

Work engagement and resilience at work: The moderating role of political skill



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Orientation: Faced with high contextual dynamics, organisational leaders are looking to resilience as a resource to help their employees manage their well-being as they adapt to the changes. Appreciating the complementary resource streams that help employees adapt or transform the context is an urgent priority.

Research purpose: Drawing on the conservation of resources theory, the study evaluated the moderating role of political skill in the relationship between work engagement and resilience at work.

Motivation for the study: The quality of the employees' personal and social resources at work could explain the degree to which they move beyond mere adaptation to thriving.

Research approach/design and methods: The data collected from a convenient sample of over 200 individuals were used to construct a hierarchical multiple regression model.

Main findings: There was a significant association between work engagement and resilience at work. The interaction term between work engagement and political skill accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in resilience at work.

Practical/managerial implications: The result suggests that work engagement and political skill act in an integrative way to replenish adaptive resources at work. Organisational leaders must inculcate and nurture cultures that promote these complementary capabilities if they are to enjoy adaptive advantages. These capabilities are learnable and, hence, developable.

Contribution/value-add: The study model deepens our understanding of the integrative mechanisms that nourish employee resiliency.

Keywords: contextual dynamics; conservation of resources, adaptive behaviour, learnable capabilities; moderation analysis.

Introduction

Faced with high contextual dynamics, organisational leaders are mindfully shifting attention to resilience as a resource to 'build the adaptability, performance and well-being of their workforce' (McEwen & Boyd, 2018, p. 258). Resilience at work is a vital resource, anchored on the tenets of self-leadership, that allows employees to learn from and manage daily adversities in the workplace and, in so doing, move beyond adaptation to thriving (Malik & Garg, 2018; Näswall et al., 2019). This 'not-so-ubiquitous', yet developable, resource allows organisations to enjoy adaptive and generative advantages, critical needs for them to remain sustainably future fit.

The percentage of employees who reported higher levels of anger, sadness and stress increased between 2019 and 2020, partly due to the operational changes necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Gallup, 2021). Studies demonstrate asymmetry in employee adaptation to the ever-changing work demands and adversities (Sanhokwe & Takawira, 2022). There is, therefore, an urgent need to effectively interrogate the factors that nurture and develop the quality of resilience across all levels of work.

Extant literature depicts resilience as a personality trait and/or a behaviour that changes in space and time (Caniëls & Baaten, 2019). Resilience at work is the capability to recover from unpleasant work situations by proactively tapping into existing or new personal or workplace resource reservoirs (Kuntz et al., 2017). Resilient employees experience positive emotions that promote desirable psychological states (Xiang & Yuan, 2021). Such states combat adversity and protect

employees' psychological and physical health through their broadening-and-building effects (Johnson et al., 2021).

This study presents work engagement as an antecedent to employee resilience. Work engagement is the assurance available from the employee as an individual and as talent embedded in the organisation; it is a resource that energises and mobilises the goal-directed efforts of employees, albeit their circumstances at work (Sanhokwe, 2022). Political skill is conceived as a moderator – a workplace resource that could influence the quality of the relationship between work engagement and resilience at work. Political skill is a complementary set of social competencies and situational influences at work (Philip, 2021). Despite the wide variety of studies on organisational politics, little is known about the influence of political skill in shaping the adaptive behaviour of employees (Lazreg & Lakhal, 2022).

As organisations seek to continuously develop new sources of value, they are challenged to create environments that grow the quality of their employee resources. Research has shown that resilient employees are more likely to have positive attitudes and feel satisfied with their work (Jennings et al., 2019; Lim & Kim, 2020). Extant literature supports the idea that workplace resilience can improve employee and organisational well-being (Foster et al., 2020). Additionally, resilience at work is associated with innovative work behaviour (Chadwick & Raver, 2020); enhanced quality of decision-making (Mallak & Yildiz, 2016); improved goal achievement and professional happiness (Bernard, 2019), as well as performance and productivity (Walpita & Arambepola, 2020). Unsurprisingly, resilience at work has become an important criterion for talent identification, growth and development.

Despite the extensive research on resilience at work, only a few studies have anchored their investigations on the conservation of resources (COR) theory when explaining their conceptual ideas and findings (Hartmann et al., 2020). This is despite the recognition that resilience is a personal resource that can be influenced, directly or indirectly, by contextual resources in the work and nonwork domains. This presents a gap regarding the comprehension of employee adaptation at work.

The present study

The study draws on the concepts of the COR theory to explain how political skill and work engagement can influence employees' perceptions of adaptive resource loss or growth. Specifically, the study argues that work engagement fosters resilience at work. To assess potential complementarities between personal and socially constructed resources at work, the study empirically tests the moderating role of political skill in the relationship between work engagement and resilience at work.

There is currently not enough evidence supporting the nexus between political skill and the replenishment of adaptive resources. Few studies have integrated work engagement and

political skill in explaining the resilience at work phenomenon, expectedly so given the assumed dysfunctional nature of organisational politics in general (De Clercq et al., 2021). Interrogating the hypothesised relationships has implications for our understanding of the quality of resources available to the employee, including avenues for replenishing resilience-related resources. This could guide remediation and development efforts to enhance employee adaptive resources at work.

Literature review

Underpinning theory

Carrying a motivational bias, Hobfoll's (1989) COR theory postulates that employee behaviour is based on the inherent need to acquire and conserve resources while minimising potential or anticipated resource losses (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). In addition to its four underlying principles, the COR theory encompasses the concept of resource caravans. The premise is that resources move in packs, suggesting the complementarity of resource streams for survival. Furthermore, the theory submits that resources subsist in context-specific conditions that nourish or debilitate resource creation and sustenance (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Corollary 1 of the theory suggests that employees laden with complementary resource streams are less vulnerable to resource losses, a critical need at work (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). The COR theory further emphasises the role of personal strengths and social bonds in efforts to gain and conserve resources for survival (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Creating and maintaining personal, social and other organisational resources creates the sense in employees that, in their individual or collective capacity, they can face stressful challenges (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

According to the COR theory, employees create complex tools to help them survive. In the same vein, language facilitates communication (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). These capabilities build social bonding and facilitate survival. The COR theory also suggests that employees activate situation-specific behaviour to build reservoirs to satisfy future or anticipated needs (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

A brief synopsis of the constructs in use

Resilience at work

Resilience is a personality trait that helps people bounce back from challenging situations (Cooper et al., 2020). In the workplace, resiliency serves as a resource that enables individuals to overcome adversity (Sanhokwe & Takawira, 2022). A growing number of studies suggest that this trait can be nurtured and grow over time. In this vein, resilience emerges as a behavioural capability that is learnable and, hence, developable (Näswall et al., 2019).

As a developable capability, resilience at work is anchored on self-leadership. It draws on personal and workplace resources that promote learning, adaptation and development (Malik & Garg, 2018, 2020). The degree of resilience depends on the

quality of resources an employee can access. This belief creates space for dedicated interventions at work, i.e. employee resiliency can be developed through interaction, discourse and material considerations (Malik & Garg, 2018, 2020).

Work engagement

The work engagement phenomenon can be traced to Goffman (1961). However, Kahn (1990) is highly regarded as setting the tone for contemporary research on work engagement. Work engagement is a positive, fulfilling, affective-motivational state that manifests through dedication, intense concentration and vigour (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Unlike other forms of the mental state, work engagement is not tied to a particular event or object in the work environment, i.e. it is a persistent psychological inclination where employees are highly absorbed in their work and exhibit vigour and dedication (Van den Heuvel et al., 2020).

Vigour is the ability of employees to overcome diverse obstacles and challenges in the work environment, as well as their willingness to invest in their success (Schaufeli & De Witte, 2017). Dedication is expressed in the form of enthusiasm, pride and significance (Schaufeli & De Witte, 2017). Absorption is the elevated degree of concentration on work (Schaufeli & De Witte, 2017).

Political skill

Political skill is the ability 'to effectively understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that improve one's personal and/or organizational objectives' (Ferris et al., 2005, p. 127). The underlying theoretical specifications of the construct depict four dimensions, namely social astuteness, interpersonal influence, apparent sincerity and networking ability (Ferris et al., 2005).

Social astuteness is being able to observe others in organisational contexts and creating a close understanding of diverse social situations. Interpersonal influence denotes the ability of politically skilled individuals to exert significant influence within their social spheres. Networking ability is about creating, recreating, developing and nurturing diverse, value-adding networks or contacts at work. Apparent sincerity emphasises substantial levels of sincerity, genuineness, integrity and authenticity.

Conceived this way, political skill is an emergent state that originates on an individual level and is amplified by the quality of interactions in the workplace. The existing literature suggests that politically skilled employees deal effectively with workplace stressors by drawing on resources from their strong social networks at work (Summers et al., 2020). As such, politically skilled employees experience lower anxiety and can effectively handle energy-sapping exposures at work (Summers et al., 2020).

Situating the expected relationships

Work engagement and resilience at work

High contextual dynamics, characterised by frequent policy and operational changes, place increasing demands on

employees' adaptive resources. According to the second principle of the COR theory, to proactively protect against current or anticipated resource-related losses in the work environment, it is necessary to invest in complementary resource streams, including personal ones (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Furthermore, where resources are not sufficiently replenished, their depletion culminates in the loss of adaptive advantages at both the employee and organisational levels.

Positive states of dedication, vigour and absorption broaden the employee's reservoirs of psychological, emotional, social and cognitive resources (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2018). These resources build resilience in employees, allowing both the employee and the organisation to survive and thrive, albeit the natural selection challenges (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2018). Work engagement generates additive personal and organizational resources that act in a mutually reinforcing manner to strengthen employee resilience at work (Karatepe et al., 2018).

Work engagement is a reservoir that employees tap into as they adapt to changes in the operational environment (Sanhokwe, 2022). The higher the quality of this reservoir, the better the chances of adapting and thriving. Literature supports this assertion. For instance, work engagement predicts the long-term mental and physical health of employees (Shimazu et al., 2018; Tisu et al., 2020). Conversely, when the employees' work engagement resources are low or exhausted, the ability to adapt diminishes. This results in suboptimal resilience at work-related outcomes such as ill health, absenteeism, turnover and defensiveness, among others (Saks, 2019; Shimazu et al., 2018). This study submits that:

Hypothesis 1: Work engagement is positively associated with resilience at work.

The moderating role of political skill

Engaged employees report better social functioning (Bakker & Leiter, 2017). Such employees easily tap into their internal and external networks in search of new sources of value for survival and growth (Robledo et al., 2019). Furthermore, employees voluntarily contribute their knowledge, skills and abilities when engaged at work (Sanhokwe, 2022). In the other vein, political skill allows employees to understand others at work, broadens self-confidence and creates a strong sense of control over social interactions and expectations (Cullen et al., 2018). Incorporating this premise into the model, political skill is positioned as a moderator that exacerbates the relationship between work engagement and resilience at work, i.e. work engagement and political skill could act as complementary resource streams.

Politically skilled workers can access their networks and situations to gather valuable information (Cullen et al., 2018; Ferris et al., 2002). They are also more likely to perform their duties efficiently in their environments. This is because they have the necessary awareness – at the individual and

organisational levels – about the positively evaluated actions needed to satisfy outcomes of interest (Kranefeld et al., 2020). Politically skilled employees develop effective strategies and methods that enhance organisational and individual resilience by tapping into personal and social resources (Yang & Treadway, 2018). Politically skilled employees easily facilitate job crafting and do not feel alienated in the workplace (Usman et al., 2020). Yang and Treadway (2018) reported that employees with suboptimal political skills were highly likely to engage in counterproductive behavior at work.

Yet, literature also indicates that political skill may constrain work engagement and resilience. Employees with this skill can conceal their self-serving behaviour (Lazreg & Lakhal, 2022). Politically skilled employees have been associated with bullying behaviour (Treadway et al., 2021). Sun (2022) noted that political skill can trigger social undermining among coworkers. It can cause fellow employees to perceive their status as a threat (Sun, 2022). Furthermore, politically skilled employees can experience role overload (Cullen et al., 2018). Thus, political skill could enrich or debilitate employee resource reservoirs:

Hypothesis 2: Political skill moderates the relationship between work engagement and resilience at work.

Research model

The research model, see Figure 1, is hinged on the assumption that the quality of resilience at work depends on individual capacities (through personal strengths, well-being and internal motivation that serve as resources, i.e. work engagement) and others surrounding them (who, through the ability to influence, motivate, and win their support, serve as reservoirs of complementary resources, i.e. political skill). This assumption is born out of the recognition that integrated resource packs located within both individual and organisational settings could produce better adaptive results (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Work engagement, political skill and resilience at work are malleable enterprise-wide capabilities, thus offering organizations an opportunity to positively influence their trajectories.

Methods

Research design and approach

The study employed a descriptive design to yield information on the naturally occurring characteristics of

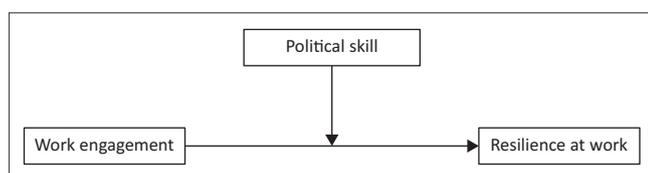


FIGURE 1: Research model.

the phenomena of interest (Aggarwal & Ranganathan, 2019). A descriptive design demonstrates generalisable associations produced through one-time exposures (cross-sectional) or over a period (a longitudinal one).

For this study, the cross-sectional design provided a clear-enough impression of the situation as well as the general information about the proposed relationships, albeit its inherent inability to distinguish cause and effect categorically (Taris et al., 2021). The constructs in use are theory-heavy. In such circumstances, theories provide causality, i.e. the researcher can easily conduct explanatory modelling based purely on theory-data relationships (Taris et al., 2021).

The quantitative approach was used to systematically observe variables and establish relationships inherent therein. The variables of interest were isolated, conceptualised and measured using numerical scales. The quantitative design has its roots in natural sciences; however, some variables in the social sciences domain can be measured using standard tools, hence the choice to employ the approach in this study (Walliman, 2017). Such empirical studies' findings help refine or strengthen theory and practice (Park et al., 2020).

Participants and procedure

Methodological individualism asserts that an adequate explanation of psychological and social phenomena can be provided if it considers the individual's thoughts, beliefs and actions (Filipenko, 2022). Hermeneutical research suggests that employees' actions are derived from their perception or view of the situation rather than an objective truth (Gilhus, 2021). Furthermore, when interrogating resilience at work, employee perceptions of the degree to which the environment at work fosters or constrains their growth and development matter. Such perceptions indicate the extent employees feel embedded in (un)supportive environments.

Thus, the study adopted the individualistic perspective given its interest in understanding the employee as an individual and as a talent embedded in unique organisational contexts. Work engagement, political skill and resilience at work are enterprise-wide capabilities, hence the focus on employees across all levels of work.

The target population comprised currently employed persons in the government, nongovernment and private sectors. The multisector perspective was influenced by the literature on the constructs in use. For instance, Malik and Garg (2018) recommended that the RAW scale should be exposed to a sample of individuals in various organisational sectors to further validate it (p. 89). Similarly, Bakker and Albrecht (2018) emphasised the need to expose the work engagement construct across diverse sectors (p. 7).

A total of 213 individuals were surveyed in Zimbabwe, with most of them being employed in the government (34%) as well as the nongovernmental organisations (33%) and

the private sector (33%). The data were collected using SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com).

The study used the snowball technique, where pre-identified participants shared the survey link with their colleagues in the same sector. The sample was composed of more men (61%), as the formal employment profile in the country is typically male dominated (Sanhokwe, 2022a). The average age of the individuals was 38.6 years with a standard deviation of 8.87 years. The average tenure was 6.9 years, with a standard deviation of 3.1 years. By the level of employment, the middle (38%) and senior (37%) employees comprised the majority of the sample.

Measures

As alluded to earlier, the study model consisted of three constructs: work engagement, political skill and resilience at work. The measures for the constructs in use are described below.

Work engagement

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) developed by Schaufeli et al. in 2002 is a commonly referenced measure of work engagement and was adopted for this study. Theoretically, the UWES-17 consists of three latent factors measured using 17 items, i.e. vigour (6 items), absorption (6 items) and dedication (5 items). Employees self-rated their levels of work engagement using a 7-point frequency-type scale (never (0), almost never (1), rarely (2), sometimes (3), often (4), very often (5) or always (6)). Sample items include: 'At my work, I feel bursting with energy' (vigour); 'I am excited about my job' (dedication) and 'I am immersed in my work' (absorption). The UWES-17 exhibits robust psychometric properties (Sanhokwe, 2022a).

Political skill

The study used the political skill inventory (PSI) developed by Ferris et al. in 2005. The underlying theoretical specifications of the PSI depict it as a multidimensional measure comprising four latent factors that are measured using 18 items. Sample items included: 'It's easy for me to develop good relationships with most people'; 'I am good at building relationships with influential people at work' and 'I'm particularly good at sensing the motivations and hidden agendas of others'. Employees self-rated using a 7-point Likert scale (strongly disagree (0), disagree (1), somewhat disagree (2), neither agree nor disagree (3), somewhat agree (4), agree (5) or strongly agree (6)). A multicountry study by Jacobson and Viswesvaran (2017) reported a Cronbach alpha of 0.89 for the 18-item PSI, thus confirming its reliability.

Resilience at work

The study used Winwood et al.'s (2013) 20-item resilience at work (RAW) scale. The RAW scale comprises seven latent factors: (1) living authentically, (2) finding your calling, (3)

maintaining perspective, (4) managing stress, (5) interacting cooperatively, (6) staying healthy and (7) building networks. Sample items include: 'I have developed some reliable ways to deal with the personal stress of challenging events at work' and 'I have friends at work whom I can count on to support me when I need it'. Employees self-rated using a 7-point Likert-type scale (strongly disagree (0), disagree (1), somewhat disagree (2), neither agree nor disagree (3), somewhat agree (4), agree (5) or strongly agree (6)). The RAW scale has robust psychometric properties (see Sanhokwe & Takawira, 2022).

Analytical approach

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed using PROCESS for R version 3.5 to test the hypothesised moderation model. Standardised beta values, depicted in Table 1, were used to interpret the effect of the two independent variables (work engagement and political skill) on resilience at work. The magnitude of ΔR^2 , as read with its associated *p*-value, denoted the quantity and significance of the variance explained by the antecedents.

Common method bias

The study undertook the following steps to minimise the common method bias inherent in self-reported measures. The study created a psychological separation, i.e. a short narrative preceded each section to make them appear distinct (or not connected). After data collection, Harman's single-factor test was used to assess the risk of common method bias (Fuller et al., 2016). The variance extracted by one factor was 29.36%, thus suggesting that the risk of the common method bias was minimal (Fuller et al., 2016).

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects. The purpose of the study was clearly explained on the survey landing page, and participation in the study was strictly voluntary. No personally identifiable information was collected, and participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

Results

Reliability of the measures in use

Two tests were used to determine the reliability of the three constructs in use, i.e. the Cronbach alpha (α) and the composite reliability. The Cronbach α values for the three scales exceeded the 0.70 threshold, i.e. UWES-17 = 0.91, PSI = 0.88 and RAW = 0.77 (see Table 1). Composite reliabilities (CRs) are considered a better measure of internal consistency, as they disregard the assumption of equal weighting (Sanhokwe, 2022a). All CRs were higher than Cronbach α and exceeded the 0.7 threshold, thus further confirming the internal consistency of the three measures.

TABLE 1: Assessing reliability and validity.

| Measure | Number of items | Cronbach alpha | Composite reliability | AVE |
|---------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------------|------|
| UWES-17 | 17 | 0.91 | 0.92 | 0.72 |
| PSI | 18 | 0.88 | 0.91 | 0.70 |
| RAW | 20 | 0.77 | 0.80 | 0.58 |

RAW, resilience at work; AVE, average variance explained; PSI, political skill inventory; UWES, Utrecht Work Engagement Scale.

TABLE 2: Assessing construct validity.

| Measures | AVE | WE | PS | RAW |
|----------|------|------|-------------|--------------|
| WE | 0.72 | 0.85 | - | - |
| PS | 0.70 | 0.38 | 0.84 | - |
| RAW | 0.58 | 0.62 | 0.58 | 0.766 |

AVE, average variance explained; WE, work engagement; PS, political skill; RAW, resilience at work.

Convergent and discriminant validity

The study referenced the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criteria to assess convergent and discriminant validity. As shown in Table 2, the average variance extracted was greater than > 0.5 , thus confirming the convergent validity of the measures. To test for discriminant validity, the square root of the AVE of each of the three measures should be larger than the correlation of the specific measures with any of the other measures. Based on this claim, see values in bold font in Table 2, discriminant validity was also confirmed.

Evaluating the moderation effect

Table 3 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis. The table displays four important data points regarding the moderation test. Firstly, it includes the unstandardised regression weight for the independent variable, work engagement, with the test statistic (t), the p -value and the confidence interval. Secondly, it captures the unstandardized regression weight for political skill, the moderating variable, with its test statistic, the p -value, and the confidence interval. Thirdly, it reports the unstandardised regression weight for the interaction between work engagement and political skill with the test statistic, the p -value and the confidence interval. If this is significant, it reveals that there is a moderation effect. Lastly, ΔR^2 , a measure of explained variance, is used to evaluate the size of the moderation effect.

Work engagement explained a substantial proportion of the observed variance in RAW ($\beta = 0.56$, 95% CI = [0.4902, 0.6324], $p = 0.001$), thus confirming Hypothesis 1. When the interaction term $X*W$ (work engagement * political skill) was added to the regression model, it represented a numerically small, yet statistically significant proportion of the observed variance in RAW ($\Delta R^2 = 0.14$, $F(1, 162) = 103.65$, $p = 0.000$). Specifically, 14% additional variance was explained by adding the $X*W$ interaction term to the model. This result supports Hypothesis 2. A closer look at the two-way interaction between work engagement and political skill on RAW demonstrates the additive effect of political skill. Specifically, the relationship between work engagement and RAW was more positive in employees who had higher (vs. lower) political skills.

TABLE 3a: The linear model of predictors for resilience at work.

| R | R^2 | MSE | F | $df1$ | $df2$ | P |
|--------|--------|--------|----------|--------|----------|--------|
| 0.8730 | 0.7762 | 1.3640 | 895.3056 | 1.0000 | 162.0000 | 0.0000 |

MSE, mean squared error.

TABLE 3b: Model.

| Variable | Coeff. | Se | T | P | LLCI | ULCI |
|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Constant | 0.4287 | 0.0526 | 4.5938 | 0.0021 | 0.3761 | 0.4813 |
| Political skill | 0.4233 | 0.1434 | 1.8337 | 0.0368 | 0.2799 | 0.5667 |
| Work engagement | 0.5613 | 0.0711 | 2.1021 | 0.0014 | 0.4902 | 0.6324 |
| Int_1 | 0.5971 | 0.1476 | 1.9356 | 0.0000 | 0.4495 | 0.7447 |

Note: Int_1 = work engagement X Political skill.

LLCI, lower level confidence interval; ULCI, upper level confidence interval.

TABLE 3c: Test of higher-order unconditional interaction.

| Variable | ΔR^2 | F | $df1$ | $df2$ | p |
|----------|--------------|----------|--------|----------|--------|
| $X*W$ | 0.1382 | 103.6497 | 1.0000 | 162.0000 | 0.0000 |

Note: Focal predictor - Work engagement (X); moderator: Political skill (W).

Discussion

Work engagement was positively and significantly related to resilience at work. Political skill moderated the relationship between work engagement and resilience at work.

The positive association between work engagement and resilience at work suggests that investments in work engagement-related resources nourish adaptive resources at work. Alternatively, work engagement has a protective effect. Work engagement replenishes resource losses prevalent in today's work environment, allowing employees to recover and thrive, albeit the challenges at work. In this vein, employees and the organisation should strive to enrich work engagement-related resources.

Yet, according to Gallup (2022), only one in five employees were engaged at work globally. Shoko and Zinyemba (2014), as well as Mpundu (2016), reported on the levels of work engagement in Zimbabwe. Both studies revealed concerning statistics; less than 40% of the employees in Zimbabwe were positively engaged at work. A multicountry study by Maleka et al. (2019) showed lowest work engagement scores among Zimbabwean employees compared with their South African and Namibian counterparts. A qualitative study by Sibanda et al. (2014) in the public sector also revealed low levels of work engagement that translated into suboptimal performance. This study's results suggest that the quality of resilience at work could be substantially compromised in low work engagement settings.

The work engagement resource straddles the work and nonwork domains (Sanhokwe, 2022b). A meta-analysis conducted in 2021 concluded that personal resources are more proximal to an employee's engagement than job resources (Mazzetti et al., 2021). Organisations benefit when employees tap into their personal reservoirs to stay engaged, hence the need to protect and avoid the exhaustion of personal, nonwork resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Viewed this way, nurturing the individual employee resources propagates resilience at work.

The moderating role of political skill suggests that work engagement and political skill are co-travellers that can emerge from carefully designed and nurtured environmental and developmental conditions to shape resilience at work and its associated outcomes (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The finding also supports the notion that employees' resources exist in context-specific conditions that can nurture or debilitate resource creation and sustenance (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Work engagement and political skills broaden and build personal and interpersonal resources, foster a sense of community and thus improve the odds of coping and surviving in today's complex business environments.

There was a 14% variance in resilience at work when the interaction term was added. Political skill has an additive effect on the work engagement-resilience at work relationship. While acknowledging the numerical size of the effect, the result is worth unpacking. On one hand, the result could imply that other factors are at play, expectedly so given the complexity of human behaviour and the workplace. On the other hand, the effect size could also point to the debilitating and enriching influence of political skill on the relationship with the latter being more pronounced. This posture recognises the need to be mindful of the positive and negative aspects of political skill at work.

The study empirically tested and confirmed that the quality of the interaction between individual and communal resources at work matters. Under such circumstances, stress – at the employee level – occurs when resources are threatened or lost. Stress also occurs when employees do not gain or regain core resources after a significant effort to do so (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In the current business environment, resource loss circumstances are high; thus resource gains become more important. Building and developing political skills and work engagement can help boost available resource streams and promote resiliency.

Theoretical and practical contributions

The study expanded the COR theory by integrating personal and social resources from the work context to explain the antecedents of resilience at work. As postulated by the COR theory, resilience can be treated as a personal resource that can be influenced by social resources created or discovered within the contextual work environment.

Traditionally, resources have been viewed as an asset that can be exhausted. Political skill could replenish the resilience at work resources if utilised appropriately. The onus is on organisational leaders to strategically integrate specific organisational practices with personal, interpersonal and other social forces in a manner that allows these positive behaviours and practices to be seen and serve as replenishable resources. This is critical under chaotic and complex environments where singular or parallel resource pathways may be necessary but insufficient to navigate employees (and, by extension, organisations) beyond adaptation to flourishing states.

Work engagement, political skills and resilience at work are developable capabilities and therefore warrant appropriate interventions at the organisational level (Veldsman & Johnson, 2016). Implied in this narrative is that leadership teams need to be aware of the environments that influence resources available to the employees. Organisational leaders should periodically profile employees to appreciate their levels of engagement, political skill and resilience at work to guide targeted interventions to enhance these capabilities. Only through well-thought-through, organisationally entrenched, evidence-driven approaches can employees be effectively transitioned off suboptimal states.

As posited by the COR theory, myriad resource streams reduce employee vulnerability; employees can easily attract more resources if they are embedded in multiple resource streams. In contrast, individuals lacking resources are highly vulnerable to resource loss culminating in a vicious cycle. Through dedicated surveys, organisations will appreciate asymmetry in work engagement, political skill and resilience at work. Such data should be used, in a mindful, respectful manner, to facilitate targeted remediation efforts. Cross-fertilisation of groups or individuals may generate valuable results.

Limitations and areas for future research

Although this was a cross-sectional study in which the moderation effect was observed at a specific point in time, it should be noted that resilience at work is not a static phenomenon, nor are work engagement and political skill. The cross-sectional nature of the study means reverse causality cannot be ruled out, more so between work engagement and resilience at work (see Malik & Garg, 2018). However, cross-sectional designs still suffice when conducting a single or multistage moderation analysis, as was the case in this study.

While the ΔR^2 , as a measure of explained variance, is routinely used to evaluate the size of moderation effect, it has its drawbacks. As Liu and Yuan (2021) articulated, not all the variance in the criterion variable – resilience at work – relates to the moderation effect. Therefore, an effect size with the total variance of resilience at work as the denominator does not accurately denote the true moderation effect. Furthermore, interaction and moderation may be conflated. Liu and Yuan (2021) propose new measures of moderation effects size calculation that future studies can utilise.

Conclusions

The study deepened our understanding of the integrative mechanisms that nourish employees' adaptive resources. The results suggest that work engagement and political skill act as integrated pathways to replenish resilience resources at work. Therefore, organisational leaders must inculcate and nurture cultures that promote these complementary capabilities if they are to enjoy adaptive advantages, a critical need in today's operating environment.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

H.S. conceptualised the study, developed the data collection tools, reported and interpreted the results, and contributed in the overall write-up of the manuscript. W.C. supervised the study and contributed to the overall write-up of the manuscript.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study can be made available by the corresponding author, H.S., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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