

ENGAGEMENT AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

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Abstract. The article presents a contemporary theoretical overview as well as empirical research from 2024 on two important topics for Bulgarian organizations: work-life balance and engagement. It examines the interrelationships between these two phenomena, as well as how and to what extent current workplace status influences them. The scientific empirical study was conducted among 432 employees from Bulgaria. The results of the correlation analysis showed a high positive correlation between the subscales of engagement: Vigor, Dedication, and Absorption ($p < 0.001$). A positive, although weak, correlation was also found between work-life balance and engagement. The results indicated that managers and business owners have the highest level of engagement ($p < 0.001$). The article also discusses approaches for increasing work engagement.

Keywords: work engagement; work-life balance; organisational psychology; Bulgarian managers

Introduction

Bulgarian organizations have been undergoing dynamic changes over the past thirty years. In many contemporary organizations, deliberate actions are initiated to engage and retain employees and talents, who are considered their most important asset. Unemployment in Bulgaria is at a record low (around 4,5%, according the official statistics in Bulgaria), making it a priority and a strategic imperative for companies to do their utmost to retain and engage their people.

Theoretical background

Work Engagement

The challenges that organizations in our century face are globalization, digitalization, and the pursuit to discover, develop, retain, and engage the best

people, the talents. Engaged employees are what every organization strives for, because people are what drive organizations forward. Historically, there was more emphasis on machines and technologies; now it is people who are becoming increasingly important. In contemporary psychological literature, this positive, meaningful work-related state is characterized by three main components: vigor, dedication, and absorption in work (Schaufeli et al. 2002; Bakker & Demerouti 2008).

Proceeding from the idea of psychological research aimed at positive organizational behaviour, which is defined as the study and focus on the strengths of human capital and looking at the psychological abilities and resources that can be measured, developed, and utilized to achieve maximum work performance (Luthans & Peterson 2002). The emphasis is placed on and the search is directed towards what drives us forward, what the resources are, and what the positive aspects of the workplace are in an organizational context. One of the main components of positive organizational behaviour is work engagement. There is abundant empirical evidence for the positive impact of high levels of employee engagement on higher levels of job performance, customer satisfaction, lower turnover, and hence better organizational results.

Work Engagement – psychological approaches

In psychological literature, one of the best and empirically proven definitions of work engagement is that of the Dutch psychologist Schaufeli and his colleagues, who define engagement as “a positive state of mind characterized by Vigor, Dedication, and Absorption” (Schaufeli et al. 2002). The ‘Vigor’ component is characterized by high levels of mental resilience and stamina while the employee is working. ‘Dedication’ is associated with employees being highly interested in their work and experiencing a sense of significance, meaning, enthusiasm, and challenges. ‘Absorption’ relates to absolute concentration and joyful immersion in work, where time passes quickly and it becomes difficult to detach from the work that one is engrossed in (Figure 1). These employees also get tired, but they are filled with energy, enthusiasm, and absorption in the work process, leading them to achieve high results and stay in their jobs. What is specific about engaged employees is that they are not negatively addicted to their work like workaholics.



Figure 1. Elements of Psychological Work Engagement (Schaufeli et al. 2002)

Levels of engagement may vary depending on different personality and individual traits. Younger employees might be positive when they first join an organization,

but can quickly become disengaged. Highly extroverted and adaptable individuals are more likely to be engaged. Managers are generally more engaged than regular employees. Engagement is a choice, depending on what the employee believes is worth investing their energy, emotions, and dedication into (Robertson-Smith & Markwick 2009).

A key element is the opportunity for employee empowerment and their freedom to contribute ideas in an organizational context. For example, according to researchers such as Lawler and Worley (2006), to effectively engage employees and positively influence their engagement, it is necessary to empower employees. They argue that this will help employees to develop decision-making abilities that are important for their performance and the quality of their work. Empowerment can range from relatively low levels of influence, such as providing options for decisions made by others, to having the final say in decisions and their consequences.

To better understand engagement, which is crucial for leadership and organizational outcomes, as well as for how people feel within organizations, it is necessary to know more about the factors that influence it. These factors are both individual and organizational. There are several commonly cited engagement drivers: the nature of the work performed, work with meaning and purpose, opportunities for development, receiving timely recognition and rewards, building good and respectful relationships, open two-way communication, and inspirational leadership (Robertson-Smith & Markwick 2009). Providing employees with the opportunity to express their opinions is a key factor in maintaining and enhancing high levels of engagement and job performance. It is important to emphasize the significance of leadership and communication within organizations. The role of leaders in relation to engagement is crucial, and they can have a strong impact. Top management in organizations has control over all key drivers and, moreover, influences the engagement of other employees through their interactions with them (Truss et al. 2013).

According to a study by Towers Perrin (2003), both emotions and rational elements are outlined as the main components of commitment. They believe that emotional factors are related to the satisfaction experienced by the individual, as well as the sense of inspiration they receive from their work and from the organization. A key element here is the sense of personal achievement at work. In contrast, rational factors typically relate to the connection between the individual and the broader corporation. For this purpose, the role of managers and the onboarding process are important to achieve a good understanding of employees about their work and role.

In recent years, authors have emphasized the role of engagement on economic outcomes (Mansoor & Hassan 2016). According to the results of studies involving tens of thousands of employees from over 40 companies in several countries, both operating and net profit significantly decreased over a three-year period as a result of low engagement. Organizations with low engagement do not perform

well financially. Different definitions and directions are given for engagement in scientific literature, which help us better understand the construct and its influence, both for the employees themselves and for organizations (Batalova & Naydenova 2022). In Bulgaria, research on engagement has only been conducted in recent years, focusing on the influence of leadership on engagement, gender and other differences, and factors that affect it (Alexandrova-Karamanova et al. 2022). Regarding the effects of work engagement, the focus is on forming a positive attitude toward work and the organization, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and less frequently, intention to leave. Additionally, the relationship with positive organizational behaviour (personal initiative, motivation for learning, and proactive behavior) and work performance is emphasized.

Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance, broadly defined as the balance between work responsibilities and personal life, is a significant topic in today's society – for workers, organizations, and families alike. The increase in the number of studies on the construct, especially in recent years, highlights the importance of the issue for scholars as well (Verma et al. 2024). Some definitions of work-life balance focus on time spent in work and non-work environments, others on task performance satisfaction in each environment or on the importance of each role to the individual. There is a general consensus that the construct's definition should better focus on work-life rather than work-family in order to include non-family-related responsibilities and demands such as education or travel (Brough et al. 2020).

Analyses of studies on the topic of work-life balance establish the need for refinement of the construct towards a more precise definition and reliable measurement based on it. A significant issue turns out to be the lack of a specific tool for studying the construct. Kalliath & Brough attempt to overcome the limitations of previous definitions and define work-life balance as the individual perception that work and non-work activities are compatible and lead to development according to the individual's current life priorities. Brough et al. base their theoretical model on this definition to create a new methodology. They also incorporate Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources theory of stress, which emphasizes the individuals' need to create, preserve and protect the quality of their resources (Brough et al. 2014). Scholars relate this theory by looking at work-life balance as a resource (each person can estimate at any time how much of it they have), the evaluation of it is subjective and people can win or lose this resource. Based on these arguments, work-life balance can be defined as "an individual's subjective appraisal of the accord between his/her work and non-work activities and life more generally" (Brough et al. 2014, p. 2728). Based on their theoretical premises, Brough et al. create and validate a new work-life balance research methodology, which will be used in the present study. The application of cited methodology,

logically implies the use of this specific definition as a groundwork of data analysis of present research.

Work-life balance, a meaningful goal and ideal state for employees, has become increasingly difficult to achieve in recent years, as the use of work-related information technology blurs the boundary between work and other life domains (Ma et al. 2021). There is a strong link between work-life balance and turnover – employees who experience chronic imbalance seek alternative employment with a more “family-oriented” employer (Brough et al. 2014). It turns out that organizations that do not take work-life balance into account risk losing valuable employees (Ma et al. 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to develop a truly emotionally oriented culture within organizations (Landolfi et al. 2022).

Another aspect of the role of organizations, according to Kreiner, is the need to reduce the obsessive passion for work and its prioritization, or workaholism, at an organizational level. This can be achieved through clear rules and the encouragement of a balanced and healthy lifestyle (Huyghebaert-Zouaghi et al. 2022). It is useful for organizations and employees to know that the conflict between work and non-work life follows a certain curve throughout an individual’s life path—it reaches its peak after the birth of a child and its level remains high until the time when children enter adolescence (Clark et al. 2019). On the other hand, it should also be taken into account that there is empirical evidence for the significant role of individual personality traits in managing work-family conflict (Selvarajan et al. 2016).

The issue of work-life balance (including work-family conflict and work-family balance) has attracted the interest of researchers in Bulgaria as well (Batalova & Naydenova 2022; Nedeva-Atanasova & Andreev 2013; Andreev et al. 2019). However, the relationships between the constructs and other important variables related to the organizational context have not been sufficiently studied. An analysis of data for Bulgaria from the European Social Survey shows that a higher level of education is associated with higher satisfaction with work-life balance and that women are less satisfied with the achieved balance. Respondents who are business owners, however, significantly less often achieve a good balance between the time dedicated to work and personal life (Dimitrova 2019).

Work Engagement and Work-Life Balance

In today’s fast-paced world and the increased demands of the workplace, it is becoming increasingly crucial for employees to find a good work-life balance, which would positively influence their job engagement, well-being, and work performance. It is also important for employers to create good conditions that do not overburden their employees, allowing them to be productive and engaged at work. On the other hand, putting too much energy and dedication into work can also lead to a disruption of the work-life balance. Research by various authors indicates that an individual’s personal life can significantly impact their work and engagement, and vice versa (Timms et al. 2015). It should be noted that both work and family

life in the modern world demand a great deal of effort, emotional investment, time and dedication.

Some authors also explore the “dark side” of the relationship between engagement and work-life balance (Ugwu et al. 2022). In 2022, Ugwu et al. investigated the work engagement – work-life balance connection, and the mediating role of home demands in this relationship among knowledge workers under conditions of work from home. Results revealed that work engagement was related positively to home demands. The results also showed that home demands related negatively to work-life balance and that work engagement related negatively to work-life balance. The results further showed that home demands mediated the negative work engagement – work-life balance link. Thus, it may turn out that employees are left with too few resources to balance work and personal life, leading to conflict and stress for them.

Research Model and Hypotheses

Based on the presented theoretical analysis of the problem of work engagement and work-life balance, a research model of the interrelationships between the constructs was developed (Figure 2).

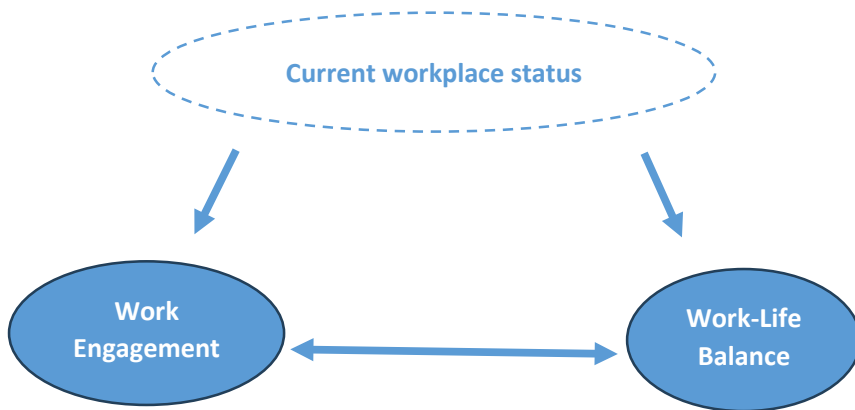


Figure 2. Research Model “Interactions between Work Engagement and Work-Life Balance and the influence of the current workplace status“

The present study aims to research the relationships between work engagement and work-life balance by analyzing the influence of the current workplace status. Based on the proposed research model, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

Hypothesis 1. It is expected that there will be a positive interrelationship between work engagement and work-life balance.

Hypothesis 2. It is assumed that managers/team leaders and business owners will have higher scores on work engagement but lower scores on work-life balance (Dimitrova 2019), compared to employees. A higher position in the hierarchy is expected to lead to a greater (often very dynamic) volume of work commitments, thus requiring more dedication.

Method

Sample and Procedure

After selecting the research methodologies, an anonymous online questionnaire was prepared using the LimeSurvey platform. The questionnaire was distributed among organizations in both the private and public sectors, as well as within groups on social networks. To ensure the accuracy of the analysis of the main constructs, it was explicitly stated in the introduction of the questionnaire that it is intended for employed individuals. The research was conducted in April and May 2024, and a total of 432 participants from Bulgaria took part in the study. The distribution of respondents by subgroups based on socio-demographic and work-related characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Subgroups based on respondents' gender, age, level of education and current workplace status – frequencies and percentages

	Subgroups	Frequency	Valid Percent
Gender (N=432)	Women	300	69.4
	Men	132	30.6
Age (N=432)	<= 30 years old	73	16.9
	31 – 40 years old	129	29.9
	41 – 50 years old	167	38.7
	51+ years old	63	14.6
Level of education (N=431)	Secondary school graduates	69	16.0
	University graduates	335	77.7
	PhD graduates	27	6.3
Current workplace status (N=432)	Employee	242	56.0
	Manager/team leader	118	27.3
	Business owner	24	5.6
	Other	48	11.1

The sample distribution indicates that the larger number of respondents are women (69%) at the most important age in career development (31–40 years old–30% and 41–50 years old–39%). Most participants are university graduates (78%), and their current workplace status is employee (56%).

Measures

A psychological study was conducted, incorporating scales to examine a series of constructs significant for scientific analysis and organizational practice – work engagement, well-being, proactive behavior, work-life balance, etc. The present analysis focuses on the results obtained for the main constructs of the research model.

Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9)

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale-9 measures work engagement, defined as a positive work-related state of fulfillment that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al. 2006). An empirical study in 10 different countries (14,521 respondents) indicated that the original 17-item UWES can be shortened to 9 items (UWES-9). Participants indicate their opinion on a 7-point frequency rating scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (always). The factorial validity of the UWES-9 was demonstrated using confirmatory factor analyses. The three scale scores have good internal consistency and test-retest reliability.

The UWES-17 scale is available in Bulgarian and applied in Bulgarian studies (Naydenova 2022, etc.), but the shortened UWES-9 version is not popular yet among the scientists in the country.

Work-Life Balance Scale (WLBS)

Brough et al. developed a new methodology for studying work-life balance and conducted three independent studies (including a longitudinal study) using it with four different samples of employees from Australia and New Zealand (a total of 6,983 participants) (Brough et al. 2014). The methodology is concise, based on qualitative research, and consists of 4 items that are clearly formulated for employees at all levels of the organizational hierarchy. Participants indicate their level of agreement on a 5-point scale (from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree”). Higher scores on the scale indicate a higher perceived level of balance. The study by the authors demonstrates the unidimensional factor structure of the instrument, its good psychometric characteristics, and criterion validity. At present, no data have been found regarding previous scientific studies using the WLBS in Bulgaria. To utilize this scale with a Bulgarian sample, it was translated from English into Bulgarian. The procedure also included subsequent back-translation into English to ensure accuracy.

Data analysis

In order to test raised hypotheses, the Pearson Correlation analysis as well as Mean Differences with Eta Coefficient and One-Way ANOVA analysis with Games-Howell Post Hoc Multiple Comparisons were applied.

Results

The Reliability analysis of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) shows very good internal consistency of the methodology in the present Bulgarian study – for the scale as a whole ($\alpha=.940$), as well as for the subscales (Vigor Scale $\alpha=.876$, Dedication Scale $\alpha=.889$ and Absorption Scale $\alpha=.832$). Data analysis indicates

that the internal consistency of the Work-Life Balance Scale (WLBS) is very good ($\alpha=.887$), too. The interrelationships between the elements of work engagement and their connections with work-life balance in organizations in Bulgaria in 2024 are being tracked. In order to test **Hypothesis 1**, a Pearson Correlation analysis is applied (Table 2).

Table 2. Intercorrelations of work engagement (general score and subscales) and work-life balance

Constructs	Vigor	Dedication	Absorption	Work Engagement	Work-Life Balance
Vigor	1	,842**	,732**	,928**	,202**
Dedication		1	,777**	,947**	,240**
Absorption			1	,900**	,141**
Work Engagement				1	,212**

Note. **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). N=413.

The results of the correlation analysis showed a positive relationship between the phenomena of work engagement and work-life balance (0.212, $p<0.001$), indicating a weak but positive correlation. This means that for the sample from private and public organizations in Bulgaria, employees who experience a good work-life balance are positively associated with higher work engagement, and conversely, employees' engagement is positively associated with a good work-life balance. The strongest correlation of work-life balance and elements of work engagement is with Dedication (0.240, $p<0.001$)—more dedicated employees have a higher level of work-life balance and vice versa.

Additionally, the interrelationships between the three elements of psychological engagement – Vigor (Energy), Dedication, and Absorption – and the strength of the relationships between them are examined. The results of the correlation analysis showed a high positive correlation between Vigor (Energy) and Dedication (0.842, $p<0.001$). Energy is a part of engagement and refers to high levels of Vigor, the willingness to invest more effort, and is characterized by resilience. Energetic employees do not easily despair; instead, they have a strong desire to overcome difficulties and challenges. Employees with high Energy scores are notably enthusiastic, willing, and energetic while working, in contrast to those with low scores.

A strong correlation is observed with the dedication of employees in the surveyed Bulgarian organizations. Dedicated employees identify with their work because they find it inspiring, meaningful, and challenging. Those with low dedication scores typically do not feel inspired or proud of their work. Dedication consists of questions related to the feeling of significance from work, enthusiasm,

and pride in one's labour—feeling inspired and challenged by one's work, truly dedicated.

The results of the correlation analysis showed a high positive correlation between Vigor (Energy) and Absorption (0.732, $p < 0.001$). Employees who are absorbed in their work find it difficult to detach from it, feeling as if time flies. A strong positive relationship is established between the energy levels of the surveyed employees and their absorption in their work. Absorption is characterized by the feeling of being 'immersed' in work, not wanting to detach from it, the sensation that time flies, and a forgetfulness of everything else.

Moreover, their values seemed to align well with those of the organization they worked for, and they appeared to be engaged in other activities outside of work. Although these engaged employees reported sometimes feeling tired, they described their fatigue as quite a pleasant state because it was associated with positive feelings and a sense of accomplishment. They demonstrated resilience and employed effective coping strategies.

The results of the correlation analysis showed a high positive correlation between Absorption and Dedication (0.777, $p < 0.001$). According to various studies by Schaufeli, as well as Bakker and colleagues, engaged employees are not workaholics because they enjoy other things outside of work and, unlike workaholics, do not work hard due to a strong and irresistible inner drive but because they find work enjoyable (Schaufeli et al. 2002; Bakker & Demerouti 2008). Presented results, regarding the positive interrelationship between work engagement and work-life balance **support Hypothesis 1.**

Hypothesis 2. is tested by means of a series of Mean Differences with Eta Coefficient and One-Way ANOVA analyses. As the subgroups in the analysis are more than two (employees, managers/team leaders, business owners, and other), a Games-Howell Post Hoc Multiple Comparisons is applied in order to determine if there are any statistically significant differences between every pair of subgroups.

Present analysis indicates that there are not any statistically significant differences in respondents' scores on work-life balance, related to respondents' **current workplace status** ($p > .05$). There are statistically significant differences in participants' scores on work engagement ($F = 8.343$, $p < 0.001$), inclusively at a subscales level – Vigor subscale ($F = 6.713$, $p < 0.001$), Dedication subscale ($F = 8.162$, $p < 0.001$) and Absorption subscale ($F = 6.903$, $p < 0.001$), based on **current workplace status** (Figure 3).

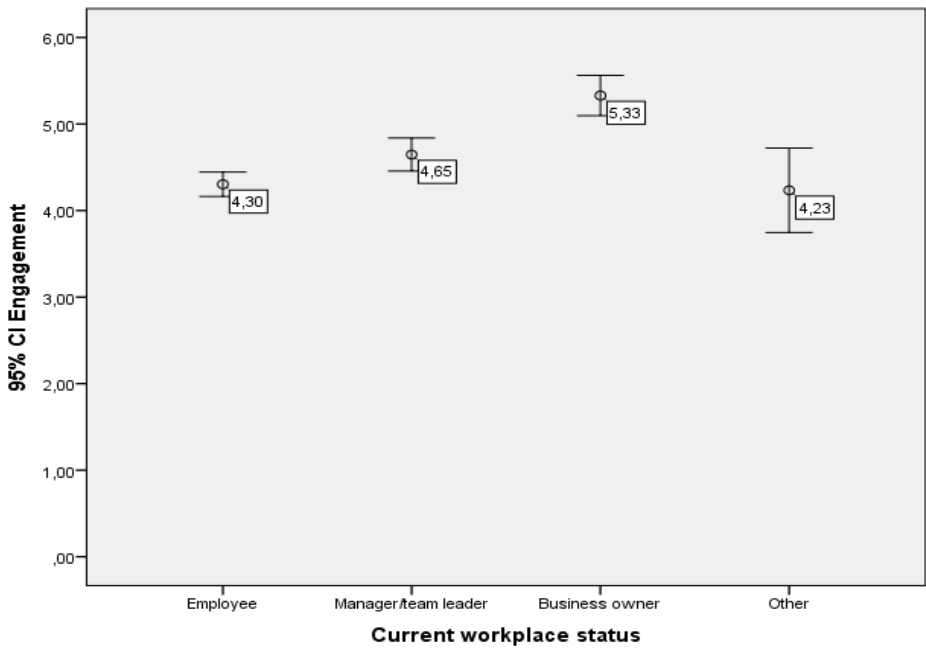


Figure 3. Statistically significant differences in scores on work engagement (incl. at a subscales level) between respondents with different current workplace status (N=413)

The Eta Coefficient for Vigor subscale and Absorption subscale shows that there is a small effect size ($<.24$). For the Dedication subscale and Engagement scale the effect size is medium ($<.37$). The Games-Howell Post Hoc Multiple Comparisons indicate, that there are statistically significant differences between the following subgroups: Business owner vs. Employee and Manager/team leader and Other (Vigor subscale and Absorption subscale); Manager/team leader vs. Employee, Business owner vs. Employee and Manager/team leader and Other (Dedication subscale and Engagement scale).

The results also revealed that managers and business owners in the Bulgarian sample are significantly more engaged compared to employees and other groups studied. This data is consistent with results from European studies, which observe a trend where, on the one hand, managers have higher levels of engagement in their work, and on the other hand, they are key drivers and positive factors for engagement. Leader engagement is fundamental to good management in any company, affecting effectiveness and employee retention (Markos & Sridevi 2010; Naydenova 2022; Wollard 2011). According to Klusmann and colleagues, there

is a strong correlation between high engagement of managers and leaders in organizations and increased performance and profitability, as well as talent retention and increased customer satisfaction, leading to overall better results for companies (Klussmann 2009). Training managers to successfully manage their employees so that they can develop and reveal their best selves and their potential is a top priority for organizations.

The absence of statistically significant differences in participants' scores on work-life balance, based on their current workplace status, indicated that maybe not the position, but probably work tasks and commitments, or other work-related factors, are more important for the achieved level of work-life balance. Moreover, social support is one of the main moderating constructs of work-life balance (Brough et al. 2014); hence, it is one of the most important constructs in work-life balance analysis. In Bulgarian scientific literature, the construct of social support has primarily been studied in the context of stress management, with a focus on specific groups (Panchelieva et al. 2023, etc.). However, there is a lack of Bulgarian research data on the influence of different sources of social support in relation to solving problems in both work and personal life. The interactions between work-life balance and social support are explored by the authors of the present study, but the detailed analysis of the problem will be presented in upcoming analyses. Cited results regarding **the influence of respondents' current workplace status** on their scores on work engagement and work-life balance indicate that **Hypothesis 2. is partially supported.**

Discussion

The aim of the article was to review two phenomena – work engagement and work-life balance – and to present the results of a psychological study conducted in Bulgaria in 2024 among over 430 employees. The data analysis showed a positive, although weak, correlation between work-life balance and work engagement. Managers and business owners have the highest level of engagement. The results obtained from the study are extremely interesting and demonstrate that the phenomenon of engagement is very complex and influenced by various factors. Leaders should focus on all groups of employees, understanding their specific characteristics and trends well. The discovered positive correlation between work-life balance and engagement is also a finding that can assist in developing human resource management strategies within an organizational context. It becomes clear that leaders should pay attention to the specifics of different employee groups and apply strategies tailored to them. Key factors are the good development of managers as a key to engagement, as well as good human resource management practices. In regard to results related to work-life balance, the absence of differences in respondents' scores, based on current workplace status probably indicates the need for analysis of the influence of other factors on the construct. Data for such factors

as type of work activity, social support, etc. has been collected in present research and will be analyzed in detail in further publications.

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