

The impact of recognition, fairness, and leadership on employee outcomes: A large-scale multi-group analysis

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Executive Summary

This study addresses the determinants of employee engagement, burnout, and job satisfaction among regular workers in South Korea's private and public sectors. The authors argue that workplace resources (recognition, fairness, involvement, transformational leadership) and demands (overload, competition, technological disruption anxiety) jointly shape these outcomes, with sector-specific variation. Drawing on data from 25,285 employees in the 6th Korean Working Conditions Survey (2020–2021), the study employs Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) and Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) to test nine hypotheses. Key findings indicate that recognition exerts the strongest positive effect on engagement ($\beta = 0.394$), while transformational leadership both enhances engagement and reduces burnout. Overload shows a counterintuitive slight positive association with engagement alongside a stronger positive association with burnout. Technological disruption anxiety negatively affects job satisfaction. The MGA reveals that transformational leadership more effectively reduces burnout in the public sector, while competitive pressures contribute more strongly to burnout in the private sector. The authors conclude that sector-specific organizational strategies are warranted, though the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference.

Key Insights

1. Recognition is the strongest predictor of employee engagement ($\beta = 0.394$), substantially outperforming fairness ($\beta = 0.123$), involvement ($\beta = 0.070$), and transformational leadership ($\beta = 0.039$) in the same model.
2. Transformational leadership exhibits a dual role: a modest positive effect on engagement and a negative effect on burnout ($\beta = -0.069$), with the burnout-mitigating effect significantly stronger in the public sector (-0.123) than the private sector (-0.059).
3. Technological disruption anxiety exerts a statistically significant negative effect on job satisfaction ($\beta = -0.054$), identified as a contemporary job demand not previously integrated into large-scale PMS research at this scale.

Practical Takeaways

- Recognition programs demonstrate the largest empirical effect on engagement in this dataset, suggesting organizations prioritizing resource allocation for engagement interventions may find recognition initiatives more impactful than fairness or involvement programs alone.
- Sector context moderates the relationship between several workplace factors and outcomes — overload's contribution to burnout is higher in the public sector ($\beta = 0.217$) than the private sector ($\beta =$

0.167), while competitive pressure's burnout effect is higher in the private sector ($\beta = 0.141$) versus public ($\beta = 0.071$), indicating that uniform cross-sector policies may not capture these differential dynamics.

Frameworks Mentioned

Job Demands-Resources Model (JD-R) — A theoretical framework positing that job demands and job resources have distinct and interrelated effects on employee burnout and engagement; used as the primary theoretical foundation of the study.

Two-Factor Theory — Herzberg's motivational theory distinguishing between hygiene factors and motivators, cited to frame recognition as an intrinsic motivator driving satisfaction and engagement.

Conservation of Resources Theory — Hobfoll's theory proposing that the threat or loss of valued resources leads to stress and diminished well-being; used to theorize the negative effect of technological disruption anxiety on job satisfaction.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The study's large sample ($n = 25,285$), use of a nationally representative survey (KWCS), open data availability, application of PLS-SEM with 5,000-resample bootstrapping, and inclusion of MGA for sector comparisons represent genuine methodological contributions. The integration of technological disruption anxiety as a contemporary job demand adds theoretical novelty. **Limitations:** The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, which the authors acknowledge. Single-item measures for both competition and job satisfaction — acknowledged as a constraint of the KWCS instrument — reduce construct validity and may attenuate or distort relationships. The sample is restricted to South Korean regular employees, limiting generalizability across cultural and institutional contexts. The model's predictive power for burnout ($Q^2 = 0.058$) is notably low, suggesting significant unexplained variance. Common method bias, while assessed via VIF, cannot be fully ruled out given the self-report survey design. The counterintuitive positive (non-significant) association between overload and engagement warrants cautious interpretation and is explained post hoc via Flow theory without confirmatory evidence. The 85.2% private-sector composition creates asymmetry in the MGA comparison. No competing interests are declared and no funding was received, reducing but not eliminating risk of interpretive bias.

Organizational Practice

The study examines data from the 6th Korean Working Conditions Survey, reflecting actual workplace conditions reported by 25,285 regular employees across private and public sector organizations in South Korea. Organizational practices described include formal recognition and praise programs, conflict resolution procedures, employee involvement in departmental decision-making, supervisor-level transformational leadership behaviors, workload intensity (fast pace and strict deadlines), intra-organizational competition, and organizational responses to technological change. Sector-level differences in burnout management and workload allocation between public and private organizations are documented through MGA.

Strategic Implications

The findings suggest that recognition-focused interventions have a substantially larger empirical association with engagement than fairness or involvement programs within this dataset, which has implications for how organizations prioritize resource investment in performance management. The

differential impact of transformational leadership on burnout across sectors implies that leadership development frameworks may need sector-specific calibration rather than uniform deployment. The documented negative effect of technological disruption anxiety on satisfaction points to a gap in conventional PMS frameworks, which have not historically incorporated anxiety about automation as a managed variable. The stronger burnout-overload relationship in the public sector suggests workload management policies may warrant distinct calibration across organizational types. The persistence of engagement as a strong mediator between antecedents and job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.307$) reinforces engagement's central role in performance management architecture.

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