

Refining Employees' Engagement by incorporating Self-Directedness in Training and Work Environments

Mary Viterouli¹, Dimitrios Belias², Athanasios Koustelios³ and Nikolaos Tsigilis⁴

¹PhD Candidate, Department of Business, University of Thessaly, Larissa, Geopolis, Greece.

²Assistant Professor (Post Doc), Department of Business, University of Thessaly, Larissa, Geopolis, Greece.

³Professor, Department of Business, University of Thessaly, Larissa, Geopolis, Greece.

⁴Associate Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Media Communication, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Egnatia 46, Thessaloniki, Greece

mviterouli@gmail.com, mvyterouli@uth.gr

dbelias@pe.uth.gr

akoustel@uth.gr

ntsigilis@jour.auth.gr

Abstract: Employee engagement constitutes a critical driver of business success in today's competitive marketplace, since it effectuates internal stimuli for action and reaction. Fostering engagement into one's workforce is not a simple, one-dimensional task, but rather entails a multiplicity of factors and a conglomeration of approaches. The term 'Employee Engagement' relates to the level and breadth of an employee's commitment and connection to an organization and is influenced by a variety of factors such as organisational culture and communication schemata, managerial styles and leadership types, general policies and practices within the workplace. To this end, the aim of this paper is to introduce a strong connection between engagement and self-directedness by melding it with psychologically, educationally and strategically elaborated notions of facilitation (Knowles, 1975), self-actualization (Maslow, 1943) and autonomy (Lopes, Calapez and Lopes, 2015) along with operational tactics of learning and training that can address different mentalities and generations (Berkup, 2014). Employees need to be assisted in developing and evolving critical skills such as their self-directedness by means of empowerment. This study considers that empowerment and commitment can be achieved if management integrates self-directedness notions and principles into one's training and work environment. A self-directed employee is a dynamic, self-reflective, mature and autonomous person that chooses to engage and remain engaged. Self-initiation can be displayed, communicated and instructed, since people are the making of social, cultural and discursive constructions (Lopez et al. 2015). Considering that self-directedness leads to improved personal agency and initiative, adaptability and employability in the labour market, and efficiency in terms of organisational performance, instilling it in employees translates to endorsing engagement into one's personnel. That is why a detail literature review approach has been adopted for the research purpose highlighting significant works on self-directedness, empowerment and engagement. The data is collected from various databases, research articles, whitepapers, magazines, project works and the internet. This study contributes to extending literature on the relationship between self-directedness and engagement by addressing key practices and factors that attribute to fortifying their interrelation.

Keywords: Employee Engagement, Self-Directedness, Empowerment, Self-actualization, Generation Mix, Psychological Contract, Motivation

1. Introduction

According to Cloninger's et al. Temperament and Character Inventory (1993), Self-directedness is one of the three aspects of the human character (along with Cooperativeness and Self-transcendence) and consists of five subscales: responsibility vs. blaming; purposefulness vs. lack of goal direction; resourcefulness vs. inertia; self-acceptance vs. self-striving; and congruent second nature vs. incongruent habits. It stands as a bio-psycho-socio-spiritual constituent of personality that is either intrinsically or extrinsically acquired and developed. All the more light is shed on self-directedness for it serves a lot of purposes and empowers the individual to the core. It is not necessarily innate, but can be taught and promoted; thus, incorporating it in training and work environments, could refine employees' engagement, since empowerment leads to engagement and self-directedness leads undoubtedly to empowerment. Self-directedness has the capacity to bring out potential in people. Self-initiated people are people with internal control and self-guidance. They are purposeful, resourceful and self-actualizers. Organizations need now more than ever an engaged workforce throughout the hierarchy, so as to generate valuable business results. After all, this ability to direct our own engagement and growth is now less of an academic theory and more a necessity for success in our field of work.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Psychology of Engagement

Promoting optimal employee engagement has been an ever-lasting concern in the business world, with perhaps the most common misconception of businesses being not actually identifying its multifaceted nature but trying a one-size-fits-all approach (which will only work for a percentage of the workforce). *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs* provides a foundation of people's psychological development. It represents a ranked useful framework, linked to organizational theory among other things, because it offers insight on human motivation and engagement. Understanding what people need, how those needs differ from person to person and identifying important drivers of employee satisfaction (or their absence) is important for effective management; that is why generation gaps and subsequent differences in perceptions and actions have also been addressed, so that drivers can help bridge the gap and be applied effectively in any multigenerational workplace.

Maslow (1943) developed a five-stage model pyramid, depicting equivalent stages of needs:

1. *Biological and physiological needs*: are the basis and involve the primary ones for human survival such as air, food, drink, shelter, clothing, warmth, sex, sleep, etc..
2. *Safety needs*: protection from elements, security, order, law, stability, freedom from fear. People want to experience predictability, order and control in their lives.
3. *Love and belongingness needs*: family, friendship, affiliations (interpersonal relationships).
4. *Esteem needs*: consist of two categories: a) esteem for oneself (dignity, achievement, mastery, independence) and b) the desire for reputation or respect from others (status, respect, prestige).
5. *Self-actualization needs*: realization of personal potential, self-fulfillment, seeking personal growth and peak experiences; a desire to become the most that one is capable of becoming.

Even though, an eight-stage model was later on formulated (Maslow, 1970), the five-model stage has the unadorned, but complete adequacy to show how to tap into the potential of employees who are not (actively) engaged. The more engaged one becomes, the more strongly growth needs are detected and sought, since growth needs do not result from a lack in a quality, skill or desire, but rather result in a person's willingness to grow even further and pursue to self-actualize, that is to reach the highest level of fulfillment and potential. *Self-actualization is a continual process of becoming rather than a perfect state one reaches of a 'happy ever after'* (Hoffman, 1988, p.238). This is the final stage, where one perceives his/her engagement as actually yielding desired results.

According to Gallup's State of the Global Workplace Report (2021) only 20% of employees are engaged in the workplace. Following a steady pattern over the last decade, employee engagement decreased globally by two per cent, from 22% in 2019 to 20% in 2020. If leaders seek to address this decrease and its subsequent consequences, they can utilize the Maslow's Hierarchy model taking into consideration the Generation Mix (McIntosh-Elkins, McRitchie and Scoones, 2007), otherwise this decrease will have an even worsening business impact on workplace culture, employee retention and performance. Prioritizing and aligning responses in accordance with employee needs and work habits is imperative for boosting and strengthening engagement and commitment. These kinds of responses need to also consider the active multigenerational workforce, consisting of four existing generations (Dimock, 2019), whose boundaries and cutoff points are rough estimates (Chronological Generation Classification \pm 1-5 years): a) Baby boomers; b) Generation Xers; c) Generation Y or the Millennials; and d) Generation Z or the Post-Millennials. Technological, political, economic, social and environmental factors define each generation's formative and developmental years. This fact alone presents challenges for today's employers, since employees' traits, beliefs, outlook and life experiences from different generations influence the way they behave, work, communicate, learn and respond to change. Each preceding or succeeding generation varies in many respects, that is why a table with their main characteristics has been formed.

Reinforcing engagement translates to responding to and impacting on employees' multifaceted needs by applying Newton's law of action and reaction; a bidirectional process. Businesses need to *pay* employees sufficiently so as to satisfy their basic needs; *provide* for them and take care of them so as to secure their wellbeing; *include* them so as to offer them a sense of association and belonging; *recognize* their effort and achievements so as to boost their self-direction, and lastly; *empower* them by any means necessary (e.g.

autonomy in decision-making, training opportunities for advancement) so as to help them reach their full potential, according to their generational traits.

Table 1: Active workforce’s generational traits

	Baby Boomers (1946–1964)	Generation X (1965–1980)	Generation Y (1981–1996)	Generation Z (1997–2012)
Characterization:	Optimistic, competitive, workaholic, team-oriented, in control, values of simplicity, risk-takers, aggressive in their pursuits, willing to make sacrifices for success	Flexible, adaptable, informal, critical, skeptical, cynical, independent, self-reliant, pragmatic, entrepreneurial,, survivors, used to uncertainty, favour diversity, resistant to change	Competitive, civic-minded, open-minded on diversity, team-oriented, achievement/goal-oriented, dreamers, self-reliant/confident, independent, take uncertainty and challenge in stride	Global-thinkers, entrepreneurial, progressive, less focused, realists technology-driven and savvy, individualistic, realistic, competitive, leaders, financially conscious
Motivated by:	Company loyalty, teamwork, duty, quest for self-gratification/achievements	Diverse and dynamic environments, work-life balance, their personal-professional interests rather than the company's, offering of tools to succeed	Responsibility, their manager’s quality, favourable change, meaningful work experiences, loyalty, reward and work/life balance, cutting edge ventures	Diversity, personalization, individuality, creativity, skills advancements, challenging work-experience, independence, new technologies
Employers should:	Provide them with specific goals and deadlines; put them in mentor roles; offer coaching-style feedback	Give them immediate feedback; provide flexible work arrangements and work-life balance; extend options for personal growth	Get to know them personally; manage by results; be flexible on their schedule and work assignments; provide instant feedback	Offer chances to work on multiple projects at the same time; provide work-life balance; allow them to be self-directed

Source (modified from): Sladek & Grabinger, n.d.; P.G.U., n.d.; McIntosh-Elkins et al., 2007)

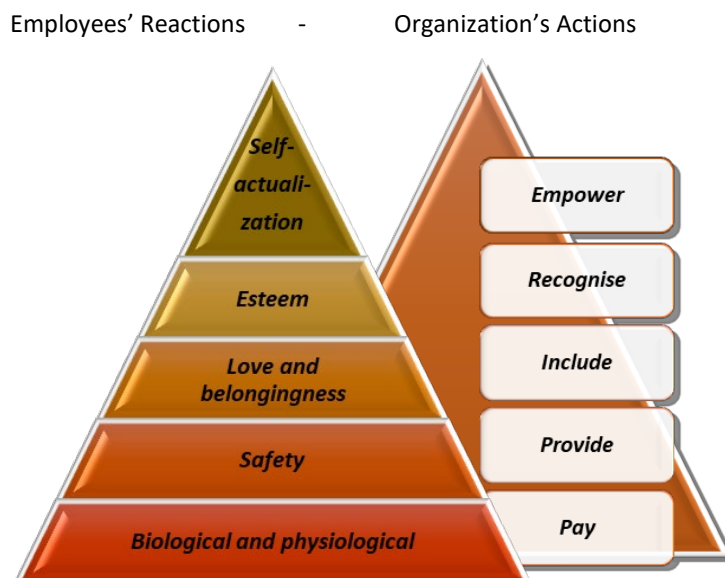


Figure 1: Feedback (needs) - Feedforward (expectations)

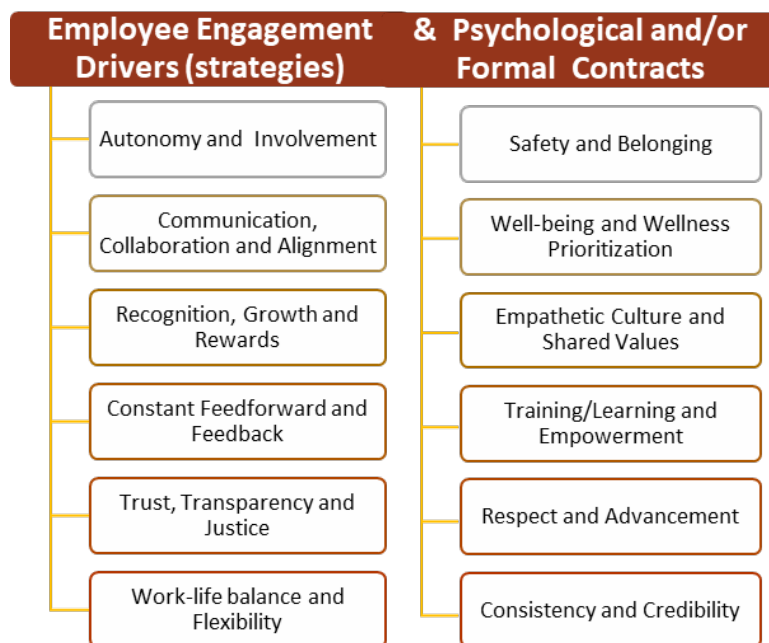
Source: Maslow (1943)

‘Providing for’, though, can be a proactive measure. Leaders should be able to offer feedforward, i.e. provide their employees of the context they want to communicate prior to their interaction, and then take feedback

from the needs of their employees, and if and how these were met and satisfied, accordingly. Generational diversity demands for different approaches and adaptations. Thus, rather than receiving or providing feedback, employers should feed forward, that is provide future-oriented options, solutions or rewards to their employees. Hence, when employees are offered a good health insurance, it means that companies aid them in being healthy; being healthy means no absenteeism; employees reliably come to work (feedforward control). Likewise, a company empowers an employee because it sees potential in empowerment; potential that can lead to self-actualization and efficient performance in the workplace. This ‘reverse process’ (first the feedforward and then the feedback for reconfirmation) could lead to stronger engagement and a better understanding of the mutual obligations, expectations, beliefs and ambitions (Rousseau, 2008) employees and employers have towards one another (the Psychological Contract formed, preceding the formal), since the company ‘offers’ before it ‘receives’; when employees feel valued they are more likely to reciprocate (Soares and Mosquera, 2019) and ‘compensate’ the company by being more productive and engaged, no matter their generational mentality differences.

2.2 The Venture of Employee Engagement

Increasing complexity, demands and crises in the business world and the need for resilience and sustainability have driven companies and organizations to reinvent and develop engaging practices (Sulkowski, Edwards, & Freeman, 2018). According to a Gallup study conducted by Harter et al. (2020), employee engagement reflects the involvement and enthusiasm of employees in their work and workplace. Given that engagement is important to organizational success, the identification of motivators, drivers and strategies that foster work engagement has become an important research stream (Shahid, 2019). To this end, companies have introduced a variety of metrics to measure, analyze and track employee engagement, and, accordingly, take measures, where necessary, to design interventions and implement different practices to improve it. Especially in an era where work has become more complex (remote or hybrid) and the employee-employer work agreement and model have been modified (McIntosh-Elkins et al., 2007), a deeper understanding of factors that drive work motivation and engagement of all four pre-mentioned generations is necessitated.



Source (modified from): Berkup, 2014; Lopes et al., 2015; McIntosh-Elkins et al., 2007; Sladek and Grabinger., n.d.; Shahid, 2019; Soares and Mosquera, 2019

Figure 2: Most Prevalent Engagement Drivers and Parties’ Contracts

Thus, to the best of our knowledge, we aimed to gather and list drivers that employees from different generations associate with and promote self-directedness, and though the majority of these factors has already been mentioned in research, their indispensability is perpetual. Berkup (2014) has spoken of recognition,

feedback, work-life balance, positive environment and skills development that advances engagement, stimuli and performance; Lopes et al. (2015) have spoken of autonomy and involvement that drives people to exceed themselves, the sense of belonging, respect, employee's well-being; McIntosh-Elkins et al (2007) have addressed matters of communication and collaboration, rewards and recognition, trust and transparency, feedforward necessity along with training opportunities; Sladek and Grabinger (n.d) have analyzed the importance of consistency in actions and directions along with flexibility; Shahid (2019) has spoken of shared values and the structure of leadership; Soares and Mosquera (2019) have addressed, among other things, the role of the psychological contract and meaningful work. Keeping those in mind, a new employee engagement framework of drivers is presented where drivers are in accordance not only with the formal, but also with the psychological contract formed and acknowledged by both parties. The results of these drivers do not occur by default, but progressively (Shahid, 2019).

The need for better-designed employee engagement programs has been acknowledged, along with offering a holistic employee experience by various researchers and theorists (Robinson, Perryman and Hayday, 2004; Maltese, 2021). Engaged employees can result in 23% higher profitability and 10% higher customer loyalty/engagement (Gallup study, 2021). Giving employees the sense of belonging, of feeling valued, and more autonomy and ownership over their tasks, behaviour and training can lead to improved results, such as self-direction and empowerment. All the drivers mentioned above make allowances for the well-being of the employee so that, conclusively, the well-being of the company/organisation is cherished too; the more positive the impact on the workforce, the better the impact on the company as a whole. Once a company has managed to connect its goals with the goals of its personnel (and vice versa) engagement can be improved. According to the Achievers Culture Report (2020) those who feel connected to their organization's values and vision are five times more likely to feel engaged at work and contribute to its goals.

3. Engagement through Self-Directedness and Empowerment

"Wisdom begins in admitting your own ignorance."

Socrates

"Over the years, the concept of 'self-directedness' has been studied in a variety of domains and disciplines" (Raemdonck, Thijssen and De Greef, 2017, p. 402). This widespread interest in self-directedness is explained by the underlying assumption that self-directedness leads to self-determination, self-confidence, initiative, perseverance and life satisfaction. In learning schemata, self-direction, mainly, represents a four-stage process that entails: being ready to learn, setting learning goals, engaging in the learning process, and evaluating learning. Self-directed learning (SDL) has always been within the human nature. The ancestry and roots of self-directed learning goes way back in the antiquity (Socrates, Aristotle). However, it has been popularized and scrutinized by scholars in comparatively recent years.

Although, not commonly known, Cyril O. Houle (1961) was the first to identify self-directed learning of adults in his study *'The Inquiring Mind'* (Candy, 1991; Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2007; Brockett & Donaghy, 2005). Houle recognized three different types of adult learners: the *goal-oriented* learners; the *activity-oriented* learners; and the *learning-oriented* learners. Allen Tough (1971), a doctoral student of Houle, pinpointed the reasons why adults engage in learning processes and showed that they, themselves, planned their learning projects, i.e. resources, content, method, schedule and pace of learning (self-planning), so as to combat problems and challenges, and/or to bring about change and improvement in themselves by gaining more knowledge and acquiring new skills. Following the above studies, the most disseminated and widely known theory linked to self-directedness in learning environments is *Andragogy*, by Malcolm Knowles (1968, 1975), the art and science of helping adults learn (Adult Education principle). Knowles argued that adults possess self-management skills and can undertake the initiative in their own learning (motivation). He viewed adults as autonomous and self-driven beings that can identify their learning needs, formulate their learning goals, determine the respective needed resources for learning, and, finally, select and implement the appropriate learning strategies. Naturally, other definitions were later formulated too, which also show that in order to self-direct, one needs to be engaged and vice versa.

Garrison (1997), accordingly, pinpointed learners' self-direction in a learning environment. He formed a three-dimensional model which integrates self-management, self-monitoring and motivation, and is based on cognition and context. Taking primary charge of planning, continuing and evaluating learning experiences is also

how Merriam et al. (2007) defined self-initiation in learning. Likewise, Merriam and Bierema (2013) claimed that initiative, active involvement and control of the learner over the learning process is imperative and an integral part of autonomy and self-directedness. In this sense, SDL includes the conceptualization, design, implementation and evaluation of learning by learners themselves according to their needs and preferences (Brookfield, 2009) and is viewed as a natural form of learning where adults pursue learning to face their daily problems (Brockett and Hiemstra, 1991).

Taylor (1995) defined self-directed learners as demonstrating greater awareness and motivation to take responsibility in making learning meaningful and confronting problems as challenges. Similarly, Candy (1991) formed a four-dimensional model of self-directedness in learning, and presented us with attributes such as: personal autonomy (deciding and taking action); self-management (willingness and ability to manage one's own learning); learner's-control of instruction; and autodidacticism (self-education), which aid the individual become empowered. Evidently, self-directedness leads to empowerment and empowerment can lead to a greater sense of engagement.

4. Measuring Self-Directedness' Influence

Following the theorists, Guglielmino (1977) formed one of the first quantitative instruments to measure self-direction; the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS), which was one of the first quantitative instruments to measure SDL. Even if his instrument received a lot of criticism, it still remains the most widely used tool to measure it (Merriam et al., 2007). Since the 1980s, SDL has been widely researched, scrutinized and regarded as a core aspect of Adult Education principles. Brookfield (2009), for instance, argued that studies lacked in variety and methodological approaches, targeting specific groups of learners. He also noted that self-directed learning represented mostly means of self-instructional methods and techniques and not necessarily an internal drive to intellectual pursuit and advancement.

Sharing the same concerns, Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) pinpointed the confusion that the term, concept and construct of 'self-directed learning' pose to different theorists and researchers. To clarify misunderstandings from past attempts and constructs, they created their own model of self-directedness in learning, the Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) model. The PRO Model makes a distinction between the external, process-oriented concept of self-directed learning and the internal, individually-oriented concept of learner self-direction. They both comprise Self-Direction in Learning, and entail personal responsibility and social context. Stockdale and Brockett (2011), operationalising the PRO model, developed an instrument, the PRO-SDL model (Personal Responsibility Orientation to Self-Direction in Learning), which has two components: the Teaching Learning Transaction and Learner Characteristic. The former refers to the process of self-directed learning and elaborates on two factors: initiative and control. The latter refers to autonomy, self-assertiveness, stimulus and self-regulation and accordingly elaborates on self-efficacy and motivation.

More recently, Raemdonck, Thijssen and De Greef (2017) have developed an instrument to measure self-directedness in work-related learning processes (SDL-scale) used for employees that have different qualification levels. They have focused on the notion of self-directedness as a coherent network of cognitive (beliefs), affective (attitudes), volitional (intentions) and behavioural patterns. Any individual is required to evoke this network of patterns so as to actually self-direct the learning process, namely: goal setting, choosing strategies, executing the strategy, monitoring and evaluation. This shows that the 'pattern' is more or less the same whether learning or work environment is involved.

5. Discussion on the Importance of the Research

All things considered, it is obvious that the above instruments, along with others, can be used to measure self-directedness of the employees in any environment, and alongside give us clues and hints on how to foster and enhance their engagement (Chakravarthi & Vijayan, 2010). A high level of self-directedness can empower employees respond to challenges and cope with demands, as well as enrich their knowledge, skills and capabilities in order to fortify their career status and enhance their wellbeing. Thereby, a lot of organisations have turned to training schemata that are no longer 'sage on the stage', but learner centred. Moreover, companies have changed their structures from hierarchical and managerial-oriented to the empowerment of employees through autonomy and self-directedness (Belias, Rossidis, Papademetriou and Mantas, 2021). That is why the responsibility for learning has been shifted to the individuals and teams themselves (self-driven teams) in the workplace. An intense interest in transferring power from institutions to individuals has been also

noted (Rigby and Ryan. 2018). Steve Jobs (2019) once said: *“It doesn't make sense to hire smart people and tell them what to do. We hire smart people so they can tell us what to do.”* Accordingly, organizations should teach and guide employees towards self-directedness and self-empowerment, and simply ‘get out of their way’. Incorporating self-directedness in training and work environments can help an organisation do exactly that, since there are sources of untapped potential within every organisation. That is why recent research has intensified on showing the means that can bear fruits.

Lemmetty and Collin (2020) addressed the challenges employees have to continually encounter and the need for employees autonomy and self-directedness, especially in low hierarchies. They found that the multidimensional concept of self-directed learning at work is essential to the workforces’ engagement and performance. The workers of their study talked about self-directed learning as ‘an obliged, creativity-enhanced as well as flexible and fast-paced practice’ (p. 62) that grew their competency. The employees emphasized the responsibility of individuals and groups concerning their own learning, and realized that typical workplace activities, such as learning from mistakes, self-managed observation, training others and learning through interaction, were actually SDL activities, intertwined with work practices, that helped them improve and get a better grasp of their contribution to the organization. However, they also found that learning can become problematic, stressful, burdensome and alienating, if support and tools are not provided by the organisation and peers to monitor, restrain or alter learning processes. Critical thinking and understanding is needed, and SDL should not be inflicted on employee, but rather progressively cultivated and elaborated upon. For this reason, they concluded that further research should be conducted considering the collective practices and nature of SDL on the level of teams and organisations.

Vithayaporn, Yong and Chai (2021) performed a study in order to investigate the key role of SDL in enhancing employee competencies that fulfil up-to-date skills requirements. They found that employees are challenged to assume more responsibility for their learning to remain skillful, knowledgeable, and of competitive qualifications and, thus, SDL can prove to be a critical tool for leverage. Unity, mutual learning, support, willingness and collaboration in the workplace culture is important so as to implement SDL and empower employees via new competencies acquirements. Evaluation by superiors and peers, effective communication and interaction, personalized coaching and instructions, accessibility to sources and resources of knowledge and skills can facilitate learning and boost one’s assertiveness and self-directedness. After all, bearing in mind that all people are to some degree intrinsically motivated and seek meaning making in their work, it is quite engaging when one puts to use one’s competencies and skills. *“All other things being equal, when people have the opportunity to do work in a way that a) effectively uses their skills; b) fits their values; and c) provides the freedom to exercise choice, they will be fully motivated to engage in their work”* (Macey et al., 2011, p.130).

Interventions that serve confidence and resilience are also those that help enhance the motivation to engage, not just the capacity for doing so. Piotrowski (2020) studied the relationship between SLD and employees’ resilience; resilience being an individual’s ability to manage adverse circumstances and, thus, a constituent and a counterpart of engagement. She found that the more self-directedness empowers people to grow in their roles, the more they will adapt and remain productive during times of change and crisis. Dealing with healthcare middle managers, she identified that both SDL and resilience reflect an internal control by the individual; and concluded that the managers could be benefited if they could be encouraged to develop SLD so as to improve their work for themselves and others. Thus, the foundation of self-directedness is an interactive and dynamic network of psychological and cognitive schemata one needs to understand and address in order to exteriorize its qualities.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the linkage between self-directedness and engagement. Self-directedness is complex and hard, as is engagement, since it is a construct with interrelated parts and of multidimensional nature; it requires a deep understanding and acceptance of the corporate mission, values and culture and is strongly affected by power and control. Comprehending people’s potential, enhancing their skills and competencies by alongside giving them more power (tasks/responsibilities) and freedom (autonomy/control) to self-direct their actions, can create empowered people who seek to self-actualize for themselves and the organisation itself. As is deducted, companies can incorporate SDL with the appropriate culture and systems, and measure it with the right tools (SDLRS; PRO model; SDLS model; SDL-scale mentioned before), so as to strengthen their status in the market in a turbulent era such as this we are living in. This paper strongly suggests future research on tools and

means for self-directedness, such as the SDL-Scale (Raemdonck et al., 2017) that accounts for SDL in work-related processes, along with the elaboration of the drivers pre-mentioned that facilitate it, so as to boost engagement. After all, SDL presents a new digital normal and can be considered as the future of workplace training.

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