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Enhancing Job Satisfaction among Croatian Healthcare Professionals: Examining the Interplay of Perceived Social Support, Work Engagement and Job Satisfaction

Abstract

In light of the numerous advantages associated with heightened job satisfaction among healthcare professionals, affecting their well-being and the quality of service delivered to patients, it becomes imperative to systematically investigate the determinants of job satisfaction, particularly during challenging periods when healthcare professionals (consider) leaving the country. This research explores the mediating role of work engagement in the relationship between perceived social support and job satisfaction. A total of 1,410 Croatian healthcare professionals actively participated in the study, completing the Sociodemographic Questionnaire, Job Satisfaction Index, Social Support Questionnaire and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale. The results of a mediation analysis conducted using the SPSS PROCESS Macro (3.0, Model 4) reveal that perceived social support and work engagement both significantly and positively predict healthcare professionals' job satisfaction. Elevated levels of perceived social support directly enhance job satisfaction and exert an indirect effect through heightened work engagement. This finding suggests that healthcare professionals perceiving increased social support are more likely to experience job satisfaction, partially attributable to their high level of engagement. The conclusions of this research contribute to enhancing awareness regarding the crucial role of social support and work engagement in fostering job satisfaction among healthcare professionals.

Keywords: job satisfaction, work engagement, social support, Croatian healthcare professionals

Introduction

Work plays a significant role in the lives of employed individuals, with an average of one-third of the day spent in the workplace. For these reasons, it is crucial that employees experience job satisfaction, as it contributes to their overall well-being. Job satisfaction not only impacts the individual but also extends to their surroundings, including their family and friends. In light of the numerous advantages associated with heightened job satisfaction among healthcare professionals, affecting their well-being and the quality of service delivered to patients, it becomes imperative to systematically investigate the determinants of job satisfaction, particularly during challenging periods when healthcare professionals (consider) leaving the country. Job satisfaction can be described as a pleasant feeling arising from the evaluation of one's own work experience – an assessment of what an employee expects from their job and what they believe they can receive in return (LOCKE 1969). Long-term research on the job satisfaction of healthcare professionals suggests that it influences various aspects of work behaviour. In several studies, job satisfaction has been shown to positively interact with work engagement, which subsequently affects other work outcomes such as the quality of care provided by healthcare professionals to patients (ORGAMBÍDEZ-RAMOS – DE ALMEIDA 2017; VAN BOGAERT et al. 2013). Social support, according to the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model (SCHAUFELI–BAKKER 2004), is considered a resource of the job – aspect of the work context that facilitates employees' ability to cope with job demands. Social support in the workplace facilitates the exchange of information, re-evaluation of situations from different perspectives, collaborative problem-solving, and the giving and receiving of advice (BROUGH–PEARS 2004). Social support is a crucial factor in subjective well-being, particularly in occupations associated with high levels of stress (BURKE et al. 2012; RYAN–DECI 2001). In contrast to those experiencing burnout at work, engaged individuals feel an energetic connection to their job, viewing it not as demanding and stressful but rather as a challenge (BAKKER et al. 2008). Work engagement can be defined as a positive, fulfilling cognitive-affective state related to work, characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption (SCHAUFELI–BAKKER 2004). Vigour, in addition to a high level of energy, entails mental resilience, a willingness to invest effort in one's work and persistence when facing difficulties. Dedication is characterised by a sense of importance, enthusiasm, pride and challenge. Finally, absorption is marked by complete concentration and joyful immersion in one's work, during which time

passes quickly, and one is reluctant to detach from the task. Existing research on work engagement conducted among medical staff suggests that work engagement influences job satisfaction (ORGAMBÍDEZ-RAMOS – DE ALMEIDA 2017; VAN BOGAERT et al. 2013), the quality of patient care (VAN BOGAERT et al. 2013), organisational commitment (CHO et al. 2006), and turnover intentions (CHOI 2013; VAN BOGAERT et al. 2013). A positive association between work engagement and job satisfaction is confirmed in a sample of Portuguese nurses (ORGAMBÍDEZ-RAMOS – DE ALMEIDA 2017). According to the JD–R model, work engagement plays a crucial role as an intermediary between job resources, such as social support, and organisational outcomes like job satisfaction. However, research by Shahpouri et al. (2016) has raised questions about this mediation. In the study of Shahpouri et al. involving 208 female nurses from Iran, work engagement was found to mediate the effect of personal resources (such as hope, resilience, optimism and self-efficacy) on turnover intention. However, it did not mediate the influence of job resources (including contingent rewards, organisational support and organisational justice) on turnover intention. Interestingly, the analysis revealed no direct or indirect effect of social support on nurses' turnover intention. In a more recent study, Jasiński and Derbis (2023) confirmed that the relationship between support from superiors and job satisfaction among 163 midwives working in the Polish public healthcare system was partially mediated by work engagement. This underscores the necessity for further exploration into the intricate dynamics between social support, work engagement and job satisfaction. Consequently, this research endeavours to investigate the mediating role of work engagement in the relationship between perceived social support and job satisfaction among Croatian healthcare professionals.

Method

Sample and procedure

The study involved a total of 1,410 healthcare professionals with a minimum of six months job tenure, mostly female (91.3%), from across the entire Republic of Croatia. Employees were recruited through Facebook by sharing the study announcement in several private groups with medical content. The age range spanned from 20 to 63 years ($M = 35.28$, $SD = 9.895$).

Instruments

Healthcare professionals completed the Sociodemographic Questionnaire, Job Satisfaction Index, Social Support Questionnaire and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale. To determine the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants, a Sociodemographic Questionnaire was used, including questions about gender, age, job role, city of employment and length of service in the current position. As a measure of overall job satisfaction, the *Job Satisfaction Index* (BRAYFIELD–ROTHE 1951) was utilised. This scale assesses an individual's general attitude towards their job (e.g. "I am quite satisfied with my current job" or "I enjoy my work"). The Job Satisfaction Index consists of five items, with responses rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1, indicating "strongly disagree", to 5, indicating "strongly agree". The total score is calculated as the sum of responses to all five items. The theoretical range of scores is from 5 to 25, with a higher score indicating greater job satisfaction. The reliability calculated using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient is $\alpha = .80$. To assess social support, the *Social Support Questionnaire* (part of the Job Characteristics Theory test battery MORGESON–HUMPHREY 2006) was applied. The questionnaire consists of six items, with five items pertaining to the degree to which the job provides opportunities and assistance from colleagues (e.g. "People I work with care about me as a person"), and one item addressing support from supervisors (e.g. "My supervisor cares about the well-being of the people who work for him/her"). Responses are rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1, indicating "strongly disagree", to 5, indicating "strongly agree". The total score is the sum of responses to all six items, with a theoretical range of scores from 6 to 30, where a higher score denotes greater social support. The reliability of the questionnaire was measured using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with $\alpha = .76$. To determine employees' work engagement, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale – 9 (UWES 9 SEPPÄLÄ et al. 2009) was used. The questionnaire comprises nine items divided into three subscales – vigour, dedication and absorption. Participants rated statements on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 0, indicating "never", to 6, indicating "daily". The total score for each subscale is calculated as the average of ratings on all items belonging to the respective subscale, and the total score of the questionnaire is the average of all subscale scores. A higher total score indicates higher work engagement. The reliability coefficient expressed as Cronbach's alpha in this study was $\alpha = .89$.

Results and discussion

This research seeks to investigate the mediating role of work engagement in the relationship between perceived social support and job satisfaction among Croatian healthcare professionals. Results of a correlation analysis show that Croatian healthcare professionals that perceive high social support exert higher levels of work engagement and job satisfaction (Table 1).

To verify the mediating role of healthcare professionals' work engagement in the relationship between social support and job satisfaction, we applied the SPSS PROCESS Macro (3.0, Model 4). The results reveal that perceived social support and work engagement both significantly and positively predict healthcare professionals' job satisfaction (Figure 1). Elevated levels of perceived social support directly enhance job satisfaction (0.2112, 0.2734) and exert an indirect effect through heightened work engagement (0.1899, 0.2507). This finding suggests that healthcare professionals perceiving increased social support are more likely to experience job satisfaction, partially attributable to their high level of work engagement (Figure 1).

This finding aligns with the results of Jasiński and Derbis (2023), who confirmed that work engagement partially mediates the relationship between support from superiors and job satisfaction among midwives. The results of this study contribute to a better understanding of the interplay between social support, work engagement and job satisfaction. Additionally, the results highlight the importance of promoting social support and work engagement among healthcare professionals to increase the job satisfaction of medical personnel. However, it is necessary to highlight some research limitations. Specifically, the participants in this study were only those interested in the topic, potentially reducing the possibility of generalising the results to all

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations between measured variables

<i>Variables</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>
1. Job satisfaction	19.61	3.79	–	.56**	.72**
2. Social support	21.56	4.61		–	.46**
3. Work engagement	4.54	0.85			–

** $p < .01$.

Source: Compiled by the authors

medical professionals in the Republic of Croatia. An additional limitation is the lack of conceptual division of social support into support from colleagues, superiors and the organisation, as some studies have confirmed a significant impact of one but not the other sources of support on job satisfaction. Future research should consider the possibility of dividing the construct of social support into support from colleagues, superiors and the organisation and examine whether there are differences between these sources of social support in job satisfaction. Additionally, it would be helpful to assess job satisfaction using a multidimensional questionnaire to determine which aspects of job satisfaction should receive the most attention. Nevertheless, the findings regarding the importance of social support can serve as a guideline for healthcare managers to promote an organisational climate that emphasises and positively values the support provided by colleagues and superiors in daily tasks. Recognising the importance of work engagement can be encouraged by highlighting the significance of their roles and consequences to employees. To foster work engagement, it is crucial to value employees' opinions, provide appropriate feedback on their work, and enable them to learn and develop professionally and personally. Understanding and prioritising the well-being of healthcare professionals is pivotal for creating a thriving and effective healthcare environment.

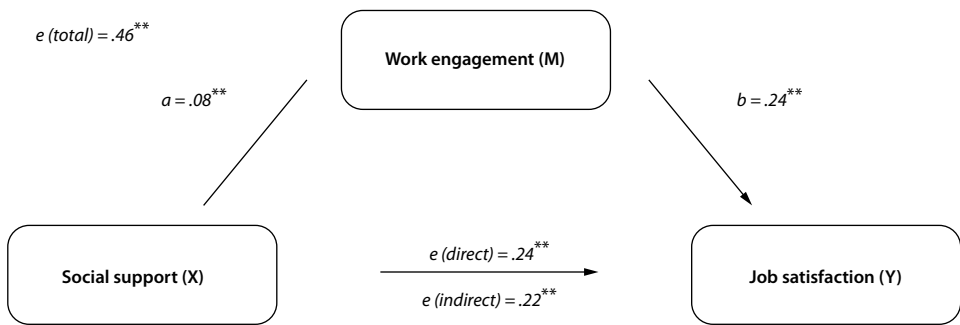


Figure 1: *The mediating role of work engagement in the relationship between perceived social support and job satisfaction*
Source: Compiled by the authors

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