

Career Engagement at Work: Realigning Challenge and Capacity in Chaotic Times

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We had some unanswered questions after our webinar – here's a brief response to them.

1. *What role does Disengagement play while we consider a job change versus considering a career change? Also, on a larger scale, currently is Covid-19 also influencing that need for change?*

I'm not sure that one can always distinguish a "job" change from a "career" change, so I'm assuming in this case that the new job would be very similar work to the previous one and that the individual was fully engaged in the previous job (i.e., neither overwhelmed nor underutilized). In that case (i.e., moving to a similar level of challenge and capacity), one wouldn't expect much shift in engagement. As systems may be slightly different from one employer to the next, a new job might be slightly overwhelming up front. However, sometimes an orientation period doesn't offer much challenging work. In such cases, the individual might feel slightly overwhelmed.

However, if the individual was shifting jobs due to feeling disengaged in the previous one, regardless of whether that disengagement was from being overwhelmed or underutilized, I wouldn't expect shifting to a similar job to offer much of a fix. Instead, I'd want to ensure that the new job offered different conditions than the one left behind. If the individual had been overwhelmed, I'd look for a job with either less challenge or more supports/resources. If the individual had felt underutilized, I'd look for a job with more challenge or fewer resources/supports to more fully engage the individual.

COVID-19 has, of course, impacted the engagement of many employees. Some industries have ground to a halt, rendering a search for a similar job quite futile. However, for folks who had been previously fully engaged in their jobs, I'd be looking for a similar level of challenge and resources/supports. Some individuals, on the other hand, had been either coasting at work or feeling completely overwhelmed. For them, the pandemic may have offered a welcome disruption in a career path that had been quite unsatisfactory. A fresh new start could offer a chance for re-engagement at work and in other life roles.

2. *Has this model been tested in Eastern cultures, eg Middle East, Asia...etc?*

Yes, we've used it in training career counsellors and career development professionals in Saudi Arabia (with locals and expatriates), in Singapore, and in China. It has been well received and fully resonated with individuals in each of those countries.

3. *Are there any articles on this topic that you can refer?*

There are several book chapters, included the one in the *Career Theories and Models: Ideas for Practice* CERIC publication that was mentioned in the webinar. Here are a couple of CJCD journal articles that are freely available online:

Luke, J., & Neault, R. A. (2020). Advancing older workers: Motivations, adaptabilities, and ongoing career engagement. *Canadian Journal of Career Development*, 19(1), 48-55.

Pickerell, D. A., & Neault, R. A. (2016). Examining the career engagement of Canadian career development practitioners. *Canadian Journal of Career Development*, 15(1), 4-14.



4. *Understanding that there are individual differences, in your opinion, where do you think young adults -- post-secondary students may be? What additional supports do you think will be helpful in addition to offering services online?*

I believe you'd find young adults / post-secondary students in any of the zones in the model. Some are very overwhelmed with school, work, and pandemic-related isolation. Others are bored – unable to pursue the gap year, work-related, post-secondary, or post-university dreams they had been working towards. I think the additional supports might best be based on a needs analysis of a specific group. For example, at my own university, I'm co-facilitating a short townhall meeting this week for just that purpose – to check in with our grad students re how they are feeling and what kinds of additional supports they might like us to offer.

5. *Can you be slightly overwhelmed and engaged?*

Absolutely. We didn't spend much time discussing the colour-coding of the model but the changes in colour from one zone to the next are deliberately subtle. There's a "zone" of engagement and the dotted zig-zag line in the centre is intended to portray that we don't just land in a zone and stay there – engagement is dynamic. Some individuals thrive in the excitement of feeling challenged and a little overwhelmed; others prefer to feel more in control, so the experience of engagement while being slightly overwhelmed might be more likely for the first group than the second.

6. *Are employees who are underutilized not also at risk of burnout?*

Some people might refer to the disengagement from being underutilized as "rust out" rather than burnout but, as we discussed in the webinar, once one is disengaged (whether from being overwhelmed or underutilized) the "look" is the same. Disengagement is disengagement. Therefore, the symptoms of burnout could certainly be similar to the symptoms of someone who has been underutilized to the point of disengaging.

7. *Given that FIT is such an important component of capacity, is this something we have to pay extra attention to as we try to diversify our work spaces?*

Yes – I encourage my students and clients to conduct "corporate culture audits" to get a sense of how they might fit within organizations. Fit is, of course, complex – it's far more than whether there are people in the workplace who look like you, although that may be important. It's also about values, purpose, shared vision, and knowing that the work one is doing matters and is making a significant difference. I also encourage my clients to consider fit with their other life roles and responsibilities – the best job in the world might not "fit" if the schedule doesn't work or the salary doesn't cover basic costs of living.

