



Enhancing Employee Engagement: A Validation Study in Venezuela

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Introduction

Within the fields of human resources and organizational psychology, Maslow's motivational model has been regarded as internationally valid, though empirical, cross-cultural support has long been lacking. In this study, 48 professionals in Venezuela pursuing graduate business degrees were administered the Hoffman Vocational Values Scale (HVVS), a measure of employee engagement derived from Maslow's model of self-actualization. Translated into Spanish, it yielded robust internal reliability and showed clear applicability to Venezuelans, and presumably, South Americans in general. Differences in overall engagement between male/female and private sector/public sector employees were not statistically significant. As a whole, this sample valued work as an important source of self-fulfillment, and displayed relatively high engagement overall and on most HVVS dimensions. Directions for future research were suggested.

Rationale

In recent years, human resources (HR) and related professionals have shown increased interest in enhancing employee engagement. This trend is hardly surprising in view of the fact that at the professional level, particularly, such engagement has been associated with greater organizational citizenship and loyalty, commitment and retention, productivity and creativity (Harter et al., 2002; Koys, 2001). To many observers, it seems no coincidence that a phenomenally successful business like Google is rated consistently as being the best company in the United States to work for (*Fortune*, 2008). Indeed, more than 40 years ago, psychologist Abraham Maslow (1965) gained wide renown for eloquently emphasizing the importance of employee engagement for commerce and wider social benefit.

The higher-motivational approach of Maslow (1965, 1970a, 1970b, 1996) has remained influential for decades, partly on the strength of its optimistic view of human potential. Especially for HR professionals concerned with maximizing employee accomplishment through such means as training and development, his "hierarchy of inborn needs" has been appealing. In essence, Maslow conceptualized human needs as a pyramid with five levels, in ascending order these are: physiologic, safety, belongingness, esteem and respect, and self-actualization. When a lower need is satisfied, the next-higher need occupies our main attention until it, too, is satisfied. The highest need, self-actualization, is to "become all that one is capable of becoming" in terms of talents, skills and abilities. In Maslow's view, this meta-need is never really satiated, and is, therefore, a life-long source of individual motivation and achievement.

Despite the intrinsic appeal of Maslow's model, there has been a paucity of assessment tools available to measure workplace self-actualization. The HVVS was designed to provide such as an assessment tool for managers, consultants and others. First described in the professional literature by Hoffman (2004), it has proven useful in both individual career assessment and organizational analysis in the United States. At the individual level, the HVVS has helped clients to more objectively identify sources of gratification and fulfillment at work, as well as aspects involving frustration or discontent. Personal change can then be initiated more effectively. At the organizational level, the HVVS has helped HR professionals to gain a clearer picture of employee engagement by department or job classification by pinpointing specific areas of strength and deficiency. For example, results might show that company-wide IT employees share a high sense of belongingness and camaraderie, but feel insufficiently challenged creatively. Through such methods as training and development, interventions to increase employee engagement can, therefore, be undertaken with greater likelihood of success.

This study was conducted in order to determine the validity of the HVVS in Venezuela – a country of approximately 28 million persons with a high collectivist orientation (Hofstede, 1980). In ranking 53 cultures along four value-based dimensions – Power Distance, Individualism-Collectivism, Masculinity-Femininity, and Uncertainty-Avoidance – Hofstede found that Venezuela ranked

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12 on collectivism, compared to other Latin countries (average ranking = 21), indicating that this culture is markedly collectivistic with close long-term commitment to groups – particularly family and extended relationships. In this study, he also found that Venezuela scored 76 on Uncertainty-Avoidance, slightly below the Latin American average of 80, indicating this culture's low level of tolerance for uncertainty or ambiguity. According to Hofstede (2001), people in uncertainty-avoiding cultures tend to be more emotionally reactive and motivated by inner nervous energy. Cross-cultural indexes such as that of social axioms (Bond et al., 2004) have shown Venezuela to be comparable to other Latin American countries.

Though Maslow developed his motivational system mainly from observations of people and organizations within the United States, he was convinced of its universality. Thus, in Maslow's only collaborative cross-cultural study (Maslow and Diaz-Guerrero, 1960), he applied his motivational model to explain the troubling growth of juvenile delinquency in both the United States and Mexico.

Within Venezuela, several recent studies (Morillo, 2006; Ramirez, 2006; Ramirez & D'Aubeterre, 2007) have applied Maslow's perspective as a reference for their analysis of employee engagement, motivation and expectations. With a focus on Venezuela's education workers, Escalona (2006) offered a theoretical perspective on the linkage of employee health, work and social development. In her conclusion, she called for:

"...a more human model of development that gives priority to the dignified work and health, that encourages the development of capacities and human potentialities, that promotes solidarity and well-being among the nations, and that protects the environment in a comprehensive way for future generations (p.16)."

This human model of development would lead precisely to what Maslow called the self-actualizing human being. Nevertheless, to what extent his model is indeed "species-wide" (in his memorable phrase) in its applicability has remained an open-ended question. We have sought to answer it partially in this investigation of self-actualization in the Venezuelan workplace.

Method

The Hoffman Vocational Values Scale

The HVVS is a self-report measure of 25 items on a five-point Likert scale, 23 of which are phrased in the positive and two in the negative. The items reflect Maslow's hierarchy of inborn needs, encompassing employee needs for safety, belongingness, esteem and respect, and higher needs including those for creativity, inspiration, peak experiences and contributing to world betterment. In 2005, the HVVS was translated into Spanish and then independently back-translated into English in order to assure full comparability for Spanish-speaking immigrants working in the United States. For this study, the second author made slight modifications to fit current Venezuelan language usage. Following a brief introduction to Maslow's work, he distributed it on an optional basis to students in three graduate business courses and participation was 100 percent. Participants completed the HVVS individually and anonymously in class.

Sample Characteristics

The sample comprised 48 graduate students (17 males, 31 females); 32 were enrolled at the Universidad Central de Venezuela in Caracas and 16 at the Universidad Nacional Experimental Politecnica de la Fuerza Armada Nacional in Los Teques. They encompassed 24 taking a marketing specialization, 16 enrolled in information technology management, and 8 in the pharmaceutical industry taking a course in strategic marketing for their industry. All were employed at full-time jobs (29 in private sector and 19 in public sector). Their ages ranged from 23 to 47, and the mean age was 31 for both genders. In their current position, tenure ranged from one month to 14 years, with a mean tenure of 2.95 years.

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Forty-six participants identified their current occupation, the most frequent of which was analyst (N=5). They held a wide range of business-related jobs including account executive, attorney, economist, journalist, manager, merchandise coordinator, pharmacist and quality coordinator.

Results

Overall data analysis

As a measure of internal consistency, the Cronbach alpha was a robust +.90, a highly satisfactory reliability indicator. Statistical tests were also performed to assess whether job satisfaction differed significantly according to gender or job sector (that is, public versus private). Two-tailed t-tests and ANOVAS revealed no such differences, nor was there an interaction effect of gender and job sector.

Specific findings related to job satisfaction

The HVVS encompasses 12 dimensions, two of which pertain to respondent characteristics and 10 to perceived current job characteristics. For this sample, the results were as follows:

Respondent Dimensions:

1) Importance of Work for Self-Actualization:

Among Maslow's most important contributions to personality and organizational psychology was his contention that work is a potent motivator for many – though certainly not all – individuals in contemporary society. In studying superbly emotionally healthy individuals – those whom he called self-actualizing, Maslow found that they tended to place a very high personal value on career achievement as a means of self-fulfillment; that is, work provided their dominant path for gratifying both lower and higher needs. This sample viewed work as definitely significant for their self-actualization. The mean score for this dimension was 4.6, which is extremely high. Work was a very important source of fulfillment and happiness for this sample.

Participants regarded work quite strongly as a way to feel a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Only four percent rated having a meaningful vocation as "unimportant" or "very unimportant" in their self-actualization.

2) Whether Respondent has Found his/her Avocation or "Calling" in Life:

In Maslow's view, the emotionally healthy individual is strongly aware of the vocation that best fits his or her unique blend of temperament, interests and abilities. In this sense, Maslow argued, the traditional religious concept that a person may have a divine "calling" – such as to the ministry or teaching – can be effectively translated into psychological terms, affirming the importance of individual differences in career suitability. The mean score for this sample was 3.8, which is moderately high, and much lower than the score for the first dimension. Only 8.5 percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that they had found their avocation, but 21.3 percent were neutral or unsure with regard to it. In comparing scores between the first and second dimensions, a sizable minority of respondents (22.2 percent) viewed work as vital for their self-actualization in life but had not yet found their true vocation.

Job Dimensions

3) Whether Current Job is Self-Fulfilling for Respondent:

The mean score was 3.7, which is moderately high. There was a large amount of variability – 30.2 percent were extremely satisfied with their current job and only 7.8 percent were extremely unsatisfied. 38.0 percent were in the middle categories, ranging from slightly dissatisfied to slightly satisfied.

4) Whether Current Job Provides Physical Safety:

The mean score was 3.7, which is moderately high. In this sample, 66.7 percent of participants felt personally safe either "often" or "very often" on the job. This is a positive indication. But, 18.8 percent of participants felt

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- personally safe only "rarely" or "never." Statistical analysis indicated that gender was not a significant factor in affecting one's sense of physical safety.
- 5) *Whether Current Job Provides Belongingness and Sociability:*
In Maslow's view, basic to human nature is our need to feel part of a group and to experience camaraderie. The mean score was 4.0, which is relatively high. Of this sample, 36.1 percent reported that they "very often" felt a sense of belongingness and pleasant sociability in their current job. Only 5.3 percent of participants reported "rarely" or "never" feeling this mood at work.
- 6) *Whether Current Job Provides Co-Workers to Respect and Admire:*
The mean score was 4.1, which is relatively high. Of this sample, 55.8 percent "very often" felt respect and admiration regarding co-workers in their organization. Only 5.3 percent of participants "never" felt this attitude. In Maslow's approach, these statistics are a very positive finding. He believed that employees have a psychological need to experience respect and admiration at work.
- 7) *Whether Respondent Feels Respected and Appreciated in Current Job:*
The mean score was 4.2, which is relatively high. Of this sample, 41.7 percent felt respected and appreciated "very often" at work. Only a very small percentage – 2.0 percent – reported that they "rarely" or "never" felt respected and appreciated at work, and 15.6 percent reported that they felt this way only "sometimes" on the job. These statistics indicate that participants in this sample generally feel respected and appreciated, but there is room for improvement.
- 8) *Whether Respondent has a Teacher and a Hero in Current Job:*
The mean score was 3.0, which is somewhat low. Of this sample, only 12.5 percent "very often" felt that they had a personal hero in their organization, and only 29.2 percent reported that they "very often" had a personal teacher. Consistent with their United States counterparts, participants were more likely to have a teacher than a hero in their organization. Specifically, 31.0 percent reported that they "never" had a personal hero at work, but only 18.8 percent reported they "never" had a personal teacher. This finding suggests that leadership remains a vacuum for many Venezuelan employees – and is harder to create than a mentor or teacher.
- 9) *Whether Respondent Feels Creatively Challenged in Current Job:*
The mean score was 3.8, which is moderately high. Of this sample, 30.6 percent reported that they "very often" feel challenged and motivated creatively at work and only 5.6 percent reported that they "never" felt this way; 63.8 percent of participants were in the middle categories: they reported feeling a sense of creative enjoyment and pleasure occasionally but not too often. For them, creative challenge is not utterly lacking in their jobs, but it is not a daily occurrence either.
- 10) *Whether Respondent Feels Bored and Stifled in Current job:*
The mean score was 2.7, which is moderately low, and, therefore, a positive finding. However, there was considerable variability in this sample. Fully, 26.0 percent reported that they feel bored and stifled "often" or "very often." This is a discouraging finding. However, 42.7 percent reported that they "never" or "rarely" feel bored and stifled at work; 31.3 percent reported that they "sometimes" felt this way. There is definitely room for improvement in these results.
- 11) *Whether Respondent has Peak Experiences in Current and Previous Job:*
The mean score regarding inspirational and peak experience at the current job was 3.6, which is only moderate. The mean was 3.5 concerning peak experiences and 3.7 for inspirational moments. There was definite variability on this dimension. On the positive side, 52.1 percent of respondents reported inspiration and peak experiences either "often" or "very often" in their current job. This figure is slightly more than half. In addition, only 2.1 percent reported that they "never" felt this way. But a sizable percentage (45.8 percent) reported inspiration and peak experiences only "rarely" or "sometimes" at their current job. Interestingly, when describing their previ-

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ous job, only 30.4 percent of respondents reported having a peak experience either “often” or “very often” compared to 50.0 percent regarding their current job. So clearly, the data shows greater self-actualization, features involving current employment, as compared to past employment.

12) *Whether Respondent Feels Current Job is Helping the World:*

The mean score was 3.6, which is only moderate. For those in the Western world, Maslow emphasized, it is nearly impossible to attain workplace self-actualization in the absence of this attitude. In this sample, the results were not very positive: only 54.2 percent of respondents reported that they “often” or “very often” felt they were contributing in their work toward world betterment, and 14.6 percent said that they “rarely” or “never” felt this way; 31.2 percent reported that they “sometimes” felt this way. On the positive side, 25.0 percent reported that they “very often” felt that their work was contributing to world betterment.

Discussion

Though Maslow's influential model of human motivation – and employee engagement, in particular – is generally regarded as universal (that is, “species-wide” in his memorable phrase), cross-cultural empirical support has been notably lacking. In Maslow's extensive career, he traveled outside North America only once – spending a few months in Mexico on an academic sabbatical. That sojourn generated his only collaborative cross-cultural study – a comparative, largely theoretical analysis of juvenile delinquency in Mexico and the United States. Indeed, Maslow himself recognized the need for greater cross-cultural validation of his work. For example, in an unpublished 1966 essay entitled “Critique of Self-Actualization Theory,” he commented (Maslow, 1996):

“The model of self-actualization so far seems not only cross-cultural but even cross-historical as well. In cultures as diverse as the Japanese and Blackfoot Native Americans, I have found significant similarities (in this regard). Nevertheless, it is possible that I have fallen victim to sampling error. This issue must be treated with great seriousness.” (p.28)

Derived directly from Maslow's motivational model, the HVVS was assessed for validity in Venezuela, a country whose culture is quite different from that of the United States. As found by Hofstede (1980, 2001), Venezuelan culture is intensely more collectivist, with far greater emphasis on maintaining group ties as promoting individual self-expression and autonomy. Compared to United States culture, Venezuelan culture also ranks higher on both power distance and masculinity, and lower on uncertainty avoidance. That is, Venezuelans generally give greater deference to masculinity and vertical decision-making, with correspondingly greater desire for ambiguity reduction, in comparison to Americans. Nevertheless, the HVVS proved to be internally reliable with a sample of Venezuelan employees enrolled in graduate business school and also conceptually meaningful in all its dimensions. In this regard, the HVVS appears to be applicable in measuring employee engagement in Venezuela, and by extrapolation, in other South American countries. These findings are supportive of recent Venezuelan investigators (Morillo, 2006; Ramirez, 2006; Ramirez & D'Aubeterre, 2007) who have sought to apply Maslow's motivational system to organizational development in their country. Clearly, there is empirical support for Maslow's contention (1965, 1970a, 1970b, 1996) that his motivational model is universal.

In concrete terms, the findings strengthen the importance of the HVVS as a tool for HR professionals globally in assessing and increasing employee engagement. Both in coaching individuals toward more successful careers and in raising organizational morale, this instrument offers a practical, easy-to-administer instrument across cultures and continents. In this regard, Maslow's conceptual model with its workplace levels of safety, belongingness, esteem and respect, and self-actualization, appears both measurable and applicable for individual and organizational benefit.

Certainly, this study had several limitations. The sample was small in size and wholly comprised of college-graduates who were pursuing graduate business

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degrees. It is, therefore, unclear how generalizable their relatively high work-engagement is compared to that of the majority of Venezuelans, lagging far behind in educational and vocational achievement: This is a country where the average adult's scholastic attainment is only mid-6th grade (UNESCO, 2005). It is also possible that the sample tended to be more ambitious and work-involved than Venezuelan college graduates who are not seeking an advanced degree. Though current research (Bond et. al, 2004) portrays Venezuela's culture as relatively typical for South America, little data exists specifically concerning workplace attitudes and expectations compared to those of its regional neighbors.

Several fruitful directions emerge for future research. It would be useful to assess the HVVS with a larger, more heterogeneous Venezuelan sample, encompassing vocations other than business – such as education and health care. Additional studies in other South American countries would likewise be constructive. At the present time, it seems reasonable to conclude that among well-educated, career-oriented Venezuelans, Maslow's model of employee engagement and the HVVS, which derives from it, are indeed psychologically and culturally relevant.

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At the present time, it seems reasonable to conclude that among well-educated, career-oriented Venezuelans, Maslow's model of employee engagement and the HVVS, which derives from it, are indeed psychologically and culturally relevant.

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