



# Enhancing Employee Engagement: A Validation Study In Italy

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## Rationale

In recent years, human resources (HR) and other professionals have shown increasing 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 lifelong 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 Hoffman Vocational Values Scale (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 recently been found useful in an international validation study in Venezuela (Hoffman, Simon & Ortiz, 2008). At the individual level, the HVVS has proven beneficial in helping clients to 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 aided 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 Italy — a country of approximately 59.1 million persons, 23.2 million of whom are in the active workforce. Approximately 66 percent of Italian workers are employed in services, 30 percent in industry, and 4 percent in agriculture; 60.6 percent of Italian workers possess education beyond the secondary level; 17.4 percent aged 25 to 34 have tertiary education, a higher percentage than those in older age brackets. A relevant problem is the high drop-out rate of 55 percent for Italians who enroll in any form of tertiary education.

The country’s broader demographics are rather singular: one in five Italians is age 65 or older, the highest proportion in the world. With an average age of 42.5 years, Italy ranks behind Japan and Germany as the third oldest country. Fertility has fallen to 1.3 children per woman, well below the replacement level of 2.1, and ranking among the lowest of all countries. The average Italian woman has her first child at the age of 31, and approximately a third of Italians aged 30-34 are still living with their parents. On average in Italy, men retire at age 61 and women at age 59. Italy spends more of its national income on pensions (11.3 percent of GDP (Gross Domestic Product)) than any other country in the 30-member Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Psychological research with Italians suggests a high individualist orientation (Hofstede, 1980). In internationally ranking 53 cultures along four value-based dimensions — Individualism-Collectivism, Power Distance, Uncertainty-Avoidance, and Masculinity-Femininity, Hofstede found that Italy was high on Individualism, relatively high on Power Distance (favoring hierarchies in organizations and insti-

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tutions), and high on both Uncertainty-Avoidance (favoring formal rules and unambiguous situations), and Masculinity (favoring traditional gender roles). 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 Italy to be lower on societal cynicism (related to a suspicion of the social system) than most European nations.

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 & Diaz-Guerrero, 1960), he applied his motivational model to explain the troubling growth of juvenile delinquency in both the United States and Mexico.

To date, few studies have examined employee engagement in Italy. Focusing on mental health professionals in a variety of settings, Gigantesco, Picardi, Chiaia, Balbi & Morosini (2003) found that most participants were not completely satisfied with their job, and many were not even moderately satisfied. The sample, comprising mainly nurses, psychiatrists, and social workers, showed least satisfaction with salary, career prospects, and circulation of professional information within their organization.

Sousa-Poza & Sousa-Poza (2000) analyzed data among workers in 21 countries in one of the first cross-national studies undertaken of job satisfaction. The total sample size internationally of full-time and part-time workers was approximately 15,000. When Italians were asked on a five-point Likert scale, "How satisfied are you in your main job?" only 15.5 percent indicated that they were "completely satisfied," though 35.4 percent indicated that they were either "completely satisfied" or "very satisfied." A 2006 monograph issued by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions reported that 17.5 percent of Italian workers were "very satisfied" with their working conditions. This percentage is quite similar to the 15.5 percent reported by Sousa-Poza & Sousa-Poza (2000).

Ghinetti (2007) reported on the 1995 wave of the Survey of Household Income and Wealth conducted in Italy with a sample size of approximately 2,500 workers. Nearly 40 percent were public employees and about 12 percent were college graduates. Overall job satisfaction was only moderate (mean=2.9 on a zero- to five-point Likert scale), though somewhat higher for public sector (mean=3.2) than private sector workers (mean=2.8). Especially relevant from the perspective of employee engagement, both categories of employees reported low job interest (mean=2.6). As reported by Eurofound (2009), Italy's National Institute for Occupational Safety and Prevention (Istituto Superiore per la Prevenzione e la Sicurezza del Lavoro, ISPESL) conducted a survey in 2008 of 2,100 financial service employees. While 79.1 percent were satisfied with working time and 69.4 percent were satisfied with their salary, only 31.1 percent were satisfied with the creativity of their work, and 36 percent reported it as monotonous, the same percentage who reported it as not stimulating.

In the only published study relating specific motivations to job satisfaction in Italy, Borzaga & Tortia (2006) utilized a data set of 2,066 Italian workers. The most satisfied were those with motivation that was either intrinsic (defined as seeking work that was self-fulfilling and contributing to society) or relational, that is, seeking group belongingness. In contrast, the least satisfied workers were those with extrinsic motivation – driven mainly by such factors as the desire to earn as much money as possible, gain financial security, support their family, or increase their social status. Such findings, of course, are consistent with Maslow's emphasis on intrinsic motivation as the foundation for self-actualization in the workplace.

An indirect but nonetheless vital indicator of low employee engagement in Italy may be its "brain drain" – an issue of increasing economic and governmental concern in that country. Italy ranks among the top European countries to suffer from an exodus of scientists and other university-educated professionals. In an influential study entitled "How large is the brain drain from Italy?" Becker, Ichino & Peri (2003) analyzed expatriation from Italy to other European countries. Describing the data as "bleak," they reported that "During the 1990s, Italy lost human capital at a growing rate through its emigration flow. In particular, it lost an

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increasing share of its college graduates... a loss that is widespread and growing across all age groups and across regions of origin (North and South)... [This] emigration seems to characterize in particular the people who studied in the best Italian universities and in highly productive fields such as economics, finance, and engineering." (p.19). Subsequently, Vox (2008) analyzed expatriation to the USA in 1990 and 2000 among six European countries including Italy. He concluded that, "The proportion of Europeans who "matter" [economically] and who are in the U.S. could be as high as 50 percent; that is huge and could in principle have dramatic consequences for Europe's growth potential." (p.5).

Two published studies (Landau, 1998; Thomas, 2004) have applied Maslow's perspective as a referent in Italy for analyzing employee engagement, motivation, and expectations. In a case study of short-lived change management in the Italian public sector, Landau described a gloomy picture in which "career advancement depends almost exclusively on seniority" (p.235) and work tends to be routine, repetitive, and uncreative. Noting that employees characteristically relied upon manipulation in order to gratify their legitimate need for self-esteem, she recommended that Italian public sector organizations establish a new position: that of "organizational therapist" to help support the change process; greater recognition and appreciation of individual employees would thereby "help people to blossom." (p.241). In a more optimistic vein, Thomas (2004) examined the features of social cooperatives (SCs) in Italy today – that is, voluntary organizations that provide basic social welfare services and help integrate the disadvantaged into mainstream society. Noting their growing success in Italy, Thomas suggested that, from Maslow's hierarchy-of-needs perspective, SC employees "are noticeably stimulated to exercise greater drive [because they] do not look for economic gain as much as the need for achievement, precisely because they perform an activity for the collective benefit." (p.256)

Such humanitarian effort is highly consistent with what Maslow called the self-actualizing human being – and perhaps equally important today – with his vision of the self-actualizing society in which altruism is valued and rewarded. 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 employee engagement in the Italian workplace.

### **Italian Study**

#### *The Hoffman Vocational Values Scale (HVVS)*

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 2008, the HVVS was translated into Italian by the second author and then independently back-translated into English by a university professor teaching English in Italy in order to assure full comparability for Italians. The second author then distributed the HVVS to 117 persons in a convenience sample, and 106 were completed for a participation rate of 90.6 percent. The majority of participants responded via paper while some did so by e-mail.

#### *Sample Characteristics*

The sample comprised 106 persons (53 males, 53 females), 100 of who were employed in northern Italy and six of whom were employed in its southern region. 82 were employed in the private sector (77.4%) and 24 (22.6%) were employed in the public sector. For their terminal degree, 56 employees (52.8%) possessed a high-school degree, 41 (38.7%) had a four-year university degree, and nine (8.5%) had a master's degree. The mean seniority in their current position was 11.9 years, with a range of less than a year to 38 years; 33 percent had been in the post for 15 or more years. Participants held a wide range of jobs including administrative assistant, project manager, factory supervisor, bank clerk, actuary, personnel trainer and teacher.

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### Note on Statistical Tests Performed

As a measure of internal consistency, the Cronbach alpha was a robust +.89, a highly satisfactory reliability indicator. Statistical tests were also performed to assess whether job satisfaction differed significantly according to seniority, gender or job sector (that is, public versus private). Two-tailed t-tests and ANOVAS revealed significantly higher employee engagement ( $p < .05$ ) among workers with six or more years of seniority in their current position compared to those with less than six years of seniority. No gender or sector difference in employee engagement was obtained.

## Results

### *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 relatively important for their self-actualization. The mean score for this dimension was 3.85 on a one to five scale, moderately high as a source of fulfillment and happiness. It should be noted, though, that a sizable minority (15.0%) rated having a meaningful vocation as “unimportant” or “very unimportant” for their self-actualization in life.

#### 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 2.72, which is low, and much lower than the score for the first dimension. 30.8 percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that they had found their avocation; 28.0 percent were neutral or unsure with regard to it. In comparing scores between the first and second dimensions, a relatively small minority of respondents (11.5%) viewed work as vital for their self-actualization in life but had not found their avocation.

### Job Dimensions:

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

The mean score was 2.90, which is relatively low. Only 6.8 percent were highly satisfied with their current job in terms of self-fulfillment and fully 12.5 percent (one-eighth) were highly unsatisfied. 80.7 percent were in the three middle categories, ranging from slightly dissatisfied to slightly satisfied.

#### 4) *Whether Current Job Provides Physical Safety:*

The mean score was 3.49, which is moderate. 53.3 percent of participants felt personally safe either “often” or “very often” on the job. This is a positive indication. But 15.0 percent of participants felt personally safe “rarely” or “never.” Statistical analysis indicated that gender was not a significant factor in affecting one's sense of physical safety.

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- 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 3.37, which is likewise moderate. Only 8.9 percent reported that they "very often" felt a sense of belongingness and pleasant sociability in their current job. Moreover, 16.8 percent of participants reported "rarely" or "never" feeling conviviality at work – suggesting that isolation and lack of sociability are far from uncommon in the Italian workplace.
- 6) *Whether Current Job Provides Co-Workers to Respect and Admire:*  
The mean score was 3.27, which is again moderate. Only 16.4 percent "very often" felt respect and admiration regarding co-workers in their organization. Moreover, 18.7 percent of participants "never" felt this attitude. In Maslow's approach, these statistics are a disheartening finding, for he contended that to self-actualize – that is, achieve their full potential – employees have a psychological need to experience respect and admiration for their co-workers.
- 7) *Whether Respondent Feels Respected and Appreciated in Current Job:*  
The mean score was 3.30, which is once more moderate. Only 10.7 percent felt respected and appreciated "very often" at work. In addition, a relatively high minority (18.7%) reported that they "rarely" or "never" felt respected and appreciated at work. An additional 26.2 percent reported that they felt this way only "sometimes" on the job. These statistics indicate that participants in this sample do not feel strongly respected and appreciated, and that there is room for major improvement.
- 8) *Whether Respondent has a Teacher and a Hero in Current Job:*  
The mean score was 2.75, which is low. Indeed, only 5.6 percent "very often" felt that they had a personal hero in their organization, and only 9.3 percent reported that they "very often" had a personal teacher. Unlike their USA and Venezuelan counterparts, Italians were more likely to have a hero than a great teacher in their organization. Specifically, 15.9 percent reported that they "never" had a personal hero at work, but fully 21.5 percent reported they "never" had a personal teacher. This finding suggests that the position of skill expert or master is absent in many Italian organizations – and in their employees' perceptions is more lacking than that of admired leader.
- 9) *Whether Respondent Feels Creatively Challenged in Current Job:*  
The mean score was 2.88, which is somewhat low. Wide variability was evidenced. Only 7.4 percent reported that they "very often" felt challenged and motivated creatively at work but only 14.6 percent reported that they "never" felt this way. 78 percent of participants were in the middle categories: they reported feeling a sense of creative enjoyment and pleasure occasionally-to-often. For them, creative challenge is not utterly lacking in their jobs, nor is it a daily occurrence.
- 10) *Whether Respondent Feels Bored and Stifled in Current Job:*  
The mean score was 2.70, which is moderately low, and therefore a positive finding. However, there was considerable variability. Fully 26.2 percent reported that they felt bored and stifled "often" or "very often" at work – a discouraging finding. However, 50.9 percent reported that they "never" or "rarely" felt bored and stifled at work. The remaining 22.9 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 2.78, which is low. The mean was 2.59 concerning peak-experiences and 2.97 for inspirational moments. There was definite variability on this dimension. On the positive side, 27.6 percent of respondents reported inspiration and peak-experiences either "often" or "very often" in their current job. This figure is slightly more than one-fourth. In addition, only 10.7 percent reported that they "never" felt this way. But a sizable majority (61.7%) reported inspiration and peak-experiences only "rarely" or "sometimes" at their current job. Interestingly, when describing their previous job, 33.7 percent of respondents reported having a peak-experience either "often" or "very often" compared to only 17.0 percent of respondents when describing

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their current job. So clearly, the data show a diminishment in this crucial feature of self-actualization involving current as compared to past employment.

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

The mean score was 2.28, which is the lowest of all dimensions. For those in the Western world, Maslow emphasized, it is nearly impossible to actualize one's workplace potential in the absence of this attitude. In this sample, the results were quite negative: only 19.6 percent of respondents reported that they "often" or "very often" felt that their work was contributing toward world betterment, and 61.7 percent said that they "rarely" or "never" felt this way. 18.7 percent reported that they "sometimes" felt this way. On the positive side, a small minority (6.5%) 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, 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 Hoffman Vocational Values Scale (HVVS) was assessed for validity in Italy, a country whose culture is quite different from that of the United States. As found by Hofstede (1980, 2001), Italian culture is more collectivist, with greater emphasis on maintaining group ties than on promoting individual self-expression and autonomy. Compared to United States culture, Italian culture also ranks higher on power distance, masculinity and uncertainty-avoidance. That is, Italians 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 wide-ranging vocational sample of Italian employees from private and public sectors, and from northern and southern regions. In this regard, the HVVS appears to be applicable in measuring employee engagement in Italy. These findings are supportive of recent investigators (Landau, 1998; Thomas, 2004) who have sought to apply Maslow's approach to organizational and employee development in Italy. Clearly, there is empirical support for Maslow's contention (1965, 1970a, 1970b, 1996) that his motivational model is universal.

Our specific findings are consistent with previous studies on job satisfaction in Italy (Ghinetti, 2007; Gigantesco et. al., 2003; Sousa-Poza & Sousa-Poza, 2000) indicating significant dissatisfaction with job interest, creativity and variety. That is, while our participants valued work as a potential source of personal meaning and fulfillment in life, they tended to describe their own jobs as uncreative, harboring infrequent peak-experiences, lacking both inspiring teachers and peer camaraderie, and providing a meager sense of contributing to world betterment. Our finding that employee engagement was significantly higher among those with six or more years of seniority in their current position compared to their junior counterparts is consistent with previous studies in Italy associating overall job satisfaction with perceived job security (Ghinetti, 2007) and age (Gigantesco et. al., 2003).

However, an additional explanation can be offered by our specific finding that those with greater seniority tended to report a greater sense of group belongingness – an important mid-level psychological need below those of esteem and re-

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spect on Maslow's hierarchy. Perhaps those with greater seniority perceived that their job was "for life," whereas the new generation experienced greater uncertainty about tenure, and hence, less belongingness. Relatedly, Borzaga & Tortia (2007) found that among Italian workers, relational motivation ranked with intrinsic motivation as an important personal associate of job satisfaction. To what extent this linkage reflects specific features of Italian culture, which ranks relatively high internationally on Hofstede's (1980, 2001) individualism dimension is yet undetermined.

In concrete terms, our 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. It utilized a convenience sample that was small in number and comprised only employees who had completed secondary education. It is, therefore, unclear how generalizable our findings are regarding employee engagement throughout Italy. Though current research (Bond et. al, 2004) portrays Italy's culture as relatively typical for Western Europe, little data exist specifically concerning workplace attitudes, motivations, 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 Italian sample, as well as those in specific vocations. Additional studies in other Western European countries would likewise be constructive. At the present time, it seems reasonable to conclude that among Italian employees with secondary or higher education, Maslow's model of employee engagement and the HVVS which derives from it are indeed psychologically and culturally relevant.

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