0.03	0.06
Organizational Tenure	0.05	- 0.03
Job Tenure	0.22	0.19
Step 2: Predictor Variables		
Supervisor Support		0.17**
Co-worker Support		0.08
Job Autonomy		0.25**
F- value	2.56	6.78
R^2	0.06	0.17
Adjusted R^2	0.05	0.12

R^2 Change	0.06	0.11
F-Change	2.56**	14.20**

Note: * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$

As shown in Table 3, based on model 1, the control variables accounted for 3% of the variance in work engagement ($r^2 = 0.06$, *f*-change = 2.56, p < 0.01). Of the five control variables, only marital status was significantly related to work engagement (ß = - 0.14, p < 0.05). This indicates that nurses who are married were highly engaged in their work compared to unmarried nurses. In model 2, by adding the three predictor variables, the r^2 increased to 0.17. This result shows that the predictor variables were able to explain an additional 11% of the variance related with work engagement (r^2 change = 0.11, *f*-change = 14.20, p < 0.01). Of the three predictor variables, supervisor support (ß = 0.17, p < 0.01), and job autonomy (ß = 0.25, p < 0.01) was found to have a positive and significant relationship with work engagement, thereby, supporting H1 and H3. Meanwhile, the effect of co-worker support on work engagement was insignificant. The non-existence of a relationship between co-worker support and work engagement leads to the rejection of H2.

Discussion:

The central aim of the present study was to explore the effects of social support and job autonomy on work engagement among Malaysian public hospital nurses. The results found that supervisor support was a significant predictor of work engagement. This finding is consistent with those previous researchers (Hakanen *et al*., 2006; Llorens *et al*., 2006). In heathcare setting, nurse supervisors are the one who responsible for not only facilitating learning and enhancing the understanding of the clinical job performs by the nurses (Severinsson and Hallberg, 1996), but also helping the nurses to increase their skills and communication with patients (Severinsson, 1996). Therefore, when nurses in public hospitals perceive their supervisors as supportive, which show concern for their feelings and needs, provide help, information, and constructive feedback, these nurses will be obliged to reciprocate by exhibiting favourable attitude in the form of work engagement. In contrast, co-worker support was found to be unrelated to work engagement. This finding is inconsistent with those discovered by past researchers (Hakanen *et al*., 2006; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Bakker *et al*., 2003). In today's healthcare practice environment, the role of a nurse has become more complicated, and is related to various responsibilities (Mrayyan, 2006). As boundary-spanners, nurses have to deal with lots of people around them, such as hospital administrations, doctors, patients, supervisors, and co-workers; hence, these nurses may not be able to develop a closer relationship with their co-worker. Furthermore, their tight and busy work schedule may restrict them from

providing support to their co-workers. These may have accounted for the non-relationship between co-worker support and work engagement. Additionally, the results revealed that job autonomy significantly predicted work engagement. This finding is consistent with those of previous researchers (Bakker *et al*., 2003). According to social exchange theory, employees who are given challenging and enriched jobs will feel obliged to exhibit higher levels of work engagement (Blau, 1964). Therefore, nurses who perceive high autonomy in their jobs will be more encouraged and motivated to display higher work engagement in their daily jobs.

Implications:

The findings of the study have certain significant implications for driving engagement levels among the nurses. Since supervisory support and job autonomy influence work engagement, it would be worthwhile for hospital administrations and the Ministry of Health to provide the necessary job resources (supervisory support and job autonomy) to nurses to enable them to become more engaged in their works. Specifically, the supervisors (sisters) should provide more support, such as showing concern for staff nurses' feelings and needs; provide help and information, and constructive feedback. . Moreover, the public hospital administrations should provide sufficient autonomy to staff nurses to ensure that they work more efficient when delivering quality care to the patients. Generally, public hospital administrations should put more emphasis on improving and strengthening these resources they make available to staff nurses in order to increase their work engagement.

Limitations:

It is important to note several limitations of the present study and directions for future research. The study only considered only two predictor variables (social support and job autonomy); however, many other job resources such as performance feedback, leadership and job control may play an important role in predicting work engagement. Future researchers may want to expand the scope of this study by focusing on these variables. In addition, this study is limited to staff nurses working in public hospitals in Peninsular Malaysia. The same research could be expanded and replicated among other healthcare personnel from public and private hospitals. The sample size should be increased in future research to improve the generalisability of the results. Moreover, the study has only focused on the unidirectional impact of social support and job autonomy on work engagement. Nonetheless, recent studies have demonstrated the reciprocal relationship

between them. Future research should be undertaken to test this dynamic relationship between social support, job autonomy and work engagement in the nursing context.

Conclusion:

This study revealed that supervisor support and job autonomy were significant predictors of work engagement among nurses. It is believe that job resources (e.g., supervisor support) can also play an extrinsic motivational role, as a resourceful work environment will create an individual's willingness to contribute their abilities and efforts to the work task. Hence, it would be worthwhile for the Malaysian Ministry of Health and nursing management to create a work environment that supports the work engagement of nurses.

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