

The Impact of Appreciative Inquiry on Employees' Work Engagement Explained through Basic Psychological Needs and Motivation

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Abstract

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is implemented worldwide as a successful method for organizational change. Questions, however, remain as to what turns AI into an effective method. This paper investigates the relation between the characteristics of an AI-approach and work engagement. In an AI-approach, employees are encouraged to share their best practices, to connect to each other in taking initiative and to co-create what they feel as the best thing for the organisation. Appreciation and connecting are the two important vectors in the AI-model. Work engagement grows in work climates where adequate job and personal resources are available. We believe these resources grow and become salient through an AI-approach. It is therefore conjectured that the implementation of AI furnishes the necessary job and personal resources to satisfy the basic psychological needs, and the intrinsic motivation, hereby creating an impact on work engagement. Based on the characteristics of an AI-approach, a Connecting and Appreciation at Work scale was developed to measure AI-behavior. Our conjectures were tested by means of a survey among 132 employees of Flanders and the Netherlands. Based on the responses, we found that a higher level of self-reported connecting and appreciation is related to an increased level of work engagement. Moreover, this relationship is fully explained by employees' intrinsic motivation and satisfaction of basic psychological needs. Therefore, it can be concluded that an AI-approach creates the adequate job and personal resources to satisfy the basic psychological needs and to enhance intrinsic motivation, hereby creating an impact on work engagement. More quantitative research on the effect of an AI-approach on employees can contribute to understand the mechanisms, underlying in AI and increasing its success in organizational development and change.

Introduction

The past decade was characterized by tremendous change in various domains. A worldwide economic crisis challenged organizations to shift policies in order to live up to today's uncertain environments (Dicken, 2003; Mohrman & Worley, 2009; Obstfeld & Rogoff, 2010; Pauli, 2010). Organizational uncertainties and changes have often impact on employees' psychological well-being, nurturing more uncertainty and more stress (Bordia, Hobman, Jones, Gallois, & Callan, 2004). Already developed in the late 1980s, AI offers a successful method to craft solutions meeting today's challenges (Faure, 2006; Fitzgerald, Murrell, & Newman, 2001). Inspired by the ideas of Positive Organisational Scholarship (POS) (Donalson & Koa, 2010) and grounded in Social Constructionism (Gergen, 2009), an AI-approach means moving away from a deficit approach, shifting to a mutual inquiry into shared potentials as the life-giving starting point for the new (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2005). Evaluations of the success of AI-implementations are mostly limited to anecdotal and particular stories, explained in rather abstract constructs (Bushe, 2012; Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Grant & Humphries, 2006; Messerschmidt, 2008; van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). In this paper, however, we attempt to evaluate AI by tapping into the behavior, feelings and experiences of individual employees when AI is implemented in their organization. More specifically, we explore what is changing in the underlying psychological states of employees when their organization deploys AI-strategies. An answer to this question could contribute to a broadened understanding of AI. Moreover, it will enable us to explain the success of AI and to investigate whether employees' well-being is increased if an organization implements an AI-approach.

Appreciative inquiry: connecting and appreciation towards flourishing organisations

A review of the literature shows that an AI-approach is implemented in very different ways and in a variety of settings (Fitzgerald et al., 2001). However, all those different AI-practices are designed according to one general accepted procedure, namely implementing the 4-D Cycle: (a) Discovery, (b) Dream, (c) Design and (d) Delivery/Destiny (Bushe, 2012). The starting point in this recurrent cycle of co-inquiry is the affirmative topic, worded as the 'unconditional positive question' (Barrett & Fry, 2005, p. 35), connecting the object of inquiry with the positive core of the organisation. Regardless of the basic principles, the theoretic considerations and the daily implementations, an AI-approach is characterized by calling upon the involvement and engagement of all stakeholders for a mutual inquiry during

the 4-D Cycle. This inquiry is directed towards the discovery, appreciation and connection of strengths, and is supposed to generate a positive energy to collaborate (Barrett & Fry, 2005). The DNA of an AI-behavior refers to a double helix of ‘the appreciation of the appreciable world’ and ‘connecting an ever-expanding universe of strengths’, resulting in ‘energizing’ as the activation of ‘an energy to elevate and extend, to broaden and build, and to establish the new eclipsing the old’ (Cooperrider & Godwin, 2011).

Connecting (AIcon) refers to active stepping into high quality relations characterized by mutual emotional engagement towards action and creativity (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Going through the 4-D Cycle, the AI-approach urges all stakeholder to connect with everybody and with the whole system, in order to get a ‘collaborative dialogue and choice to achieve consent’ (Bushe, 2012, p. 88). Connecting means ‘collaboration, inclusion and cooperation’ (Barrett & Fry, 2005, p. 27). As to the workplace, connecting could be described as: *building high quality relations with all the stakeholders through a mutual sharing of strengths and dreams to co-create a shared vision on the future organisation.*

Appreciation (AIapp) refers to the appreciation of a discovered world of possibilities around us (Bushe, 2010). Appreciation goes beyond the happy and shiny world, it refers to the appreciation for what gives life (Bushe, 2012). It is depicting a possible future out of the discovered strengths. Appreciation can be understood as *appreciative intelligence*: the art to get through to the possibilities arising in humans and in systems (Thatchenkary & Metzker in Bushe, 2007). It is ‘tracking’ in a way of paying attention to discover latent clues combined with a life-giving ‘fanning’ as inflaming a starting fire (Bushe, 2001). Summarized, appreciation in the workplace can be described as: *the inquiry and the openness for life-giving possibilities in persons and systems, tracking them and fanning them as a growing potential in the organization.*

Flourishing employees for flourishing organisations: work engagement

At the intersection of connecting and appreciation, an organizational energy to grow wells up as a spring for the generative capacity of AI. Through appreciation and connecting, AI-interventions enable successful cooperative actions towards a new future, characterized by a broaden and build capacity (Cooperrider & Godwin, 2011). A theoretical ground for the impact of the double helix of appreciation and connecting is found in POS (Dutton, Glynn, & Spreitzer, 2006), the study of “positive, flourishing and life-giving dynamics in organisations”

(Cameron & Casa in Roberts, 2006). Distinguished from the interest in flourishing organisations, as studied in POS, this research is rather interested in Positive Organizational Behavior (POB), particularly in the outcomes on individual level, such as work engagement. Work engagement is characterized by (a) a higher level of energy, as understood in *vigor*, (b) a feeling of significance, enthusiasm and challenge, as understood in *dedication*, and (c) a full engrossment and concentration in one's work, as understood in *absorption*. Important predictors of work engagement are job and personal resources, such as social support, performance feedback, opportunities to learn and to develop, as well as a feeling of autonomy (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008; Schaufeli, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002). We believe that connecting, understood as the alignment of shared strengths of co-workers, can possibly realize social feedback and learning opportunities. Furthermore, appreciation, or the inquiry into shared potentials, can enhance employees' positive self-evaluation, which has been identified as an important personal resource predicting work engagement (Bakker et al., 2008). These findings allow us to draw a first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Employees reporting more AI-practices report a higher level of work engagement.

Intrinsic motivation and needs fulfilment: basic for flourishing employees

Adequate job and personal resources are not only good predictors for work engagement, but, moreover, they are very important for employees' motivation too (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Motivation refers to aspects of activation and intention (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and is about what energizes and invigorates people (Meyer & Becker, 2004; Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte, & Lens, 2008). According to the theory of Self-Determination (SDT), motivation can vary from amotivation to intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is considered to be related to effective performance and psychological well-being. Intrinsically motivated employees act because of what they experience as interesting and as giving satisfaction by itself. In contrast, amotivation implies that a person is not motivated at all. Adequate job and personal resources (i.e., supportive interpersonal climates, positive performance feedback, provision of choice) are found to have an impact on intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008). If AI furnishes those adequate job and personal resources, hereby increasing work engagement, it can be supposed that the effect AI has on work engagement can in part be explained by employees' intrinsic motivation. This increased motivation, caused by the

energizing and the invigorating effect of AI, consequently enhances work engagement, as is summarized in the next hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The relation between AI-practices and work engagement, is mediated by intrinsic motivation.

According to the SDT, intrinsic motivation is assessed at moments when people strive toward optimal functioning and more well-being in a natural way (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte, Soenens, & Lens, 2009). Optimal functioning occurs when people experience the fulfilment of Basic Psychological Needs (BPN) (i.e., autonomy, competence and relatedness). SDT researchers consider the satisfaction of the BPN to be crucial for humans to actualize their potentials and to flourish (Van den Broeck et al., 2008, p. 279). When conditions lead to the satisfaction of the need for autonomy, competence and relatedness, people report more intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and more vitality (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Providing adequate job and personal resources, not only leads to the satisfaction of BPN fostering more intrinsic motivation, but also predicts an increased work engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

We hypothesize that AI creates an organizational climate which nurtures the BPN. First, the need for autonomy refers to 'self-governance' (Ryan & Deci, 2006), to an experience of a 'sense of choice' and 'psychological freedom' (Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte, Soenens, & Lens, 2010). In AI, the very beginning is to let go of control and to encourage people to take initiative (Bushe & Kassam, 2005), and so it can be understood as enhancing the fulfilment of the need for autonomy. Second, the need for competence can be considered as the experience of getting the desired outcomes (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000), as the feeling to be effective while interacting with the environment, through deploying one's own capabilities (Vlachopoulos & Michailidou, 2006). During the 4-D Cycle in an AI-process, people are urged to tap into their strengths and competences and to depict how these strengths and capacities can change their future world (Barrett, 1995; Cooperrider & Godwin, 2011). So, during an AI-process, the recurrent inquiry into and appreciation of strengths and possibilities might impact on the need for competence. Finally the need for relatedness refers to a feeling of being part of a group, or a sense of communion, of love and being cared for (Van den Broeck et al., 2010). As an AI-approach strives toward co-sharing of strengths, beliefs, values, vision and commitment, leading towards an interdependent community (Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004), AI can possibly create the conditions to satisfy the need for relatedness.

We believe that AI can furnish adequate job and personal resources, resulting in the satisfaction of the need for autonomy, competence and relatedness which will furthermore lead to the enhancement of employees' intrinsic motivation and of employees' work engagement. This conjecture is captured in the next set of hypotheses about the mediating role of BPN in the relationship between AI-practices and work engagement:

Hypothesis 3: The relation between AI-practices and work engagement is mediated by the satisfaction of the need for autonomy (3.1), the need for competence (3.2) and the need for relatedness (3.3).

Method

Participants and procedure

A survey was conducted among employees in Flanders and the Netherlands. Respondents were contacted through social media as well as through the Flemish AI Learning Network. Participants were invited to complete an online questionnaire. A total of 132 employees completed the questionnaire, though some of them failed to indicate important socio-demographic characteristics. The characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample

	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Gender</i>		130		
Men	36.2			
Women	63.8			
<i>Age</i>		130	41.0	10.54
<i>Weekly working hours</i>		99	34.9	8.10
<i>Tenure</i>		129	9.01	8.60
<i>Education</i>		129		
Secondary education	24.0			
College	44.2			
University	31.8			
<i>Function level</i>		123		
Non-managerial position	9.8			
Middle-level position	15.4			
Executive	74.8			

Measures

AI-behavior.

In order to measure the level of AI-behavior, we developed a new scale. This scale was based on the two vectors in the AI-model: (a) connecting and (b) appreciation (Cooperrider & Godwin, 2011). A list of possible items referring to these two characteristics of AI was discussed with AI-practitioners. After several brainstorming sessions, a set of items was pre-tested, and finally refined into the *Connecting and Appreciation in the Workplace scale* (CAWs) with seven items, four items reflecting the connecting dimension (e.g., I learn by listening to past success stories of my colleagues) and three items gauging the appreciation dimension (e.g., I enrich my work by building on successes). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree with each statement on a 7-point Likert-type rating scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. A higher score on the AIcon or AIapp referred to a higher level of connecting or appreciation. The construct validity was assessed with a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) analyzing the responses ($N = 132$) using AMOS. Model fit was evaluated using multiple criteria (Hu & Bentler, 1999): (1) the χ^2 statistic; (2) the comparative fit index (CFI), for which values of .95 and higher indicate very good fit; and (3) the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), for which values between .06 and .08 indicate a good fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1989). The results suggest an appreciable fit for the scale ($\chi^2(13) = 23.7, p = .03$; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .08). A reliability analysis showed that for AIcon Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$ and for AIapp $\alpha = .76$.

Work engagement.

Work engagement was measured with the Utrecht Work and Well-Being Survey (UWES-9) (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). This scale contains 9 items (e.g., My job inspires me). All items were to be answered on a 7-point Likert-type rating scale from 1 = *never* to 7 = *every day*, meaning that a higher score refers to more work engagement. In this survey, this scale showed Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$.

Basic Psychological Needs.

To measure the need for autonomy, competence and relatedness the subscales of the Basic Psychological Needs Scale at Work (BPNS-W) were translated (Deci et al., 2001). All 21 items were used: 7 items to assess autonomy satisfaction (e.g., I feel I can be pretty much myself at work), 6 items for the competence satisfaction (e.g., People at work tell me I am good at what I do) and 8 items for the relatedness satisfaction (e.g., I get along with people at

work). All items were to be answered on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. For all items, after recoding, a higher score pointed to an increased fulfilment of the need for autonomy, relatedness and competence. In this survey Cronbach's α for the subscale autonomy was .82; for relatedness .82 and for competence .86.

Intrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic motivation was assessed using three items (e.g., Because I enjoy this work very much) based on the Motivation at Work Scale (MAWS) (Gagné et al., 2010; Gagné et al., 2012). All items were to be answered on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*, with higher scores referring to more intrinsic motivation. In this survey Cronbach's α = .87.

Analyses

All hypotheses were tested with the method for estimating indirect effects in multiple mediation (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). In order to obtain standardized regression estimates, all the variables were standardized prior to the analysis. The bootstrapping approach was used in order to circumvent the power problem related to non-normal data (Mallinckrodt, Abraham, Wei, & Russell, 2006; Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

Results

We hypothesized a mediating effect of intrinsic motivation and BPN (i.e., autonomy, competence and relatedness) on the relation between the two dimensions of AI-behavior and work engagement. Intrinsic motivation, the need for autonomy, competence and relatedness can be assumed as mediators, when: (a) the two dimensions of AI-behavior significantly predict work engagement, (b) the two dimensions of AI-behavior significantly predict intrinsic motivation, autonomy competence and relatedness, (c) intrinsic motivation, autonomy competence and relatedness significantly predict work engagement and (d) the direct effect of the two dimensions of AI-behavior on work engagement after testing for the mediation is smaller than the direct effect as tested for hypothesis 1 (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Hayes, 2004). All the hypothesized mediators (intrinsic motivation, autonomy, competence and relatedness) were entered together in one multiple mediation model.

In total 62.22% of the variance in work engagement was explained by the variables in the model ($F(6, 125) = 34.31, p < .001$). The structural relationships between AIcon and AIapp, the mediators and work engagement can be observed in Figure 1.

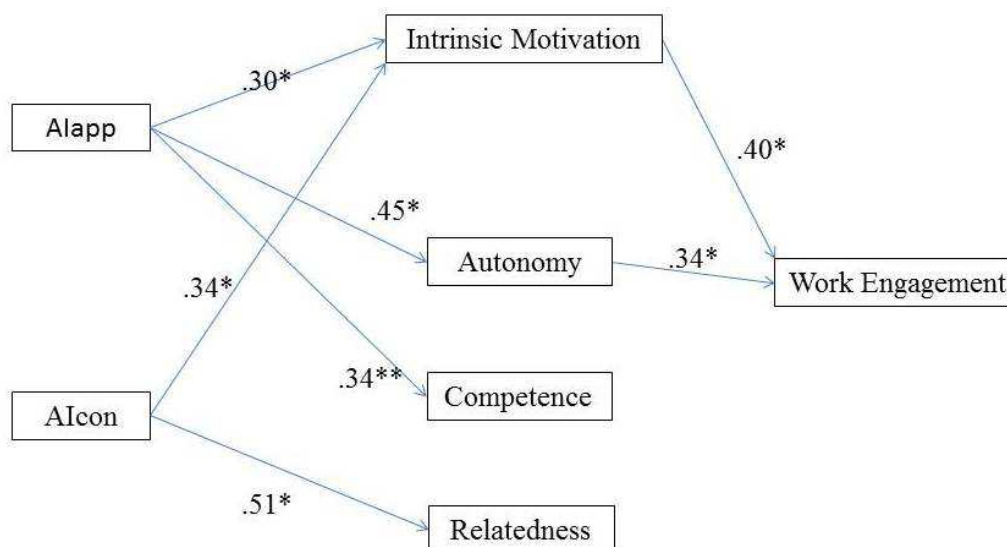


Figure 1. A summary of the structural relations between AIcon and AIapp, the proposed mediators and work engagement. Non-significant relationships were omitted from the diagram (* $p < .001$)

Table 2

The indirect effects of autonomy, competence, relatedness and intrinsic motivation between AIcon, AIapp and work engagement

	Point Estimate	Bootstrapping BCa 95% CI ^a	
		Lower	Upper
AIcon			
Autonomy	-.026	-.034	.133
Competence	-.031	-.043	.175
Relatedness	.033	-.040	.126
Intrinsic Motivation	.136	.049	.265

Total	.193	.044	.413
AIapp			
Autonomy	.153	.073	.277
Competence	.006	-.044	.054
Relatedness	.008	-.007	.065
Intrinsic Motivation	.121	.054	.238
Total	.287	.150	.418

Note: Bias corrected and accelerated confidence intervals were used, based on 1000 bootstrap resamples.

As can be observed in Figure 1, the dimension AIapp was positively related to intrinsic motivation, autonomy and competence, but not to relatedness. AIcon was also related to intrinsic motivation and furthermore to relatedness, but not to autonomy and to competence. Of the proposed mediators, only intrinsic motivation and autonomy showed a significant relationship with work engagement. Moreover, as shown in Table 2, a mediating effect of intrinsic motivation was found in the relation of both AIapp and AIcon with work engagement. As for the basic psychological needs, only autonomy was found to mediate the relation between AIapp and work engagement. After controlling for all the mediators, the direct effect of AIcon and AIapp on work engagement became non-significant, indicating a fully mediated relation.

Discussion

An AI-approach assumes driving employees to grow in connecting and in appreciation, creating flourishing organisations. The main objective of this study was to investigate the impact of an AI-approach on the individual employee. Referring to the double helix of appreciation and connecting, this research started with the operationalization of behaviour, typical in AI, through the construction of the CAWs. In order to evaluate AI, this was a necessary step to relate AI-behavior to other psychological theories, such as SDT, POS and POB. The proposed CAWs enabled to identify genuine AI-behaviour with the

appreciation and connecting dimension. A first validation of the instrument showed promising results. Although our sample was fairly small for validation purposes using confirmatory factor analysis (Browne & Cudeck, 1989), the measurement model showed a satisfactory fit.

As for hypothesis 1, the results pointed to a significant relation between both dimensions of AI-behavior and work engagement. An increased work engagement referred to a higher level of vigor, dedication and absorption in work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). This indicates that the activation of energy, stirred up by the double helix of an AI approach, can be interpreted as more vigor, dedication and absorption referring to the broadening and building capacity of both AI and work engagement (Cooperrider & Godwin, 2011; Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Work engagement assumes an energy and involvement reinforced by adequate job and personal resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Through connecting and appreciation, an AI-approach, obviously, is able to deliver these adequate resources stimulating personal growth and learning and development opportunities as a pathway to more work engagement.

Hypothesis 2 presumed a mediation of intrinsic motivation in the relation between AI-behavior and work engagement. Results indicated a mediating effect of intrinsic motivation in the relation of both AIcon and AIapp with work engagement. Intrinsic motivation is demonstrated at moments when employees experience positive feelings and enjoyment because of the activities themselves, exploring new frontiers and striving to master new challenges (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Connecting, understood as building high quality relations (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003) and appreciation, understood as the 'tracking' and 'fanning' of the growing potential in humans and systems (Bushe, 2012) create a work climate where intrinsic motivation emerges. This is also in line with other findings that job and personal resources influence both work engagement and motivation (Bakker, Albracht, & Leiter, 2011). Furthermore, intrinsic motivation is found to elicit higher performance (Bakker et al., 2008).

Finally, hypothesis 3 brought the satisfaction of BPN into the model. Results didn't indicate a mediating effect of BPN between AIcon and work engagement. As for AIapp, however, results pointed at a mediating relation of only autonomy between AIapp and work engagement. AIapp, referring to a stronger 'appreciative mindset' and more 'appreciative intelligence' (Bushe, 2007), provides a positive performance feedback. So, AIapp cultivates an active coping style to impact on the work situation creating a feeling of autonomy, impacting on work engagement. The satisfaction of the need for competence is seen as an

important predictor for motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008), and is found to be related to emotional well-being. In this research; however, satisfaction of the need for competence was related to AIapp, but it didn't predict more work engagement. As to relatedness, connecting in an AI-behavior, understood as building high quality relations to take a commitment in co-creating a new future (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Bushe, 2001) differs from relatedness in BPN understood as being part of a group or as a feeling of belongingness (Van den Broeck et al., 2010).

Limitations and Future Research

This study used self-reports of individual employees. Comparing organisations with an AI-approach and organisations without an AI-approach could provide better data to analyse the model used in this research. Furthermore, the used linear regression approach does not allow any causal interpretations. Future longitudinal and experimental studies can establish some causal impact of AI-practices on employees.

In order to support more quantitative research on AI with longitudinal surveys tapping into mediators and moderators within an AI-process, it is necessary to refine the definitions of appreciation and connecting. This refinement can make it possible to optimize the CAWs, basic for future research.

AI, as a qualitative action research method, means connecting and appreciation through sharing stories capturing the strengths and dreams of people. This quantitative research, however, was based on a questionnaire, tapping into latent psychological constructs in employees. Combining both research methods in the future may serve to understand even better and to evaluate the success of AI as a method to stimulate the flourishing of organisations along with satisfied and vital employees.

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