



Antecedents and effects of engaged frontline employees

A study from the hospitality industry

Terje Slåtten and Mehmet Mehmetoglu

Lillehammer University College, Lillehammer, Norway

Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this study is to examine factors related to employee engagement in frontline jobs in service firms.

Design/methodology/approach – A conceptual model was developed and tested on a survey in which 279 hospitality frontline employees participated.

Findings – The findings show that employee engagement is closely linked to employees' innovative behaviour. Accordingly, the study clearly reveals the value of having an engaged frontline workforce. Moreover, the results show that perceptions of role benefit, job autonomy, and strategic attention were all significantly related to greater employee engagement.

Research limitations/implications – This study limits its examination to the antecedents and effects of employee engagement for two types of service organizations.

Practical implications – The study has demonstrated the importance for managers of having an engaged workforce. In particular, it is important for managers to notice that engagement is a major driver to innovative behaviour. Consequently, one general and key practical implication from this study is the importance for managers to measure regularly the engagement of their workforce.

Originality/value – This paper enhances one's knowledge of factors linked to employee engagement.

Keywords Innovation, Management strategy, Hospitality services, Employee involvement, Norway

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Frontline employees are of central importance for the guest experience in the hospitality industry. Onsøyen *et al.* (2009, p. 82), for example, describe the role of the host-guest as the core activity. Moreover, Lashley (2008) recommends a model where the hospitality organization structures its activities according to the primacy of host and guest transaction in order to build guest loyalty. In this view, the success of hospitality organizations as well as of service organizations in general depends upon the performance of its frontline employees (Chung and Schneider, 2002; Chebat *et al.*, 2003; Hartline *et al.*, 2000; Hartline and Ferrell, 1996; Singh, 2000; Wirtz, 2008). The overseeing of frontline employees is one of the chief tasks of hospitality managers (Lashley, 2008). Consequently, it is important to understand the aspects of frontline employees' role that could contribute both to improving work performance and to strengthening the firm's competitive advantage.

In recent years, there has been a sharp increase in the interest in the concept of employee engagement and its role in work performance and competitive advantage (Kular *et al.*, 2008). In particular, various studies have noted that employee engagement is able to predict employee turnover intention, employee productivity, financial performance, customer satisfaction, and so forth (Richman, 2006). Baumruk (2004) stresses the important role of employee engagement but labels this construct as the



“the missing link” in relation to the factors that contribute to a firm’s success. Saks (2006, p. 612) also describes employee engagement as a “new and emerging area”. Consequently, employee engagement has emerged as a critical element for business success. However, there seems to be a gap of knowledge with respect to employee engagement. This paucity relates to the fact that much of what has been written about employee engagement has come from consulting firms and from the literature by practitioners, and the observations thus have their basis in practice rather than empirical research. As Saks (2006, p. 600) has stated, “there is a surprising dearth of research on employee engagement in the academic literature”. Robinson *et al.* (2004) have also commented that “there has been surprisingly little academic and empirical research on a topic that has become so popular”. This deficiency seems also to be the case within hospitality research. Recently, Kim *et al.* (2009), commenting on the focus on engagement in hospitality research, have observed that “despite the growing interest about work engagement, studies in employee engagement are limited”. Clearly, then, there is a need for more empirical research that focuses on employee engagement in hospitality research (as well as in academic research in general). Such research would not only make a theoretical contribution, but also provide management in hospitality firms with an understanding both of the effects of engagement and of the practical tools that can stimulate employee engagement. The latter is particularly germane because some reports have concluded that employee engagement appears to be on the decline in general, and that there is a deepening disengagement among employees in today’s firms (Bates, 2004). Consequently, it is important to identify, on the one hand, those factors that engender employee engagement, and, on the other hand, how employee engagement pays off for organizations (e.g. enhanced job performance). The latter is often taken for granted in discussions on employee engagement. Yet, according to Demerouti and Bakker (2006), only a few quantitative studies have shown that engagement is positively related to job performance. Moreover, according to Saks (2006), p. 604, “there is little research on the factors that predict employee engagement”. There is, therefore, a need for more research on both the antecedents and the effects of employee engagement.

This study contributes to the call for more research related to employee engagement. Specifically, this article focuses on employee engagement in relation to frontline employees in hospitality firms. These firms offer a valuable opportunity for research because the critical role that frontline employees play in a hospitality firm’s success (Lashley, 2008; Onsøyen, 2009). Although there have recently been studies focusing on employee engagement in hospitality organizations (Kim *et al.*, 2009), this is the first study in hospitality research that has empirically examined certain antecedents and effects of employee engagement from a frontline perspective.

This article begins with a discussion of the concept of employee engagement. Next, there is a discussion of the antecedents and effects of employee engagement under examination in this study. Third, the methodology used in this study is described. Fourth, there is a presentation of the analysis and empirical findings. This article concludes with a discussion of the implications of this study and points out the limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review and conceptual framework

Conceptualization and definition of employee engagement

The concept of engagement can be traced back to Kahn (1990). Drawing from the earlier work of Goffman (1961), Kahn has developed the idea of employee engagement. Goffman here suggests that people's attachment to and detachment from their roles varies. Using a theatrical metaphor, Goffman argues that people act out momentary attachments and detachments in role performances. When an individual's behaviour shows a lack of separation between that person and his or her role, it indicates role embracement, and when an individual's behaviour reveals a resistance to a disdained role, it indicates role distance. On the basis of this distinction, Kahn (1990) has focused specifically on how people occupy their roles at work in varying degrees or how much people are psychologically present during particular moments of role performances at work. For Kahn (1990, p. 700), the self and the role "exist in some dynamic, negotiable relation in which a person drives personal energies into role behaviors (self-employment) and displays the self within the role (self-expression)". Kahn sets these varying degrees of psychological conditions of "overlap" between the self and the role at work on a continuum from personal engagement on one end to personal disengagement on the other. Kahn defines personal engagement as the "Harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles" (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). According to Kahn, when they are engaged, "people employ and express themselves psychically, cognitively and emotionally during role performances" (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). In his qualitative mapping of the general conditions of experience that influence degrees of personal engagement, Kahn finds that there are three psychological conditions associated with engagement or disengagement:

- (1) Meaningfulness;
- (2) Safety; and
- (3) Availability.

Consequently, workers were more engaged when they were in situations that offered them greater meaning and when they felt psychological safety and were more psychologically available. In a follow-up study, May *et al.* (1994) employed a quantitative test of Kahn's (1990) original findings. The results from the study reveal that all three psychological conditions exhibit significant positive relations with engagement.

Although Kahn (1990) provided a definition of engagement, there are a number of definitions of the construct of engagement in the literature. However, these definitions often overlap with two pairs of better known and established constructs: organizational commitment and organizational citizenship (Robinson *et al.*, 2004) and job involvement and flow (May *et al.*, 1994). Although engagement shares some elements with these constructs, especially job involvement and flow, engagement differs from these established constructs (for an in-depth discussion of this see, e.g. May *et al.*, 1994; Saks, 2006). Moreover, recent studies have shown that the concept of engagement differs both theoretically and empirically from concepts such as job involvement and organizational commitment (e.g. Hallberg and Schaufeli, 2006).

The definition and instrument for measuring engagement by Schaufeli *et al.* (2002), namely, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), has been an appropriate tool for studies on engagement. Various studies on such diverse places as Finland, China, and South Africa have used and validated the UWES (Hakanen *et al.*, 2005; Yi-Wen and Yi-Qun, 2005; Storm and Rothmann, 2003). The UWES has also been useful for

hospitality research (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2009). Schaufeli *et al.* (2002, p. 74) define engagement “as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by:

- vigor;
- dedication; and
- absorption.

Vigour refers to level of the energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one’s work, and persistence in the face of difficulties. Dedication refers to a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Absorption captures the state of being fully concentrated and deeply engrossed in one’s work, whereby one perceives time to pass quickly and has difficulties detaching oneself from work. It seems that the UWES is both the most established and applied scale for measuring employee engagement. Consequently, this study both defines engagement in line with Schaufeli *et al.* (2002).

Antecedents to employee engagement

Perceived role benefit. Perceived role benefit, inherent in frontline jobs, is a construct derived from role theory. Frontline employees who deal directly with the customer in service encounters occupy what are called boundary-spanning roles (Bateson, 1989). Boundary-spanning employees constitute those points of contact that an organization has with its environment. According to this boundary-spanning role, the service employee face a challenge of what Chung and Schneider (2002) illustratively describe as “serving multiple masters”, emphasizing the complex environment in which frontline employees work. Moreover, these “masters” can be divided into two different categories, external masters (i.e. the firm’s customers) and internal masters (i.e. the managers). All these different expectations from internal and external masters can be labelled as a role set. According to Katz and Kahn (1978), roles are sets of behaviours that are expected of a person in a certain position. Moreover, according to role theory, if a person is not able to fulfil the expectations associated with the multiple roles that he or she is expected to fulfil, this person will experience stress, or, more precisely, role stress.

The research on role theory has most often emphasized the negative side of role stress as the outcome of playing multiple roles. However, it is reasonable to assume that are some positive aspects involved with playing multiple roles. For example, while the roles attached to the position of receptionist can be stressful, they also allow opportunities for professional visibility, career advancement, diversity, and even fun and excitement. Playing multiple roles can thus be experienced as an element of a meaningful job because of the perceived benefit inherent in the job. This study concentrates on the cognitive benefits or desirable aspects stemming from multiple roles. This approach is not unique: the literature supports this interpretation of role benefit (e.g. Keaveney and Nelson, 1993).

Sieber (1974) has classified the positive benefit of multiple roles (or what he labels as “role accumulation”) into four types:

- (1) role privileges;
- (2) overall status security;
- (3) enrichment of the personality and ego gratification; and
- (4) resources for status enhancement.

This study focuses on the last, a person's perception of the benefit of status enhancement. More specifically, this study focuses on individual perceptions of career opportunities and professional visibility as being two "resources" that multiple roles provide. Moreover, it reasonable to assume that an individual's perceiving these resources as being meaningful contributes to engagement in the work role. The opposite is also possible: an individual who perceives the same resources as being meaningless contributes to disengagement in the work role. Meaningless work is often associated with apathy and detachment (Thomas and Velhouse, 1990). However, this study concentrates on the more desirable or positive perceptions. Following this reasoning, this study assumes that a person's perception of role benefits is able to augment the engagement in the work role. Consequently, employees' perceived role benefit is positively linked to employee engagement.

On the basis of this discussion, this study proposes the first hypothesis:

H1. Role benefit is positively related to employee engagement.

Job autonomy. Hackman and Oldham (1980) have identified five core characteristics associated with any job:

- (1) skill variety;
- (2) task identify;
- (3) task significance;
- (4) feedback; and
- (5) autonomy.

These five core characteristics are often mentioned in relation to the common term of "job resources". This study limits its focus on job autonomy and its relationship with employee engagement. There are two reasons for this concentration on job autonomy. First, research has often emphasized autonomy as a fundamental job resource that fulfils basic human needs in a job situation, such as personal growth, learning, and development (Ryan and Frederick, 1997; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Second – and this reason is closely linked to the heterogeneity that characterizes the challenge that frontline employees face in their jobs – heterogeneity reflects the fact that no two customers are exactly alike. Each customer has unique needs and demands, and this constant variation implies that an employee needs to understand this and to adapt their behaviour in accordance to frontline perceptions and an understanding of each individual customer's service script (Solomon *et al.*, 1985). Frontline jobs are thus both complex and demanding, and they require some level of autonomy from an employee perspective.

Job autonomy here refers to the freedom and independence that people performing the tasks have in determining how to execute their duties (Zhou and Shalley, 2008). Previous research has found that job autonomy is linked to certain factors related to employee engagement, such as the willingness to dedicate one's efforts and abilities to a work task (Gagne and Deci, 2005), intrinsic job motivation (Hackman and Oldham, 1980), and individual development (Deci and Ryan, 1985). To these authors' knowledge, there are only two previous studies that have explicitly tested the link between job autonomy and employee engagement. Xanthopoulou *et al.* (2009) have studied employees from three branches of a Greek fast-food company. In addition to other variables, the authors examined how job autonomy was linked to work engagement

and financial returns by using both a diary booklet and a general questionnaire. Their findings reveal that job autonomy predicts financial returns through work engagement (i.e. work engagement as mediator). However, this study has a relatively low response rate ($N = 42$). Moreover, it is not clear whether the employees in this study were frontline employees dealing with customers or whether they were employees in the backstage. The second is a recent study by Schaufeli *et al.* (2008) of managers and executives of a Dutch telecom company. The aim of this study was to reveal whether job resources (including job autonomy) were predictive of engagement. This extensive study lasted over one year, and the findings reveal that job autonomy was a positive predictor of work engagement. Although this was a comprehensive study, they did not focus on frontline engagement – the aim of this study – and such conclusions cannot be generalized to these types of jobs. All the same, the findings in the two aforementioned studies are relevant, because both indicate a link between job autonomy and employee engagement. Moreover, recently published literature on employee engagement indicates a positive relationship between on job resources (including job autonomy) and employee engagement, although there has not been any explicit testing of the relationship between job autonomy and employee engagement (e.g. Mauno *et al.*, 2007; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). This study, on the basis of the previous findings and literature, assumes that job autonomy is positively related to employee engagement.

On the basis of the discussion above, this study proposes the second hypothesis:

H2. Job autonomy is positively related to employee engagement.

Strategic attention. It was not until the early 1960s that the application of the concept of strategy to business studies began to receive significant attention relatively late (Chandler, 1962). Although this concept has gained wide acceptance, Håkansson and Snehota (2006) assert that it remains an “ambiguous and elusive concept”, and the literature offers numerous definitions. However, what is clear that is that the primary idea of strategy is that it is the means of reaching certain ends. The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, defines strategy (according to its military meaning and origin) as the “the art of planning and directing military activity in a war or battle”. Although definitions of strategy abound in business studies, they all put emphasis on activities that have an impact on the achievement of the organizational goals in relation to its environment (Håkansson and Snehota, 2006). Day (1999) has identified important aspects of an appropriate strategy. According to Day (1999), “a sound strategy is directional ... it includes activities ... to deliver a particular value proposition to a target group of customers... [and] to gain competitive advantage”. Moreover, according to Day (1999, p. 10), “everyone in the organization contributes to the strategy”. These statements point to five fundamental dimensions or challenges related to a firm’s strategy. First, a strategy should be goal-oriented (“directional”), that is, a strategy should incorporate a motivational aspect for the reaching of those goals. Second, there is (or should ideally be) a close link between strategy as a plan and strategy as an act (“includes activities”). This idea stresses the importance of implementing the strategy through the organization. Third, a strategy should embrace all employees in the organization (“everyone ... contributes to the strategy”), which entails that everyone (from the bottom to the top in the firm) is responsible to live up to the firm’s selected strategy. Fourth, all strategies deal with the challenge of how to please customers in a

satisfactory way (“to deliver value proposition to customers”). Fifth, strategy is about how to achieve or uphold a reasonable level of performance and thus to ensure survival in the future (“to gain competitive advantage”). This last consideration refers to the retaining and attracting of new customers and consequently the building of a foundation for survival both in the short and the long terms. Although all the aforesaid aspects of strategy are important, it is reasonable to assume that the implementation of strategy is the most critical. Without implementation, the organization’s strategy is useless. Consequently, implementation is fundamental for a firm’s success (e.g. the firm’s competitive advantage).

This study focuses on the implementation of strategy, and labels this construct as “strategic attention”. Strategic attention encompasses frontline employees’ perceptions of the match between strategy as a plan and strategy as an act. Strategy as an act refers to their perception of the degree of implementation of a firm’s strategy in a specific work role. We may reasonably assume that strategic attention is a relevant construct for research on frontline employees. Frontline employees are critical for the guest experience in service firms. For example, Onsøyen *et al.* (2009, p. 82) describe the host-guest relationship as the core activity. More emphatically, Zeithaml *et al.* (2008) state that employees in service organizations:

- are the service;
- are the organizations in the customers’ eyes;
- are the brand; and
- are marketers.

Clearly, the frontline employees are evaluated at different levels in the customer’s eyes, and this suggests that strategic implementation becomes extremely important in such work roles (e.g. for customer satisfaction, customer value, and customer loyalty).

Strategic attention in this study refers to how the firm’s strategy serves as a guiding principle or a compass for frontline employees in their work role. Day (1999, p. 39) labels this guiding principle as “supportability”, which refers to one of three prospects of conditions that must be satisfied before a strategy can achieve results. Taking this into consideration, this study assumes that employee’s strategic attention is a driver to engagement; specifically, the more a person perceives a match between the strategy and his or her own contribution the strategy, the more the engaged this person will be. Of course, the opposite is also possible, but, again, this study examines the positive perceptions of a perceived match. In short, this study assumes that strategic attention is positively related to employee engagement.

On the basis of this discussion, this study proposes the third hypothesis:

H3. Strategic attention is positively related to employee engagement.

Effect of employee engagement

Innovative behaviour. This study links employee engagement to innovative behaviour for two reasons. First, Miles (2000, p. 371) characterizes studies of innovation in services as “being neglected and marginal”. This is paradoxical because the growth in the service sector has been so expansive that the label of a service-dominated economy is a commonplace (Tether, 2005). Because of the lack of research on innovation in services, there has been call for more research on innovation in service firms. Second,

this study concentrates on frontline employees with the hospitality industry as the setting. In the hospitality industry (and in service industries in general), frontline employees are of central importance for guest experience (Onsøyen *et al.*, 2009; Lashley, 2008). Recently, there has been call for more research on innovation in frontline jobs. Wong and Ladkin (2008), for example, emphasize the need for innovations in approaches to improving service delivery. Consequently, there are good reasons for focusing on innovative behaviours.

This study refers to innovative behaviour as the application of novel and useful ideas in the work role (West and Farr, 1989; West, 1989). More specifically, innovative behaviour is linked to the process of customizing one's service. Interestingly, innovation related to this process has some similarities to one of the five concepts of innovation that Schumpeter (1934) claims to contribute to economic development. According to Schumpeter (1934, p. 66), a "process innovation is the introduction of a new method of production, including a new way of handling a commodity commercially". Moreover, innovative behaviour has some similarities with what Gallouj (1997) labels *ad hoc* innovation, which refers to an innovation produced during the very process of providing the service and consists of contributing novel solutions to individual customers on the basis of accumulated expertise. Moreover, as a general rule, innovative behaviour is to a large extent linked to the individual customers and cannot, then, be generalized in its totality for all customers, although some of the procedural elements can be reproduced in part with other customers.

To these authors' knowledge, no study has linked employee engagement to employees' innovative behaviour. Engaged employees have high levels of energy and are enthusiastic about their work. The various characteristics of a person's engagement (i.e. vigour, dedication, and absorption) implicitly signal a positive state of mind of this person. As mentioned earlier, Schaufeli *et al.* (2002, p. 74) define engagement "as a positive ... state of mind...". Consequently, engagement is associated with the experience of positive emotions (e.g. joy). The positive emotional state implicit in engagement has two closely related effects that are able to prompt innovative behaviour. First, previous research has revealed that people experiencing a positive state of mind are more positive to opportunities at work, more outgoing, and display helpful and service-oriented behaviours to others (Cropanzano and Wright, 2001; Slåtten, 2009). Second, positive emotions are associated with creativity. Wright (2006) has, for example, claimed that joy as a positive state is able to "broaden" an employee's momentary thought-action repertory by expanding the potential thought and actions that come to mind. Consequently, an employee's positive emotional state assists the ability to be more creative when offering a service. In summary, previous research has revealed that positive emotions, implicit in engagement, relate both to behaviour and to creativity, or what this study labels innovative behaviour. The broaden-and-build theory in positive psychology supports this association (Fredrickson, 2001). According to Van de Ven (1986, p. 592), the "foundation of innovation ideas is creativity". Given the nature of engagement, it is reasonable to assume that employee engagement is related to innovative behaviour. On the basis of previous findings and the relevant literature, this study suggests that employee engagement relates positively to employees' innovative behaviour.

On the basis of the discussion above, this study proposes the fourth hypothesis:

H4. Employee engagement is positively related to employee innovative behaviour.

3. Research model

Figure 1 shows the research model and provides a summary of the variables and hypotheses guiding this study.

As can be seen in the diagram, the model proposes that perceived role benefit, job autonomy, and strategic attention are antecedents to employee engagement (H1-H3), and that innovative behaviour is an effect of employee engagement (H4). The research model also proposes that employee engagement mediates the relationship between the antecedent's variables and the effect variable.

4. Methodology

Participants

Hospitality represents several categories of organizations and operates on diverse ranges of sophistication and complexity (Onsøyen *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, it is expected that frontline employees in hospitality firms are generally expected to deal with a number of requests by the customer. Consequently, hospitality firms provide an appropriate setting for the examination of the antecedents and the effects of employee engagement. Frontline employees were defined as those who in their work role have daily or regular contact with customers. On the basis of this criterion, we included only those working as front-desk clerks in hospitality organizations as participants. The sample consisted of frontline employees from two types of hospitality organizations: hotels and restaurant businesses.

Procedure

Several research assistants participated in collecting the data for this study. To ensure a common understanding among the researchers, there were workshops that explained the overall aim of the research project, the questionnaire, and the conceptual model. All researchers were instructed to give each respondent a brief introduction of the aim of the study and to inform all participants that their responses would be kept anonymous.

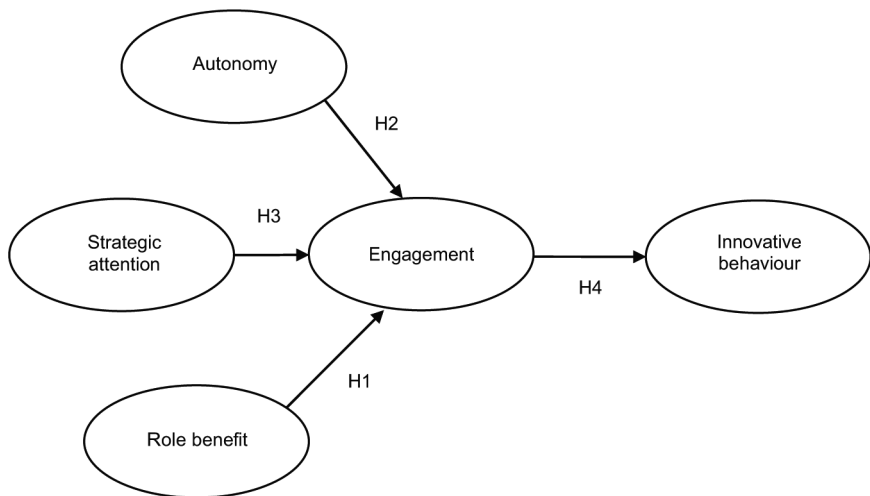


Figure 1.
A conceptual model of antecedents and effects of frontline engagement

The data were collected from hospitality organizations in Southern Norway. The organizations were selected in part because of their geographical location. In most cases, one of the researchers contacted the hospitality managers directly. In some situations, friends and other contacts were useful for obtaining access to the hospitality manager. The hospitality manager helped to identify the names of relevant participants. Each person was then contacted individually and asked to participate in the survey. If the respondent was willing to participate, the person received a questionnaire, was informed about the importance of the study and that their responses would remain anonymous. Participants returned their survey in a special closed response box to the research assistants, who then handed them to the lead investigator.

Questionnaire and measures

This study employed a structured questionnaire, with most of the questions developed from the literature. One expert evaluated the questionnaire, which then was pre-tested with five respondents. The five respondents were chosen because of their expertise and knowledge related to the content of working as a frontline employee in the two hospitality organizations included this study. On the basis of the comments and evaluations from both the expert and the five respondents, we re-worded some questions for the sake of improving the readability and understandability of questionnaire.

The questionnaire consisted of five main sections that covered the five constructs in the conceptual model in Figure 1. The first section comprised questions related to frontline employee's application of novel and useful ideas in the work role. The items used for innovative behaviour were from Janssen (2000) and modified. The second section consisted of questions related to employee engagement. The six items used for this constructs were from Schaufeli *et al.* (2002). The third section measured employee perception of autonomy or freedom in their job. The two items for this construct were from Babakus *et al.* (2003). The fourth section consisted of question related to frontlines strategic attention. The two items used were based on Liu (2006). The fifth covered the perceived role-benefit construct. The two items for measuring perceived role benefit were from Keaveney and Nelson (1993) and modified slightly to fit the aims of this study. The subjects responded to a seven-point Likert-type scale for all items. These measures were anchored at (7) strongly agree and (1) strongly disagree. Table I offers the details about the items for each construct.

In addition to the five main sections was one more section. In this section respondents were asked about socio-demographic characteristics, including age, gender, level of education, and income. This section also included questions about specific job characteristics, such as employment status and tenure.

Sample characteristics. In total, the data were collected from 279 employees in hospitality organizations. A comparison of the two types of hospitality organizations shows that 67 percent of the sample constituted frontline employees in hotels and the rest were working in restaurant businesses. The sample consisted of 67 percent male, and the mean age of the respondents was 30 years. Moreover, 35 percent of the sample had a university-level education. Their work arrangements were predominantly permanent and full-time (60 percent). Interestingly, 70 percent of the total sample had been with their respective organizations for only the last four years. This finding suggests a high turnover rate in the hospitality organizations included in this study.

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Constructs	Indicators	Loadings	CR (D.G.Rho)	AVE
Autonomy	I have a great deal of freedom for how I can go about doing my job	0.823	0.839	0.722
	I get encouraged to solve different tasks single-handedly	0.876		
Strategic attention	I am conscious about doing my job in line with the company's vision and aim	0.834	0.858	0.750
	The management has informed about the company's vision and aim	0.897		
Role benefit	This job is a "springboard" for my future career	0.844	0.863	0.757
	The job gives me an opportunity to show my skills	0.896		
Engagement	The job I have makes me enthusiastic	0.765	0.874	0.540
	I view my job as being meaningful	0.565		
	I like to work intensely	0.701		
	I often become absorbed in the job I am doing	0.884		
	The job gives me energy	0.669		
Innovative behaviour	I persevere when I encounter challenges	0.782	0.840	0.720
	I always try to invent new ways of improving the service quality	0.899		
	I always try out innovative ideas at my work	0.796		

Table I.
Measurement model

Note: CR: Composite Reliability (Dillon-Goldstein's Rho); AVE: Average Variance Extracted; All of the loadings are statistically significant

5. Data analysis and results

This study used partial least squares path modelling (PLSPM) to examine the study's suggested model. The reason for this choice is the simple fact that PLSPM is an analytic technique that runs principal component analysis (PCA) and regression analysis simultaneously. Thus, PLSPM is a more efficient analytic technique than its traditional counterpart, which performs PCA and regression analysis separately. Further, PLS is known to be robust to multicollinearity (Haenlein and Kaplan, 2004), which may occur between the different constructs in the data. The PLS analysis pursued a two-stage approach by first assessing the measurement model (validity and reliability), and then assessing the structural model by an estimate of the paths between the latent variables in the model and its predictive power. The PLSPM add-on module of XLSTAT software was used for performing the necessary analyses.

Measurement model

This study used the following criteria to assess the psychometric properties of each reflective construct: composite reliabilities (CR), average variances extracted (AVE), item loadings' significance, and discriminant validity (see for instance Liang *et al.*, 2007). As shown in Table I, all of the item loadings were large enough and statistically significant. The composite reliability coefficients (Dillon-Goldstein's rho) were all above the suggested level of 0.7, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Furthermore, convergent validity was exhibited since AVE values for all of the constructs were higher than the suggested level of 0.5. The AVE of each of the

constructs was also larger than the squared correlations between any two constructs in the model, which demonstrates discriminant validity (see Table II).

Structural model

Results from the structural model, as hypothesized, showed that role benefit was positively related to the employee’s engagement, with a path coefficient of 0.479. This finding supports the first hypothesis. Further, as expected, autonomy was also positively associated with the employee’s engagement, with a path coefficient of 0.216, a finding that supports the second hypothesis. Moreover, as anticipated, strategic attention was positively correlated with the employee’s engagement, with a path coefficient of 0.250, thus supporting the third hypothesis. Incidentally, the three latent variables (role benefit, autonomy, and strategic attention) explained nearly 60 percent of the variance of the employee’s engagement. The results further showed that the employee’s engagement was positively related to their innovative behaviour, with a path coefficient of 0.636, which supports the fourth hypothesis. It is also shown that the employee’s engagement alone explained 40 percent of the variance of innovative behaviour (see Figure 2).

	Autonomy	Strategic attention	Role benefit	Engagement	Innovative behaviour
Autonomy	1				
Strategic attention	0.181	1			
Role benefit	0.259	0.203	1		
Engagement	0.319	0.308	0.489	1	
Innovative behaviour	0.319	0.162	0.303	0.405	1
AVE	0.722	0.750	0.757	0.540	0.720

Table II.
Squared correlations,
convergent, and
discriminant validity

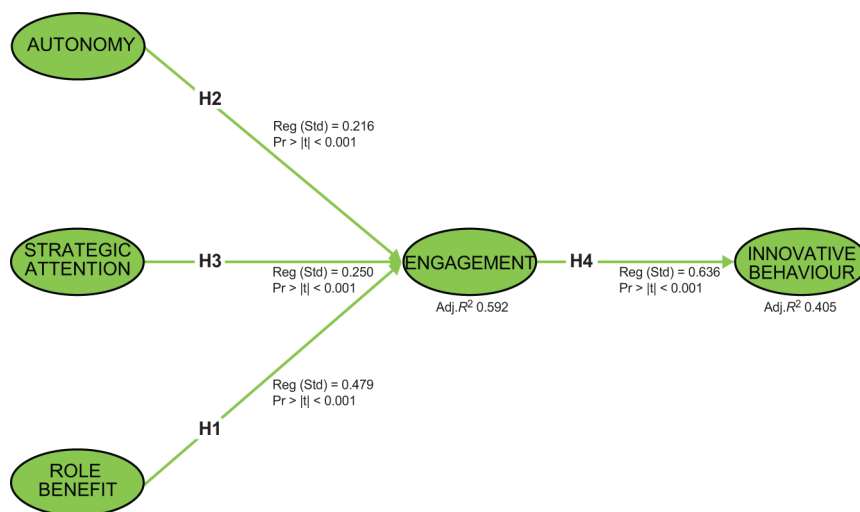


Figure 2.
Structural model results

6. Discussion

Our research has empirically demonstrated the effect of employee engagement on innovative behaviour. This finding is highly relevant to the service literature because it emphasizes the critical role of employee engagement in service firms, which until now in the literature has most often been conceptually assumed or regarded as the as a foundation for employee performance (Saks, 2006; Robinson *et al.*, 2004). Although previous service research has focused on the factors that drive employee performance, it seems that most of this research has been inspired by the idea of the service profit chain advanced by Heskett *et al.* (1997) which focuses on the effect of employee satisfaction on performance. Consequently, the effect of employee engagement on performance has been relatively neglected or absent from empirical examination (Kim *et al.*, 2009). This study addresses this lack by empirically demonstrating the effect of employee engagement on the innovative behaviour in specific work role. Overall, this study contributes to the literature that focuses on the people element of the services marketing mix.

The findings reveal that employee engagement is closely linked to employees' innovative behaviour. It is notable that employee engagement explains a significant percent (37.7 percent) of the variance in innovative behaviour. Our results support the broaden-and-build theory in that a positive state of mind broadens a person's thought-action repertory. However, this is the first study in service research that examines the effect of engagement on innovative in a specific work role. This study thus contributes to the literature that has called for more research on innovation in service organizations (Miles, 2000; Wong and Ladkin, 2008). Consequently, this study enhances our knowledge of factors that drives innovative behaviour in service organizations.

Previous service research that has employed role theory when examining people in so-called boundary-spanning roles has most often narrowly focused on the negative aspects of the work role. Often, these negative aspects are labelled as role stress and refer to such factors as "role conflict", "role ambiguity", or "role overload" (for an example, see Slåtten, 2008). In contrast, this study contributes to the literature by using role theory in service research and by focusing on the positive aspects of being in a boundary-spanning position. More specifically, this study is unique in explicating the connection between perceived role benefit and engagement from the perspective of a frontline employee. The perceived role benefits point to individual employee perceptions of career opportunities and professional visibility. The findings reveal that perceived role benefit was the most important construct in creating employee engagement. Consequently, employee-perceived role benefit can be identified as a key construct or crucial aspect in relation to employee engagement. The findings are supported by causality-orientations theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Causality-orientations theory provides an explanation for a person's selective perception and rationale or attribution for pursuing a given activity. One explanation for a person's performing a job that follows this reasoning is that the job is seen as a means to an end. The person perceives the demands from customers and managers with a specific work role as being reasonable (even when they conflict). The person interprets these demands to mean that these customers and managers are actually providing important information for the improved performance of the job. According to the findings from this study, persons who perceive the challenge of handling the demands in a specific work role as being an advantageous element become more engaged in that work role. To our knowledge, no previous research has attempted to examine connection between perceived role benefit and employee engagement in service research.

According to the literature on strategy, before a strategy can achieve the promised results, a close link between strategy as a (document) plan and strategy as an act is vital. Consequently, a service firm's strategy is worthless if it is not implemented in the minds of the organizational members. The findings here reveal that strategic attention is able to stimulate both employee engagements and innovative behaviour. Although there is a large body of literature that highlights the importance of strategy for successful service firms in general (Owen *et al.*, 2001), this is the first study that has empirically studied strategic implementation and its role for employee engagement in service firms. The finding in this study supports what Day (1999) calls "supportability", a critical aspect of a successful strategy.

This study considers job autonomy as the freedom and independence that people have when performing a task (Zhou and Shalley, 2008). The construct of job autonomy was linked to employee engagement, although it was less important than perceived role benefit. This finding supports previous studies that suggest a positive relationship between job autonomy and employee engagement in organizations in general (Mauno *et al.*, 2007; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli *et al.*, 2008; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2009). Yet this study goes further by specifically demonstrating that employees' perception of freedom and independence in frontline jobs drive their engagement. To our knowledge, this is the first study in service research that demonstrates this relationship and thus contributes to the literature by enhancing our knowledge and understanding of factors related to the people element (specifically, frontline employees) in service organizations.

7. Practical implications

It has been reported that there is an "engagement gap" among employees today (Kowalski, 2003). This study has investigated three factors that can contribute to managers' understanding of how to fill the "engagement gap" with respect to frontline employees. Specifically, employee-perceived role benefit, job autonomy, and strategic attention were linked to employee engagement. In total, these three constructs explain 45.2 percent of the variance in employee engagement. Consequently, managers should pay close attention to these three constructs in their efforts to create an engaged frontline work force.

On the basis of the findings, this study urges managers to focus on how employees perceive the benefits of their present position as frontline employees. Specifically, managers ought to encourage their employees to perceive their job as a resource for status enhancement. This can be done in numerous ways, but one way stands out: having the employee focus on career development. A career-development programme is defined as "the evolving sequence of a person's work experience over time (Arthur *et al.*, 1989). A career-development programme should clearly show the different steps in the career path and make explicit the criteria of how a frontline employee can progress along that path. Managers should note that there are two important factors that help a career programme to be a successful tool. First, managers must develop the career-development programme on an individual basis. This stresses the point that each individual employee must play an active role in developing the career plan. By individualizing the career programme, the manager facilitates the employee's commitment to the programme and, more importantly, a common understanding between the manager and the employee about the preferred career path in the company. Second, managers should provide career-development services and

assistance to the individual. Consequently, it is insufficient for managers only to develop an individual career programme. On the contrary, managers should see the development of an individual career programme as a starting point. Specifically, they should spend time with their members of staff individually on matters of career development and take actions to further their staff's development (Yarnall, 1998). Such actions would include managers' playing an active role in acting as a coach and counsellor, helping to identify and overcome obstacles to development, being a resource and source of ideas for developmental options, and reinforcing development through the rewarding of staff. Only when both the individual employee and the manager play an active role in the use of career programme can this tool contribute to or uphold the employee's perception of the benefits in their present working role as a resource for status enhancement. The employee perception of the role benefit would, according to the findings in this study, result in a working force that is both more engaged and innovative in their approach to customer service.

Autonomy is generally a requirement where work cannot be easily standardized, which is most often the case for frontline jobs in the hospitality sector. This study shows that job autonomy was the second key variable for stimulating employee engagement in frontline jobs. Accordingly, this study recommends that managers ensure that individual employees are given the necessary freedom, flexibility, independence, and discretion in scheduling the work and determining the procedures to be used (Hackman and Oldham, 1976). To ensure the necessary level of autonomy, managers should regularly track employees' perception of their job autonomy and consider whether they are satisfactory or not. If the job autonomy is not satisfactory, managers need to take the necessary steps to rectify this problem. It is also important to note that the level job of autonomy needs to be properly cultivated, and this means that managers must provide the employees a solid basis of knowledge, training, support, and practical tools in order to build their confidence in their specific work roles. This point is particularly important if job autonomy is supposed to contribute successfully to employee engagement and innovative behaviour. Consequently, it is important for managers to keep in mind that the realization of the potential inherent in job autonomy is only beneficial or has value for the firm when it is handled in correct way.

There is a useful adage that applies to a firm's strategy: "plans are nothing, planning is everything". This expression usually stresses the importance for managers to take the implementation of a firm's strategy seriously. This study shows that there is a positive link between the implementation of strategy and employee engagement. Managers would do well to recognize that the successful implementation of strategy involves a wide array of their practices (Domm, 2001). However, one common important factor for all these aspects is the use of time. There are three aspects of time that managers should consider. First, time should be used to involve the organization's employees (e.g. frontline employees) in the formulation of the content in firm's strategy. This step can help the firm to ensure that their point of view is taken into consideration in the preparation of the strategy. Second, time should be used to relate the strategy to employees. In particular, a manager should spend time giving employees a clear understating about the content of firm's strategy and the role that each individual employee has in the fulfilment of the firms' strategy. The goal here is to persuade the employees about their roles and to ensure that employees believe in the strategy. It is reasonable to assume that this would be easier if managers have already spent some

time to involve employees in the early stages of the strategic process. Third, to implement a strategy successfully, time must be used to bind the strategy to the employees. In other words, managers should use an adequate amount of time to train their employees on how to strive consciously towards contributing to the organization's overall strategy. For example, if the strategy has statements' about service like, "we care about our customer", or "the customer should see us as being professional", these can mean different things to different people, and can result in confusion. However, by ensuring a common basis of training and action competence, a manager can positively contribute to making certain that employees have a set of common practices, are committed to the firm's service strategy, and stay engaged (Domm, 2001). Consequently, strategic attention contributes both to the engagement of employees and to the stimulation of employees' innovative behaviour.

8. Suggestions for future research

First, this study is based upon a sample consisting of frontline jobs across two hospitality organizations. Indeed, the use of such a relatively broad context has some limitations, but it is suitable for the contributions this study has to offer: the initial test of a relatively neglected area in hospitality research. All the same, future research should replicate and enlarge upon the present findings in order to explore whether there are differences in employee engagement depending upon on such factors as the type of hospitality firms, the type of contact, the level of customization, and the level of interaction. Such an approach can show if employee engagement changes according to characteristics of the frontline jobs or types of hospitality organizations.

Second, one limitation of this study is that it derived its data from a cross-sectional field study. Although the hypotheses were taken to be of a causal nature, the present design was not optimal for testing the direction of influence in the model. With respect to causality, one cannot be sure that the antecedents cause employees' engagement or that employees' engagement causes employee innovative behaviour. However, the design of this study does meet two of the three criteria for testing causality, namely, isolation and covariation. Future research should use longitudinal or experimental studies, or both, to provide more definitive conclusions about the causality.

Third, the effects variable in this study was employees' innovative behaviour. Although innovative behaviour is an important construct worthy of study, there are other effects variables that could also be implemented in the model of this study. Three such variables are employees' productivity, employees' turnover intention, and service recovery, all of which are important variables for hospitality firms to consider. Research that addresses such issues would add to our theoretical understanding and would also point out important practical implications for the best managerial practice in service organizations.

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Corresponding author

Terje Slåtten can be contacted at: terje.slatten@hil.no

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