

## *High performance work systems and the instrumental employee*

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### **Abstract**

*Employee instrumentalism, which has been defined as the belief that work is primarily a means to non-work ends rather than a central life interest, was investigated as a potential negative antithesis to employee job involvement, organisational commitment, trust in managers, and job satisfaction. Drawing on data from a representative national population survey, instrumentalism was found to be negatively related to commitment and involvement, but independent of the degree to which employees trust their managers and find satisfaction in their jobs. Furthermore, instrumentalism was found to be independent of managerial practices encompassed under the high-performance work systems (HPWS) rubric, suggesting it to be a stable socialised state that employees bring to their jobs rather than a response to the work environment. Practical implications are discussed.*

**Key Words:** Organisational commitment, involvement, instrumentalism, high-performance work systems

This study investigates whether the adoption of an instrumental orientation to work by employees covaries with employee experiences of managerial practices associated with high-performance work systems. Instrumentalism refers to the belief that work, as paid employment, is primarily a means to nonwork ends rather than a central life interest. As a concept, it has a long history in organisational theory in that it is seen as an indicator of a person's alienation from work. Alienation connotes a breakdown of interpersonal relationships and social integration in the employment relationship, resulting in a reduced sense of belonging and an inability to identify with or invest the self in an organisation or its goals; a state of self-estrangement characterised by a depersonalised detachment from work rather than involvement with it (Blauner, 1964; Cummings & Manring, 1977; Lincoln & Kalleberg, 1990). It is this combination of self-estrangement and social isolation that is theorised to result in employees seeing work as an instrumental means to an end (Grint, 1991).

Interest in worker alienation and its associated states has declined as a subject of research interest, at least outside the context of work sociology and labour process theory (Hornung, 2010). Yet considerable practitioner and scholarly attention is being paid to how we might engage employees to make stronger cognitive, emotional and behavioural investments in their work (e.g., Harter, Schmidt & Hayes 2010; Kahn 1990, 1992; Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma & Bakker 2002). And while alienation seems contraindicative to employee engagement, the potential for instrumental beliefs to serve as a negative antithesis to such

interests has yet to be investigated. Furthermore, the malleability of such beliefs to people management practices aimed at enhancing engagement, variously referred to as high-performance or high-involvement or high-commitment work systems (Boxall & Macky, 2009), has also yet to be studied. These issues form the focus of this study.

The paper is conventionally structured. First is a brief review of the relevant literature aiming to place employee instrumentalism in the more recent thinking on employee engagement and the psychological contract. The likelihood of instrumentalism being oppositional to engagement notions of involvement and commitment are then explored before a brief discussion as to its potential malleability in response to managerial policies and practices. Findings from a representative survey of New Zealand employees are then presented to shed light on these issues.

## **Background Literature**

Research and theorizing into how and why people psychologically commit to their employing organisations and become involved in their jobs has been prolific for over 40 years (e.g., Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al., 2002; Riketta, 2002). Building and extending on this has been the more recent academic and practitioner interest around the concept of employee engagement. Debate continues as to whether engagement represents a new construct (e.g., Schaufeli et al. 2002; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010), or an aggregate of existing concepts, such as organisational commitment, job involvement, job satisfaction, motivation for discretionary effort, and trust (e.g., Harter, Schmidt & Hayes 2002; Newman, Joseph & Hulin 2010). There is however agreement that engagement represents a psychological state (Kahn, 1990, 1992) characterised by the individual employee's positive emotional and behavioural relationship with their organisation and the job they perform. Rather than a stable trait, there is also general agreement that engagement is malleable in response to aspects of the work environment and job design which serve to enhance it (see Halbesleben's (2010) meta-analysis). And finally, there some consensus and evidence that higher work engagement is beneficial to both the individual employee and their employing organisations (e.g., Gallup Group 2010; Albrecht 2010).

However, while there appears to be practitioner and academic agreement regarding an increasingly normative account of the engaged employee, there is little clarity regarding what the opposite of engagement might be. One approach has been to simply conceptualise engagement as a linear continuum where disengagement is the polar opposite of engagement; for example, the 'actively disengaged-not engaged-engaged' continuum used by Gallup (Gallup Group 2010; Harter et al. 2002). Another approach posits that job burnout represents the negative antithesis of engagement (e.g., Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter 2001; Maslach & Leiter 2008); thus incorporating notions of emotional exhaustion and fatigue, as well as cynicism and depersonalisation, being symptomatic of a psychological distancing from and indifference towards one's work (Schaufeli et al. 2002).

It is this loss of involvement and depersonalisation that serves as the point of departure for this study. As noted earlier, depersonalisation and detachment have long been identified as key aspects of employee alienation from work (e.g., Blauner 1964), and alienation is also associated with the adoption of an instrumental work orientation. Where the involved, engaged employee sees their work as intrinsically rewarding and an end in itself, instrumentalism is a calculative approach to the employment relationship where "the primary meaning of work is as a means to an end, or ends, external to the work situation; that is, work is regarded as a means of acquiring the income necessary to support a valued way of life of

which work itself is not an integral part” (Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Bechhofer and Platt, 1968: 38-39). In these terms, instrumentalism maps closely to the more recent discourse on the psychological contract at work (Janssens, Sels & Van den Brande 2003; Robinson, Kraatz & Rousseau 1994; Rousseau 1995). Rather than emphasise the socio-emotional relational aspects of the psychological contract, employees with an instrumental orientation focus more on the economic transactional nature of employment. To quote Inkson, Heising and Rousseau (2001: 261), those who adopt a transactional psychological contract are “... characterised by temporariness, calculative involvement, and an emphasis on monetary compensation for narrow and well-specified worker contributions”; in short a ‘survivalist’ orientation to work (Parry 2003) which for the instrumentalist, “...is not for them a source of emotionally significant experiences or social relationships; it is not a source of self-realisation.” (Goldthorpe, et al. 1968: 38-39).

Following the above, it is hypothesized that: *a) employees with higher levels of reported instrumental beliefs will also report lower affective (emotional) commitment to their employing organisations (H1); and b) also report lower psychological involvement with their jobs (H2).*

The second point of departure for this paper is that while there is agreement that engagement is malleable and therefore influenced by management practices that either build or weaken the relationship people have with their work (Albrecht, 2010), the variability of instrumentalism is less certain. Certainly early theorizing concerning alienation encompassed the notion that it was a response to how people were managed and the conditions under which work was offered. More recently, social exchange theory would suggest that employees who experience managerial practices indicating that their organisation valued them, cared for their well-being and was committed to them would reciprocate with loyalty and commitment (e.g., Eisenberger et al., 1986; Whitener et al., 1998). Central to such exchanges is the level of trust that employees have in those who manage them (e.g., Robinson 1996). In other words, engagement-focused working environments characterised by trusting relationships, and employee experiences of involvement and commitment-related work practices, should lead employees to form socio-emotional relational psychological contracts rather than instrumental transactional ones (e.g., Rousseau 1995; Rousseau and Tijoriwala 1998)

On this basis, it is hypothesised that: *employee experience of managerial practices aimed at building employee involvement in and commitment to their work would predict lower levels of instrumental beliefs (H3).* While it is recognised that there are variants among high-involvement and high-commitment practices (Macky & Boxall, 2007; Boxall & Macky 2009), for convenience they have been subsumed under the rubric of high-performance work systems (HPWS) in this study.

Further to the above, and given the role of trust in building employee involvement and commitment, it is also hypothesised that: *employees reporting higher levels of trust in their managers would also report lower levels of instrumental beliefs (H4).*

It should however be noted that Grint (1991) has discussed instrumentalism as an employee orientation to work that is largely independent of the working environment and job performed by a worker. In these terms, employee instrumental beliefs influences, but is not influenced by, what happens at work (see also Goldthorpe et al., 1968). Instead, similar to the secular notion of work involvement (e.g. Kanungo 1982), prior socialization forces would influence how instrumentalist employees were towards the employment relationship, rather than any particular experiences arising from that relationship. On this line of reasoning,

instrumentalism should be independent of employee experiences of work and therefore managerial practices such as those encompassed within high-performance work systems that might be otherwise expected to influence it. Furthermore, if instrumentalism is a stable socialized orientation then we would also expect it to be independent of the degree of trust employees have towards their managers, and indeed the satisfactions they obtain from their job. To this end, job satisfaction was included in this study as an exploratory variable in predicting the degree of employee instrumental beliefs about work

## Method

The research population comprised all registered urban electors in New Zealand who were of working age, and neither self-employed, members of the clergy, in the armed forces, nor a beneficiary of the state. From this population, a sample of 2,000 was randomly selected and sent questionnaires by post, together with reply paid return addressed envelope, to the address listed on the electoral roll. A single reminder, together with a replacement questionnaire, was sent to non-respondents after three weeks. After excluding undeliverable and inappropriate returns, the survey sample was reduced to 1,880 individuals. Of these, a total of 424 questionnaires were returned with varying degrees of completion, generating an overall response rate of 22.6%. In the analyses below, the actual N used is less than this due to missing responses to some questions.

Exactly 50% of the respondents were female and the mean age at their last birthday was 42.06 years ( $SD = 11.78$ ), with a range from 18 to 69 years. Contrasting the respondent demographics with the population census values shows no significant differences for gender ( $\chi^2 (1) = 1.02, p = 0.31$ ), or year in which they were born ( $\chi^2 (9) = 3.98, p = 0.91$ ). The respondents had worked for their current employer for a median of 4.6 years (range = 0.08 - 45 years). The median size of their organisations was 100 (range = 2 - 12,000 employees). Most were permanent employees, employed either full-time (68.8%), or part-time (14.8%). The remainder were employed on temporary or fixed-term contracts, either full-time (13.6%) or part-time (2.9%). Initial regression analyses found that these variables collectively predicted less than 1% of the variance in instrumentalism and the regression model was not statistically significant ( $F(6,374) = 0.54, p = .775$ ). They have therefore been excluded from further analyses as potential control variables.

The research design was cross-sectional with data obtained by self-completion postal questionnaires on all variables. Questionnaire design for postal surveys followed the well established principles outlined by Dillman (1978). Unless otherwise stated, responses to all items were obtained on a seven-point Likert response scale ranging from 1: *Strongly Disagree* to 7: *Strongly Agree*. Scale scores for the multi-item variables of instrumentalism, affective commitment, job involvement, job satisfaction and trust in management were obtained by calculating the mean of the combined responses to all items for that variable. Higher scores are indicative of higher instrumentalism, involvement, commitment, trust, and so on.

**Instrumentalism** was measured using a four item scale developed by Shepard (1972) (coefficient alpha = .71). Items are shown in Table 1 below. **Job involvement** first emerged as a measurable construct with the work of Lodahl and Kejner (1965) and taps the degree of psychological investment an employee has with their job. This study used the six-item version of the scale (coefficient alpha = .74). Example items include “*I live, eat and breathe my job*,” “*I am really a perfectionist about my job*,” and “*The major satisfaction in my life comes from my job*.” **Affective commitment** was measured using the nine-item scale of the

Organisational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ; Mowday, Steers and Porter 1979) with those who score higher on this measure being more likely to identify with the values and goals of their organisation, and express pride in being a member of it (coefficient alpha = .91). **Trust-in-management** was measured using the six item instrument developed by Cook and Wall (1980; coefficient alpha = .90), with example items including “*Management where I work is sincere in its attempts to meet the workers point of view*”, “*Management can be trusted to make sensible decisions for the organisations future*”, and “*Our management would be quite prepared to gain advantage by deceiving the workers*” (reverse scored). **Job satisfaction** was measured using a 15-item scale originally developed by Warr, Cook and Wall (1979; coefficient alpha = .92), which contains both extrinsic and intrinsic job facets (response scale: 1: *very dissatisfied* to 7: *very satisfied*).

To test the potential malleability of employee instrumentalism to managerial actions, the respondents’ experiences of 16 human resource management practices previously associated with high-performance work systems were measured (Gallup Group 2010; Macky & Boxall 2007). Four items with Yes (1), No (0) responses asked “*Does your employer have a profit sharing or share ownership scheme that you are able to participate in?*” (21.5% Yes), “*Have you received additional pay or a pay rise in the past year as a result of your job performance or work in a team?*” (58.1% Yes), “*Has your job performance been formally appraised by your manager or supervisor within the past 12 months?*” (57.4% Yes), and “*Have you taken part in an employee attitude survey carried out by your employer in the past two years?*” (32.5% Yes). The remaining 12 items were measured on a 7 point Likert-type response scale (1: *Strongly Disagree* to 7: *Strongly Agree*), which included:

- *My employer provides me with sufficient opportunities for training and development*  
(Mean = 4.33, StdDev = 1.90, Slightly-StronglyAgree = 53.8%)
- *Management keeps me well informed about the firm and how well it is doing*  
(Mean = 4.52, StdDev = 1.88, Slightly-StronglyAgree = 62.0%)
- *My employer has a formal policy of avoiding compulsory redundancies*  
(Mean = 3.89, StdDev = 1.54, Slightly-StronglyAgree = 22.5%)
- *I have a job description that accurately describes the work I do*  
(Mean = 4.40, StdDev = 1.93, Slightly-StronglyAgree = 56.9%)
- *There are few status differences in my organisation between managers and the rest of the employees. We are all on the same level*  
(Mean = 3.36, StdDev = 1.91, Slightly-StronglyAgree = 35.6%)
- *I have good opportunities to advance my career by getting promoted*  
(Mean = 3.48, StdDev = 1.86, Slightly-StronglyAgree = 32.8%)
- *The promotion process used here is fair*  
(Mean = 3.98, StdDev = 1.77, Slightly-StronglyAgree = 39.0%)
- *When jobs become vacant, management normally tries to fill them with people from inside the organisation rather than by recruiting from outside*  
(Mean = 4.66, StdDev = 1.83, Slightly-StronglyAgree = 57.4%)
- *Employees have the opportunity to be involved in the decision-making on things that matter*  
(Mean = 4.02, StdDev = 1.79, Slightly-StronglyAgree = 45.7%)
- *I receive regular and constructive feedback on how well I do my job*  
(Mean = 4.01, StdDev = 1.88, Slightly-StronglyAgree = 51.4%)
- *Appraisals of my performance are fair and accurate*  
(Mean = 4.65, StdDev = 1.63, Slightly-StronglyAgree = 57.2%)

- *My work requires me to work closely with other members of a team to achieve a common goal or results target*  
(Mean = 5.64, StdDev = 1.43, Slightly-Strongly Agree = 84.9%)

Collectively, these items tap important dimensions of job clarity, recognition and rewards for performance, opportunities for growth and development, managerial communication, promotion from within, meaningful participation, and employment security. Such managerial practices represent a willingness by employers to invest in the social and human capital of a firm, an investment that should be reciprocated by employees in their becoming more involved and committed, and therefore less instrumental, in their approach to the employment relationship.

Results were analysed using IBM SPSS V19. Factor analysis, with varimax rotation, found the items to load at an acceptable weight and typically most strongly on the expected factors. Furthermore, the initial unrotated solution identified the first factor to account for a total of 34.4% of the variance, suggesting common method variance error was not a significant issue in this study. In part, this may have been due to an attempt to reduce response acquiescence, one of the more common sources of such error, by the inclusion of multiple negatively worded items scattered throughout the questionnaire.

## Results & Discussion

The descriptive statistics for the four items used to measure employee instrumentalism are shown in Table 1. The pattern of responses approximates a normal distribution for each item, with a slight skew towards the more instrumentalist end of the response scales. Factor analysis shows all items to load unidimensionally together into a standalone factor with loadings at .4 or better.

Table 1: Employee instrumentalism descriptive statistics

Item	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Slightly Disagree %	Neither %	Slightly Agree %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %	Mean (SD)
<i>I can't wait until the day I retire so I can do the things that are important to me</i>	7.2	14.6	9.5	19.3	25.1	11.9	12.4	4.26 (1.76)
<i>Money is the most rewarding reason for having a job</i>	5.7	18.1	14.3	9.3	28.2	13.6	10.7	4.20 (1.77)
<i>Working is a necessary evil to provide the things I want for myself and my family</i>	4.1	14.1	10.0	8.6	22.4	24.6	16.2	4.70 (1.79)
<i>My job is just something I have to do to earn a living - most of my real interests in life are centered outside my job</i>	3.6	14.3	14.3	13.1	20.5	19.1	15.0	4.50 (1.77)

Note: SD = standard deviation; N=419

The relationships between the scale variables are shown in Table 2 together with their summary descriptive statistics. As predicted in hypotheses 1 and 2, respondents reporting stronger agreement with instrumentalist statements about work are also more likely to report lower involvement in their jobs and lower emotional commitment to their employing organisations. However, while these findings are statistically robust it should be noted that the strength of the associations are modest to weak. In other words, while the trend is there and in the direction hypothesized, it is also clear from examining the scatterplots that there were respondents who reported higher instrumentalism at the same time as higher commitment and/or higher involvement (39.8% and 22.2% respectively using a scale midpoint split). There were also those who reported lower instrumentalism together with lower commitment (7.7%) and/or lower involvement (17.4%).

Table 2 also shows weak but statistically negative associations between instrumental beliefs and both trust and satisfaction, such that those with stronger instrumentalism are also more likely to report lower trust in their managers, lending some support to hypothesis 4, and lower dissatisfaction with their job. Also observable in Table 2 is a strong and positive pattern of associations between commitment, trust in management and job satisfaction, with employees being high on one variable also tending to be high on the others. While not the focus of the present study, nonetheless these findings are consistent with those reported elsewhere in the research literature (e.g., Whitener, 2001; Whitener et al. 1998). This lends some confidence that the findings reported here have wider generalisability beyond the study sample.

Table 2: Scale variable correlations and descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4
1 Instrumentalism	4.42 (1.29)	-			
2 Job Involvement	4.06 (1.02)	-.241***	-		
3 Affective Commitment	4.76 (1.33)	-.256***	.358***	-	
4 Trust in Management	4.74 (1.48)	-.141**	.105*	.685***	
5 Job satisfaction	5.07 (1.15)	-.175***	.200***	.738***	.754***

Notes: N=403 after deletion of missing values. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$  (1-tailed)

Hierarchical multiple regression was used test hypothesis 3 and provide a more robust test of the other three hypothesis, given the interrelationships between the predictor variables shown in Table 2. In the first regression model, only the scale variables of job involvement, affective commitment, trust in management and job satisfaction were entered. While statistically significant ( $F(4,398) = 9.97, p = .000$ ), collectively this model accounted for only 9% of the variance in instrumentalism ( $R^2 = .091$ ) and only affective commitment ( $\beta = -.206, t = -2.60, p = .010$ ) and job involvement ( $\beta = -.168; t = -3.22, p = .001$ ) were found to be statistically significant predictors. In the second model, the 16 high-performance work

practices were also entered. Collectively these explained only an additional 4% of the variance in employee instrumentalism ( $R^2 = .041$ ), and while the final model was statistically significant (see Table 3) it is clear that management practices aimed at increasing employee involvement, commitment and discretionary effort for performance do not have much impact on the degree to which employees report an instrumental orientation towards work.

Table 3: Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses for Employee Instrumentalism

Predictor Variable	<i>beta</i>	<i>t</i>
Affective Commitment	-.202	-2.50**
Job Involvement	-.179	-3.36***
Trust in Management	-.001	-0.01
Job Satisfaction	.019	0.20
Participate in profit sharing (0,1)	.068	1.29
Pay for performance (0,1)	-.005	-0.10
Formal performance appraisal (0,1)	.002	0.28
Employee attitude survey (0,1)	-.077	-1.39
Sufficient opportunities for training & development	-.125	-1.93*
Management keeps me well informed	-.042	-0.65
Policy avoiding compulsory redundancies	.054	1.04
Accurate job description	.120	2.19*
Few status differences in the organisation	-.031	-0.55
Good opportunities for career via promotion	.009	0.14
Promotion process is fair	-.031	-0.44
Internal recruitment policy	-.042	-0.78
Involvement in decision making	-.034	-0.52
Receive regular & constructive feedback on performance	.096	1.27
Appraisals of performance are fair & accurate	.052	0.74
Job requires teamwork	.025	0.49
	$R^2$	.132
	$F (20,402)$	2.90***

Notes: a) N=403 after deletion of missing values. b) \*\*\*  $p < .001$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*  $p \leq .05$

c) Tolerance and VIF collinearity statistics for all variables are within acceptable levels (Hair et al., 1995)



A number of observations can be drawn from Table 3. The first of these is that both job involvement and affective organisational commitment are significant but negative predictors of employee instrumentalism. These findings are consistent with the predictions stated in hypotheses 1 and 2. Employees who are more committed to their organisations and involved in their jobs are also more likely to be less instrumental in their orientations to work. However, while affective commitment is the strongest predictor in the final model, jointly commitment and involvement do not explain much of the variance in instrumentalism. This is consistent with the earlier interpretation that holding instrumental views does not automatically preclude being a committed employee or becoming involved in ones job.

Secondly the level of trust reported in management is independent of levels of instrumentalism. Hypothesis 4 is therefore rejected. To the extent that trust is both an input to and an outcome of the social exchange relationship that exists between managers and their subordinates, the presence or absence of trust in that exchange would not appear to have any influence on how materialist or transactional employees are in their beliefs and expectations about work.

Thirdly, it is clear that management practices associated with increasing employee engagement through commitment, involvement and motivating discretionary effort have little or no influence on employee instrumentalism. Only two practices were found to reach statistical significance, with having sufficient opportunities for training and development associated with lower instrumentalism, while having a job description accurately describing the work done was associated with tending to be more instrumental (see Table 3). Overall, however these findings do not lend support to hypothesis 3 and it is therefore rejected.

Among the management practices included in the analyses, it is also noteworthy that including employees in profit sharing or share options schemes does not seem to result in their being more instrumental in their approach to work. Nor does paying employees additional money as a result of their own or team's performance lead to them becoming more instrumental. In short, practices that might be argued to encourage the adoption of an extrinsically motivated transactional view of the employment relationship (e.g., Kohn, 1993) do not seem to do so.

## **Conclusions**

The findings reported in this study provide weak evidence that employee engagement and instrumentalism are polar opposed concepts. Instead, the evidence presented is more indicative of instrumentalism being a stable state which once developed, is rather immune to management practices designed to affect employee engagement by targeting commitment, involvement and motivation, and/or through building trusting relationships between managers and their subordinates.

And while cross-sectional studies such as this cannot determine causal direction, the findings do point to the possibility of instrumentalism as a stable psychological state being a negative antecedent to employees becoming emotionally committed to their organisations, and/or psychologically involved in their jobs. However, in practical terms the strength of the findings reported here would not warrant employers using the holding of instrumental beliefs as a staffing issue. The costs of implementing recruitment and selection procedures to exclude those holding instrumental beliefs about work, or removing those holding them from their jobs, would hardly seem warranted. It is also possible that employees who, for whatever

reason, become less committed to their organisations and involved in their jobs then respond by seeing work in more material ways; as a means to a more satisfying end rather than a satisfying end in itself.

For those organisations seeking to obtain the benefits of having an engaged workforce through implementing high-performance work systems, having employees with instrumental beliefs towards that work would seem unlikely to be major hindrance. Furthermore, directly attempting to change such beliefs via HPWS interventions would be an inefficient and ineffective use of resources. However, there is potential for such actions to increase involvement, and commitment in particular, with a subsequent reduction in instrumentalism levels among employees resulting from this.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings indicate that instrumentalism is not intrinsically the antithesis of engagement. These findings also suggest, to the extent that instrumental beliefs are representative of a transactional approach to the psychological contract, that holding a transactional contract does not preclude employees from also having socio-emotional expectations about should be exchanged in the employment relationship. It may also be timely to reappraise the sociological assumption that being instrumental towards work is symptomatic of being alienated from it. While instrumentalism may be a sufficient condition of alienation, it is not an axiomatic one.

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