

Accentuating the Positive

A Study of Positive Psychological Capital at Work

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About the Author

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About the Research

This research was carried out under the auspices of the cooperative alliance between the University of Western Australia Business School and the Australian Institute of Management in Western Australia.

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Executive Summary

Positive psychological capital (or *PsyCap*) is the term used by work psychologists to describe a positive work-related state of mind involving feelings of (1) hope, (2) optimism, (3) confidence and (4) resilience. Recent research has identified these four components of *PsyCap* as major potential influences on a person's level of performance, organizational commitment and satisfaction with their job.

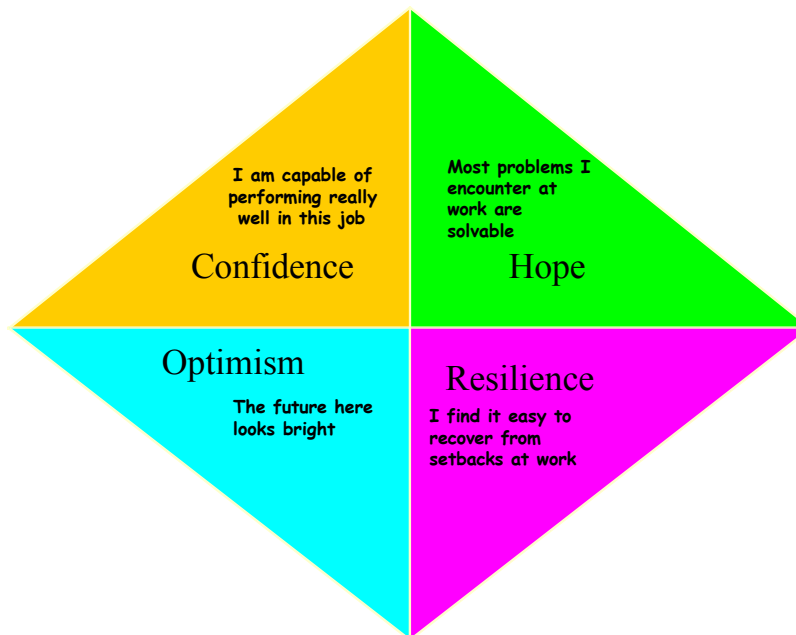
The program of research that is described in this report seeks to identify some of the major causes and further consequences of *PsyCap* for managers. Specifically, the research examines the degree to which managers' *PsyCap* is related to certain core experiences at work – engaging work roles, fairness in the distribution and administration of rewards and promotion, a supportive interpersonal climate and strong person-organization match. The study also seeks to demonstrate the importance of *PsyCap* for both managers and organizations, by investigating its impact on managers' psychological well-being and job satisfaction and on their intention to remain in a job.

This report presents the findings of two surveys of AIM-WA members, carried out in 2007 and 2008. Some of the major findings of the research are as follows:

Introduction

In recent times, organizational researchers have begun to use the term *psychological capital (PsyCap)* to denote a collection of psychological states that act as positive internal resources to individual employees as they seek to meet the challenges and responsibilities of their work roles. These psychological orientations are changeable, developing over time in response to events and conditions in one's working life and beyond. *PsyCap* has been found to consist of four main elements or component psychological orientations. These are hope, optimism, resilience, and confidence.

Figure 1. The four facets of *PsyCap*



Hope is a positive motivational state reflected in an individual's belief that there exist realistic pathways to goals, along with a determination to pursue those pathways. Hope thus has been described as involving both pathways thinking and a sense of agency. Empirical studies have demonstrated that hope may be enhanced by means of a variety of goal-related interventions, and that it is related to a range of general psychological and behavioural outcomes, including depression and life expectancy. It has also been linked to work-related outcomes such as performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

Optimism is described as positive expectation about what the future holds. An optimist is someone who characteristically makes internal, stable and global attributions about the causes of positive outcomes, and external, temporary and specific attributions regarding negative outcomes. Being pessimistic, by contrast, means inevitably attributing beneficial outcomes, such as success, to external, temporary and situation-specific causes. As with hope, optimism is viewed as having both trait and state forms, and is able to be learned and enhanced through training and experience.

Resilience has been defined as an individual's capacity to make positive adjustments in the face of, and to recover effectively from, significant challenges, such as failure, adversity or even overwhelming success. Resilience is seen as being trainable and has

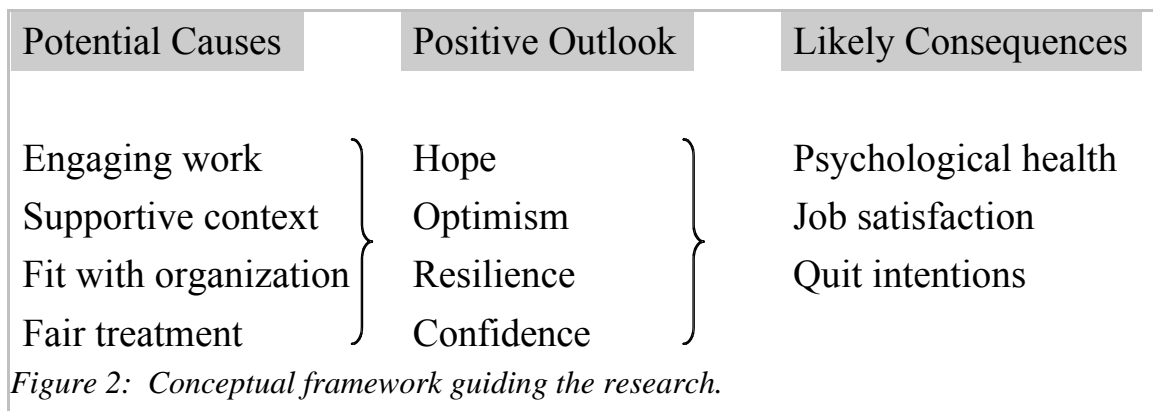
been linked to a variety of psychological, behavioural and organizational outcomes, such as stress, performance, and turnover.

Finally, there is *confidence* (sometimes called efficacy). In this context, confidence refers to a belief in one’s capabilities to generate the necessary resources and courses of action to perform effectively. Confidence has been found to be a major determinant of how effectively people learn and adapt in organizations, and also of their willingness to persist in the face of challenging performance goals.

‘Accentuating the Positive’ Research Project

The ‘Accentuating the Positive’ research project was initiated in 2007, as part of celebrations to mark the 50th anniversary of the formation of AIM-WA. In April 2007, AIM-WA members were sent an email invitation to participate in the study, by completing an online survey. In May 2008, an invitation to participate in a follow-up survey was sent. These two waves of survey data form the basis of the research that is described in this report.

To guide the measurement and data analysis process, a simple theoretical model of potential antecedents and consequences of positive PsyCap was developed. This is presented in Figure 2 below.



As mentioned earlier, at the core of our investigation are the four facets of positive *PsyCap*. Summary definitions are as follows:

Hope. A positive motivational state based on a belief that there are plausible pathways to desired goals.

Optimism. An attitude reflected in a positive expectation about what the future holds.

Resilience. A belief in one’s capacity to cope effectively in the face of significant challenges, including failure.

Confidence. The belief that one possesses the capabilities necessary for effective task performance.

To tap these variables and others in our guiding model, we used a variety of standardized measures that have been used in previous research studies of positive outlook. Details on these, and all the measures used in our study, are provided in Appendix A.

Sample Characteristics

A total of 560 members completed the survey in 2007 and 314 in 2008. Though both numbers reflect a relatively small proportion of AIM-WA’s overall membership, an examination of sample demographics indicates that the two samples are demographically fairly similar and are broadly representative of the membership as a whole. It is also worth noting that the 2007 and 2008 samples overlap to a very small extent. Only 38 people provided complete data on both occasions.

	2007	2008
Number of respondents	560	314
Average age	42 yrs	43 yrs
Percentage of women	51%	44%
Tertiary qualified	72%	72%
Average tenure in job	4.9 yrs	4.6 yrs

Table 1: Sample characteristics

More details on sample characteristics are provided in Figures 3 to 7. As Figure 3 illustrates, the job tenure distribution of the two samples is fairly similar, with the majority of respondents on both occasions having been in their current job three years or less.

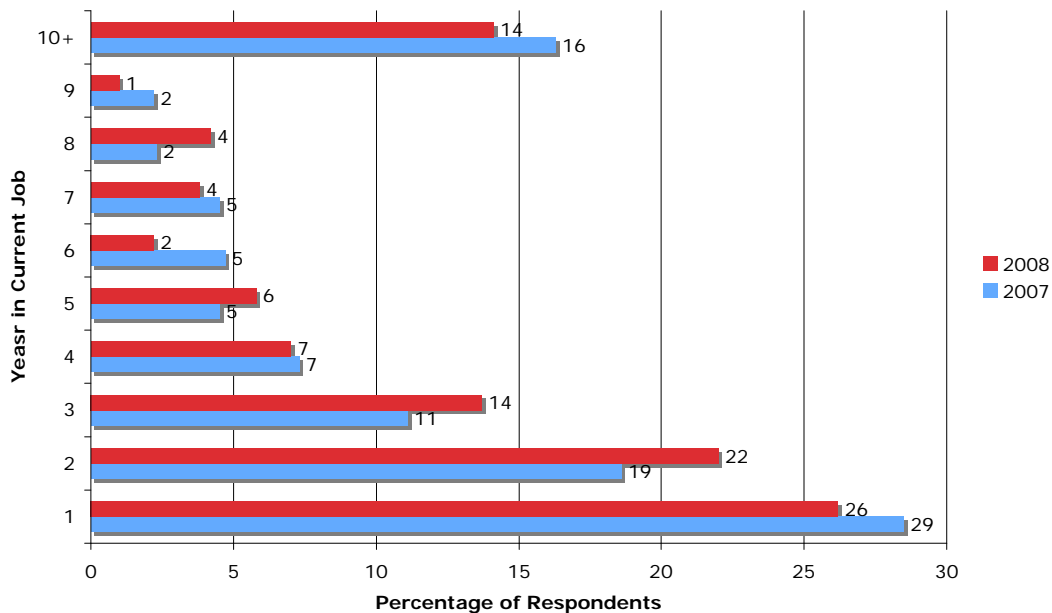


Figure 3: Job tenure for respondents

The education profiles of the two samples are also very similar, with the modal response reflecting a postgraduate qualification as the highest level of educational attainment.

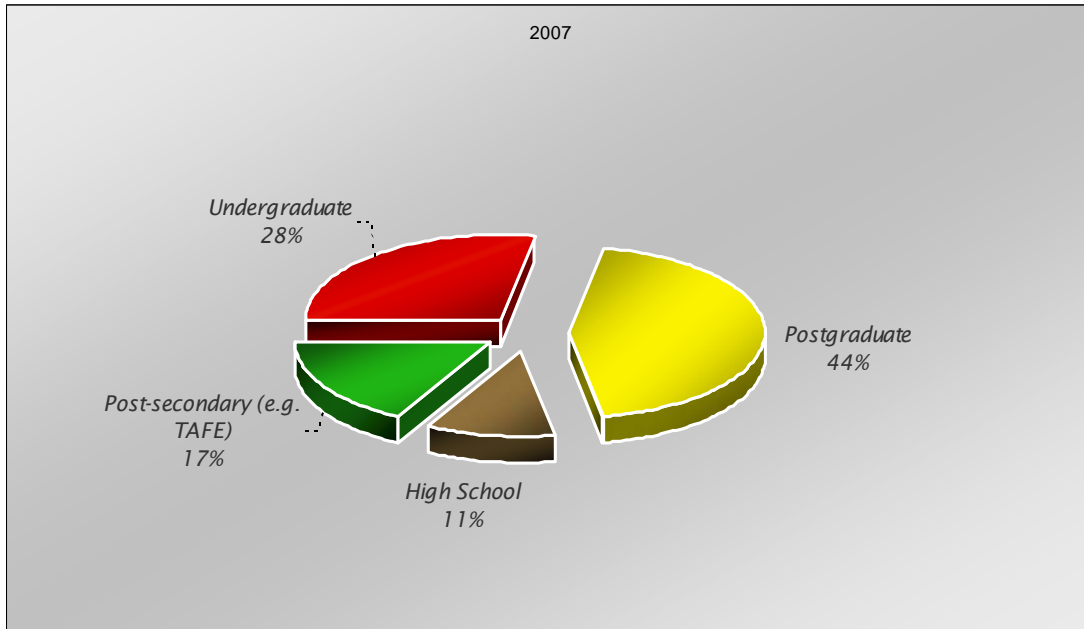


Figure 4: 2007 respondents' level of education.

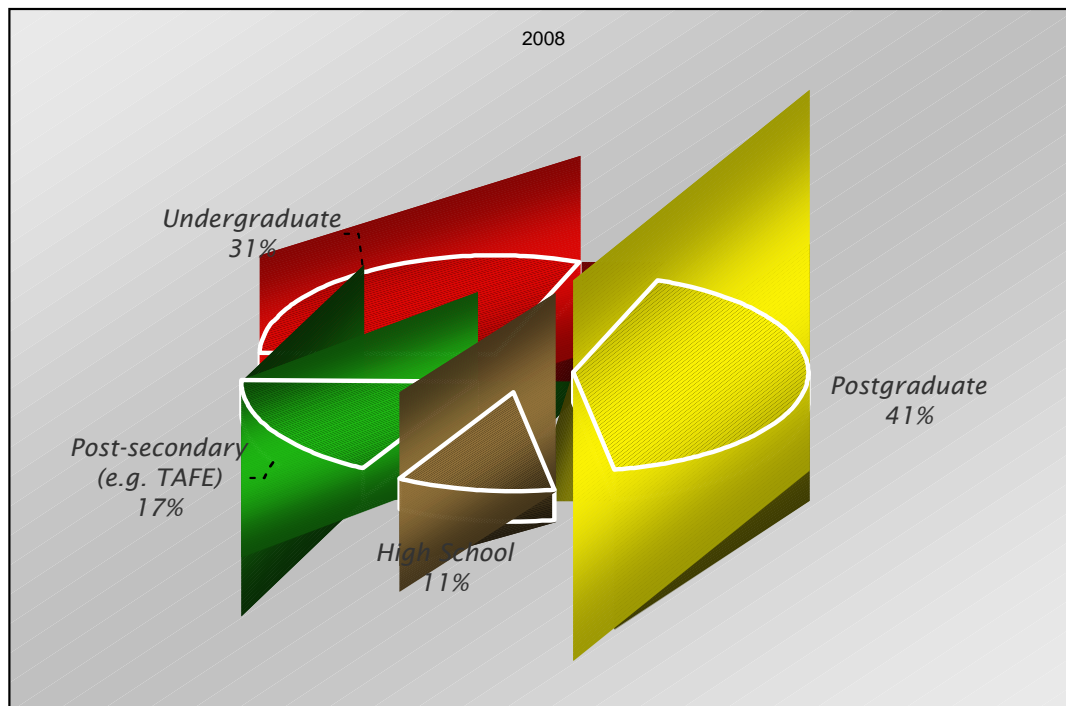


Figure 5: 2008 respondents' level of education.

In 2007, the most common industries represented were mining and government.

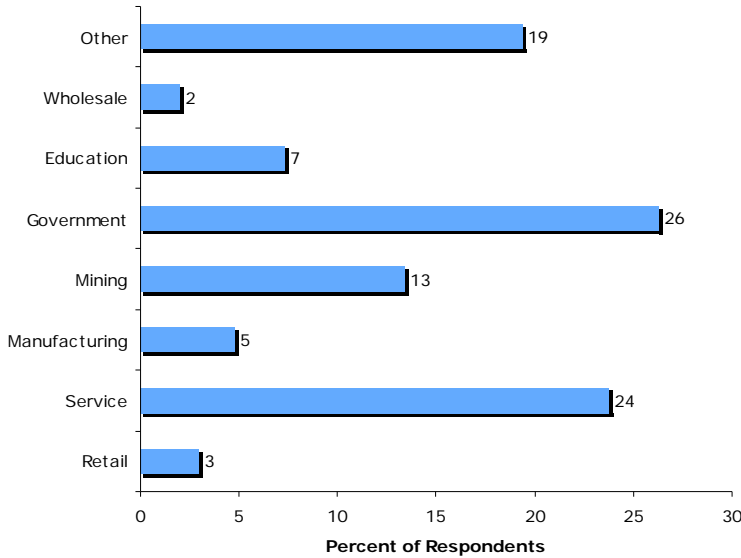


Figure 6: Industry sectors represented in 2007 sample.

In the 2008 survey, a more detailed assessment of industry background was sought. As shown in Figure 6, the strongest industry representation in 2008 was also from the area of mining, followed by health care and social assistance, and public administration and safety.

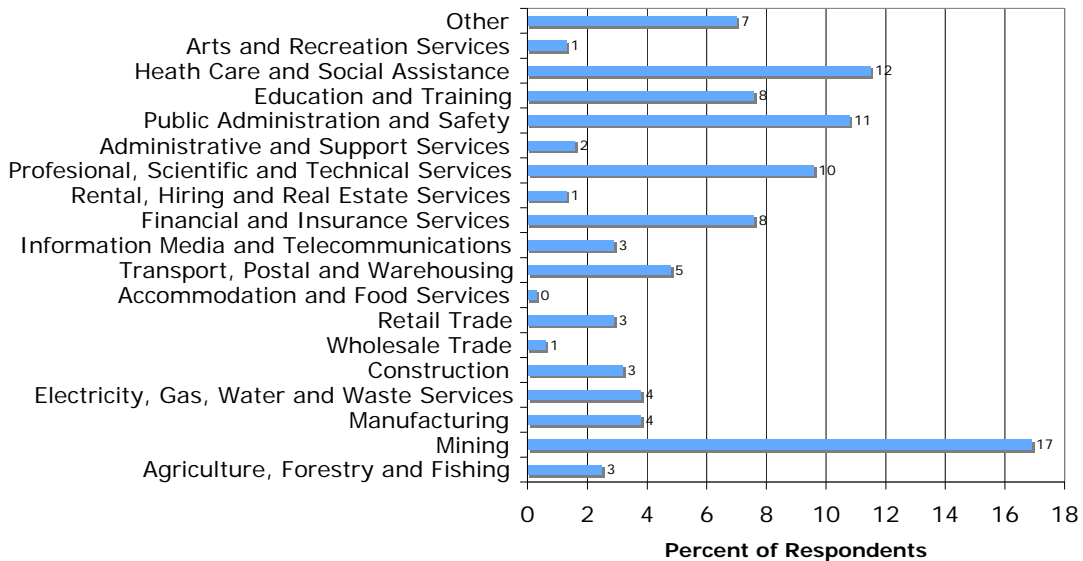


Figure 7: Industry sectors represented in 2008 sample.

The age distributions of the two samples are presented in Figure 7. The two sample distributions do not appear to differ markedly from each other. If anything, the 2007 distribution has a slightly higher representation of people under the age of 40, and this is reflected in the slightly lower average age for the 2007 sample.

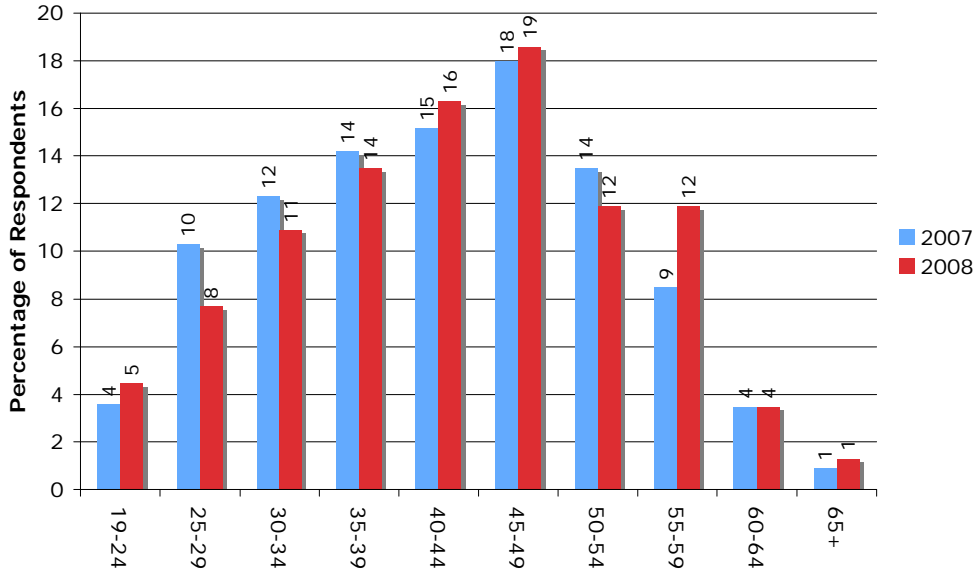


Figure 8: Age distribution of respondents.

Finally, Figures 9 and 10 shows respondents’ job type for the two samples. Note that slightly different classification was used in 2007, meaning that the two sets of data are not directly comparable on this aspect.



Figure 9: 2007 respondents’ job type.

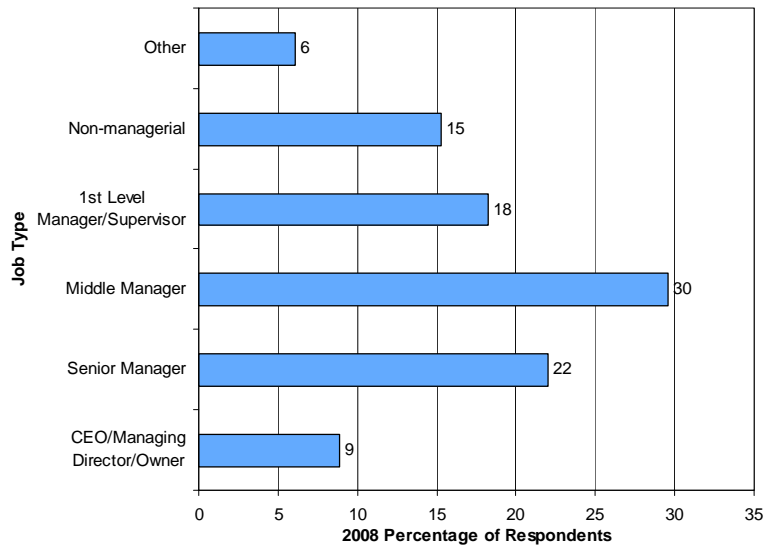


Figure 10: 2008 respondents' job type.

Key Findings

Psychological well-being

In 2007, around 40% of the sample reported having experienced three or more symptoms of low psychological well-being over the weeks immediately preceding the survey. Such symptoms might include losing sleep through worry, or feeling anxious or depressed about things. In the 2008 survey, this proportion declined markedly, with only 30% reported experiencing 3 or more such symptoms. The average number of minor symptoms of psychological ill-health reported was 1.96 for the 2008 sample as a whole, compared with 2.5 in 2007.

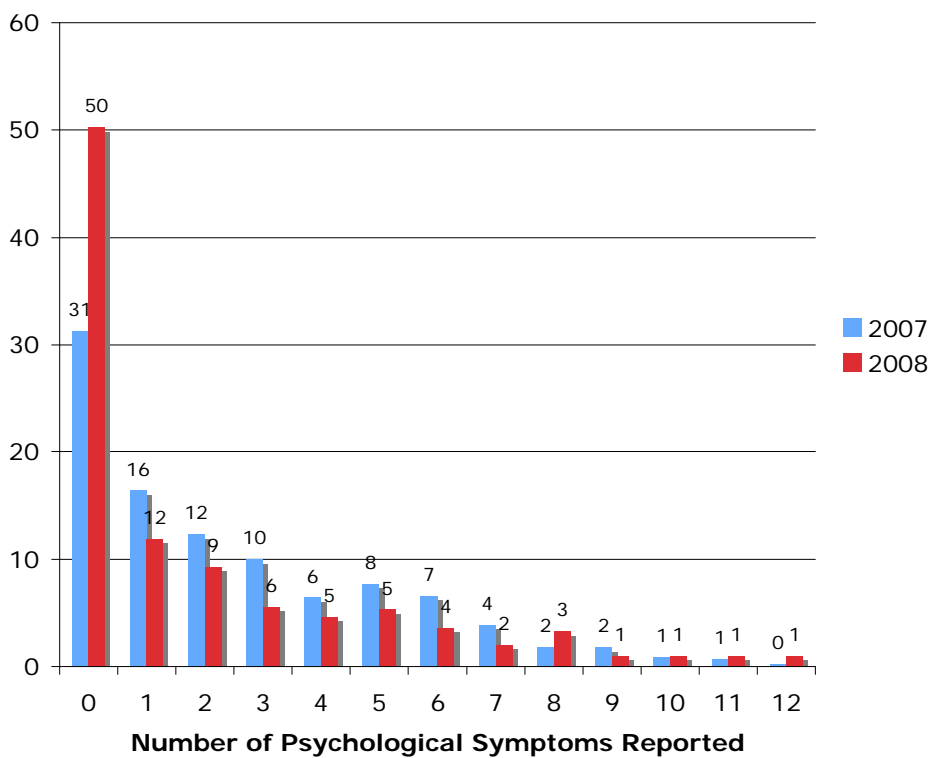


Figure 11: Percentage of managers reporting symptoms of psychological ill-health

Turnover intentions

In 2007, over half of respondents reported having occasional thoughts of leaving their current employer. One third expressed the view that they would leave within the next few years, while over ten percent planned to change jobs in the next few months.

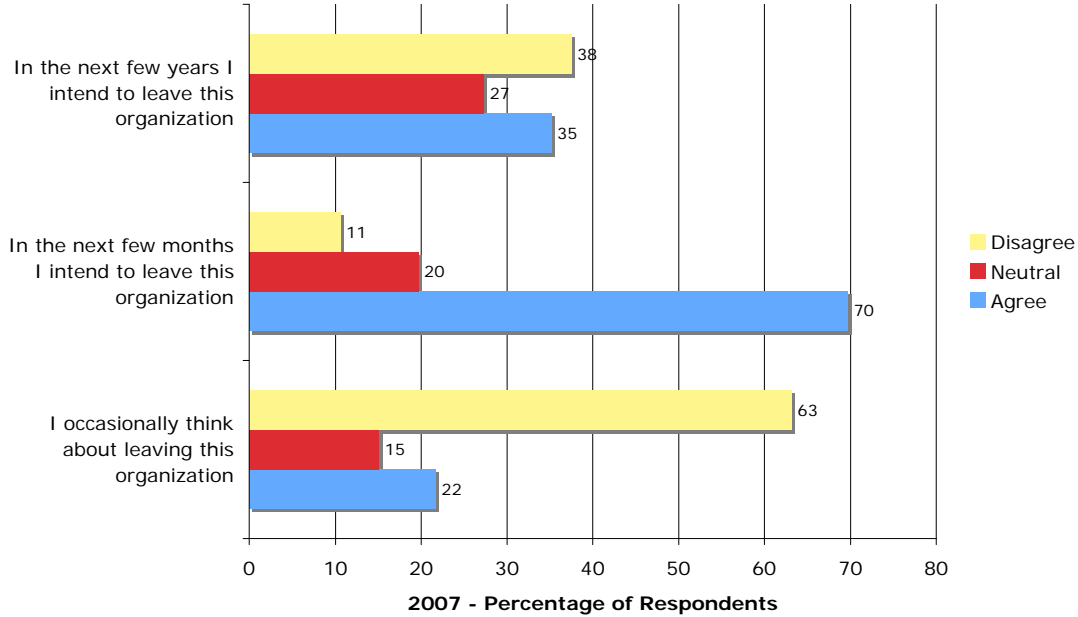


Figure 12: 2007 Percentage of managers reporting quit intentions

In the 2008 sample, the same percentage of respondents occasionally think of leaving their current employer though fewer are thinking of leaving in the short to medium term.

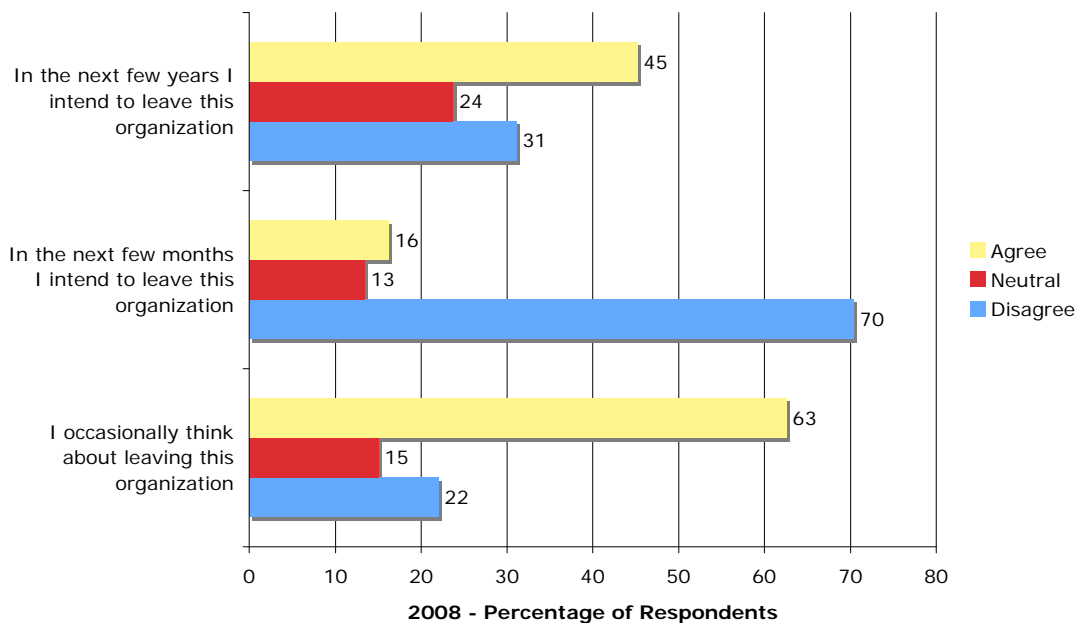


Figure 13: 2008 Percentage of managers reporting quit intentions

Job satisfaction



Figure 14: Percentage of respondents reporting overall job satisfaction.

71 percent of 2008 respondents agreed or strongly agreed with a statement indicating overall satisfaction with the job, compared with a similar figure of 70% in 2007.

Psychological capital (PsyCap)

Figure 15 compares the average PsyCap scores for the 2007 and 2008 samples. As can be seen, the 2008 data suggests a more positive outlook for the 2008 population.

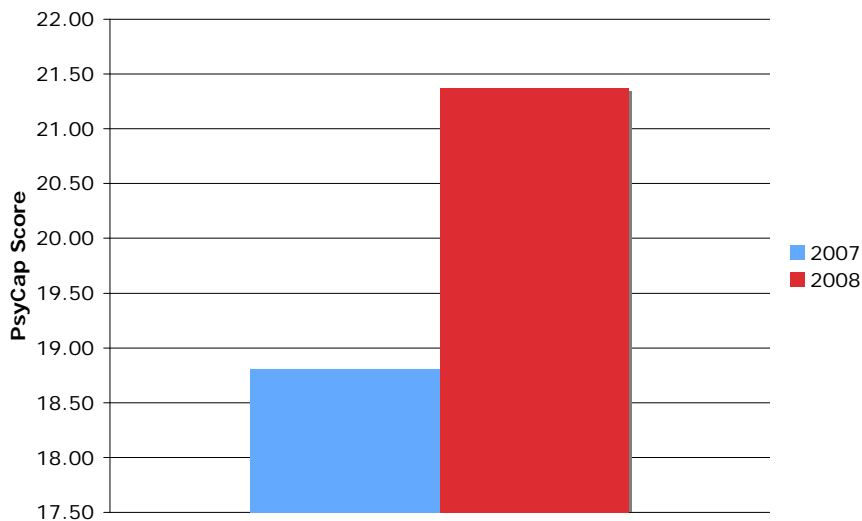


Figure 15: Mean PsyCap scores in 2007 and 2008.

A paired sample t-test for those who contributed responses on both occasions confirms a statistically significant increase in mean between 2007 and 2008 ($t=8.45$, $p< .001$). Further analysis reveals that the component scores on hope, optimism, confidence and resilience were all marginally higher in the 2008 sample.

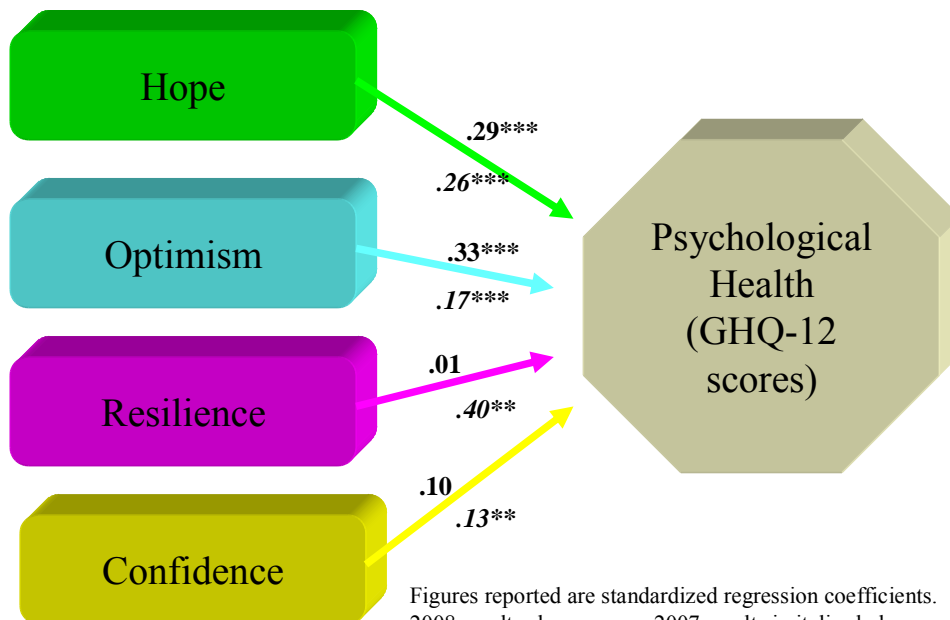
	2007	2008
Hope	6.36	6.46
Optimism	5.01	5.52
Confidence	5.68	5.72
Resilience	4.48	4.49

Table 2: Mean scores on PsyCap elements

Correlates of Psychological capital (PsyCap)

Next, we used multiple regression to examine the relationship between the components of PsyCap and three behavioural outcomes: psychological well-being, satisfaction with the job, and quit intentions.

In the case of psychological health scores, the consistent predictors of psychological well-being across both samples are hope and optimism. Resilience, the main predictor in 2007, is no longer a predictor in 2008 and neither is confidence. One possible explanation for this, consistent with the lower incidence of ill-health symptoms as a whole in the 2008 survey sample, is that people are not experiencing the same levels of demands and stress as was the case in 2007, and hence the capacity to be resilient is less of a factor in determining overall psychological well-being. The capacity to be optimistic is now the major factor associated with increased psychological well-being.



Figures reported are standardized regression coefficients.
 2008 results above arrow, 2007 results in italics below arrow.
 * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$.

Figure 16: Relationship between positive outlook and psychological well-being.

Hope and optimism are also significant predictors of job satisfaction in both samples. Again, resilience was a factor in how people felt about their jobs in 2007 but not in 2008.

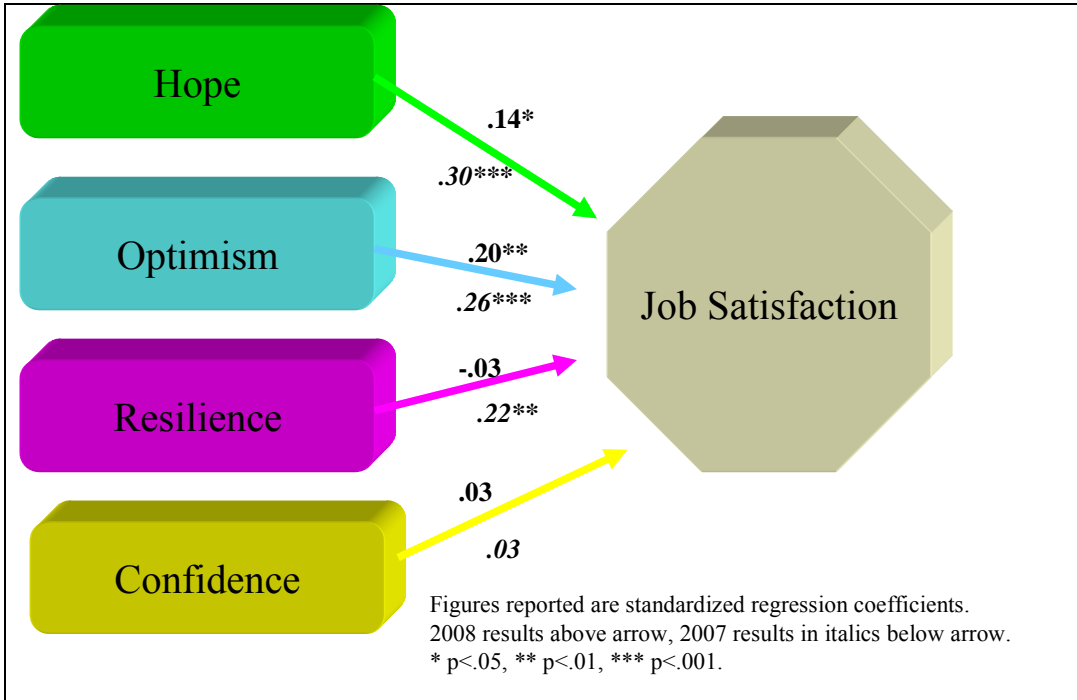


Figure 17: Relationship between positive outlook and job satisfaction.

The predictive models for quit intentions show some differences between 2007 and 2008.

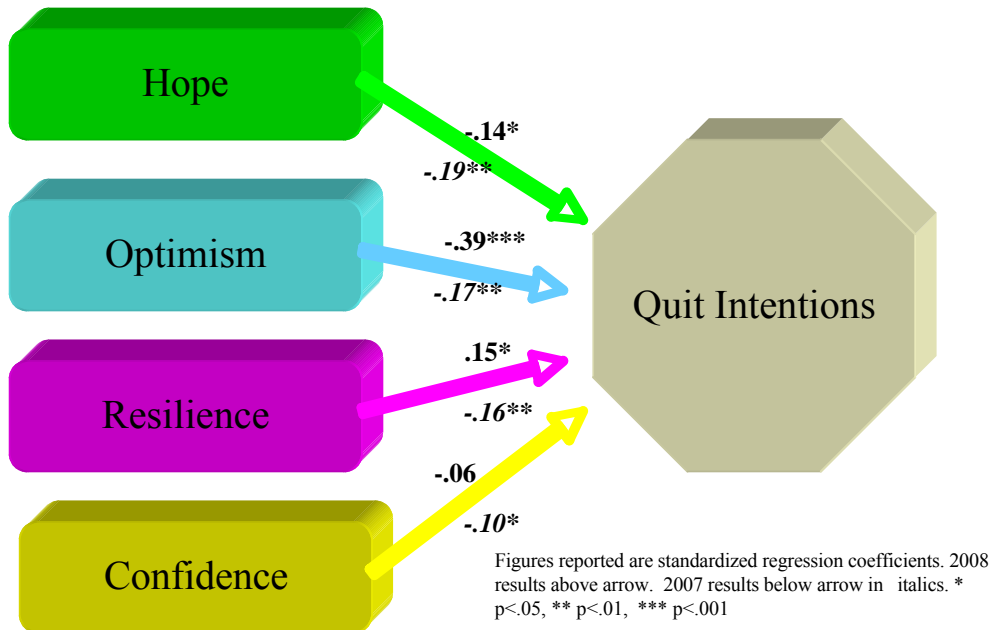


Figure 18: Relationship between positive outlook and intention to quit.

Whilst hope and optimism are significant predictors of the expressed intention to seek other employment on both occasions, resilience becomes weakly associated with an increased intention to quit, while confidence no longer predicts this behavioural outcome.

In line with the model described in Figure 1, we next looked at features of the managed work environment that might give rise to managers having a positive psychological outlook. Figures 19 & 20 summarise the results of these analyses for PsyCap overall¹.

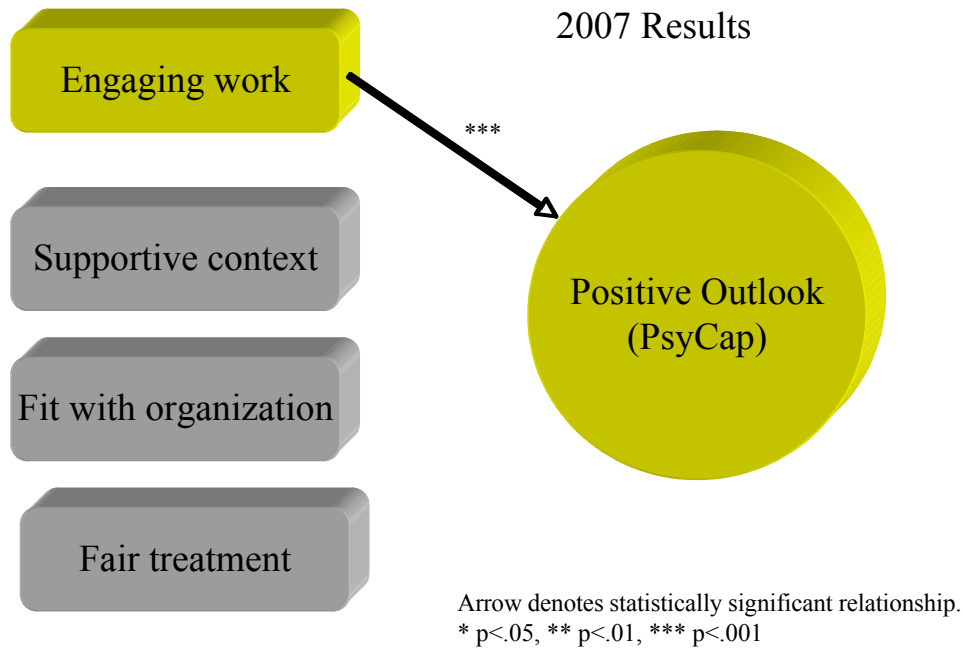


Figure 19: 2007 Features of the managed work environment linked to PsyCap

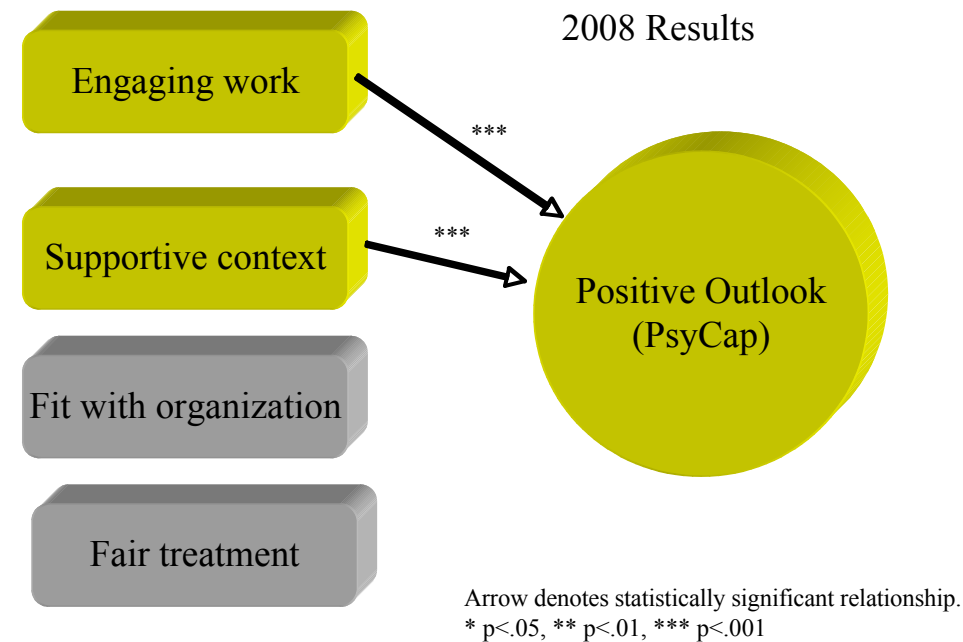


Figure 20: 2008 Features of the managed work environment linked to PsyCap

¹ For ease of presentation, we have omitted regression coefficients from this and subsequent figures. These are available from the author on request. Figures indicate significant β weights.

Engaging work is consistently a strong predictor of positive outlook in both samples. However in the 2008 sample, the degree to which a work environment is seen as safe and supportive is also a strong correlate of psychological outlook.

Next, we assessed the degree to which someone's 2008 PsyCap score could be predicted from their 2007 assessment of their working environment. This potentially provides a more rigorous test of directional causality in the relationship.

The results, summarised in Figure 21, confirm the role of engaging work as a major contributor to PsyCap. However, we also note that perceptions of fair treatment at the hands of the organization are also a strong predictor of subsequent positive outlook. This latter result, and the finding that a supportive context did not predict subsequent PsyCap scores, is somewhat inconsistent with the results from the two surveys analysed independently. However, it should be recognised that the sample of people who completed the survey at both time periods was rather small (n=38), and this may account for some of these inconsistencies.

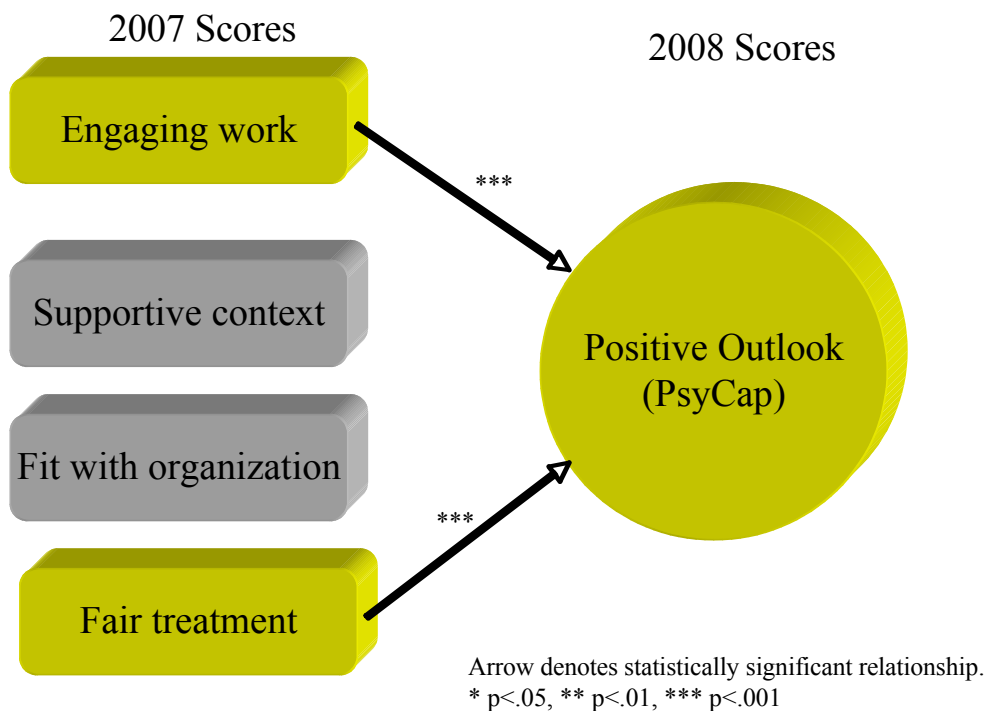


Figure 21: 2007 Features of the managed work environment linked to 2008 PsyCap

Fostering Hope

The strongest predictor of hope in both studies was the extent to which people were operating in work role that they found engaging. To a lesser extent, operating in a supportive climate and feeling a part of the organization were also important in fostering perceptions of hope. Perceptions of receiving fair treatment were only weakly related to hope in 2007 and unrelated in 2008.

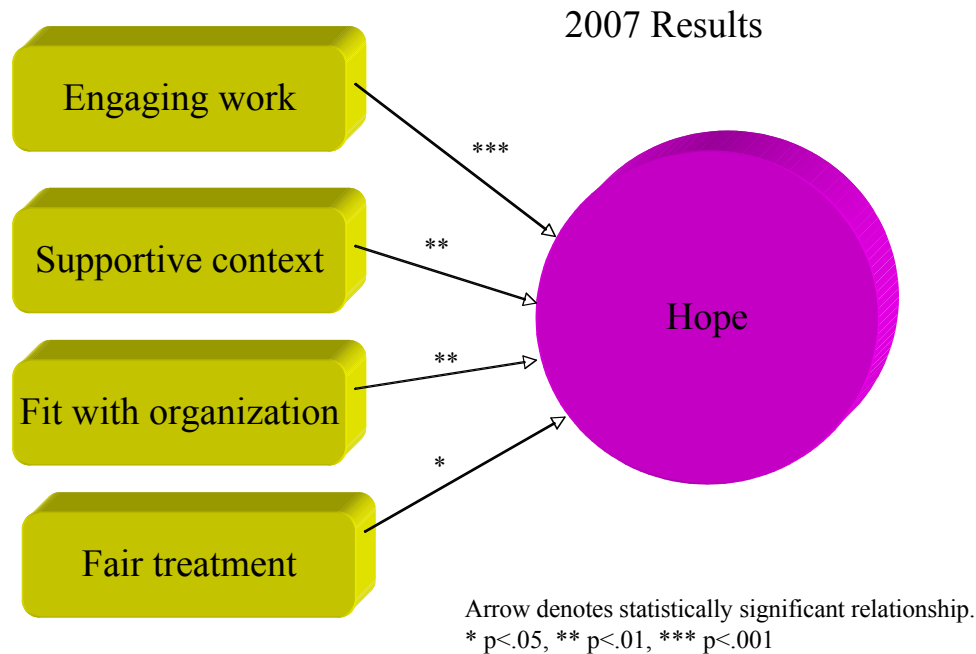


Figure 22: 2007 features of the managed work environment linked to hope

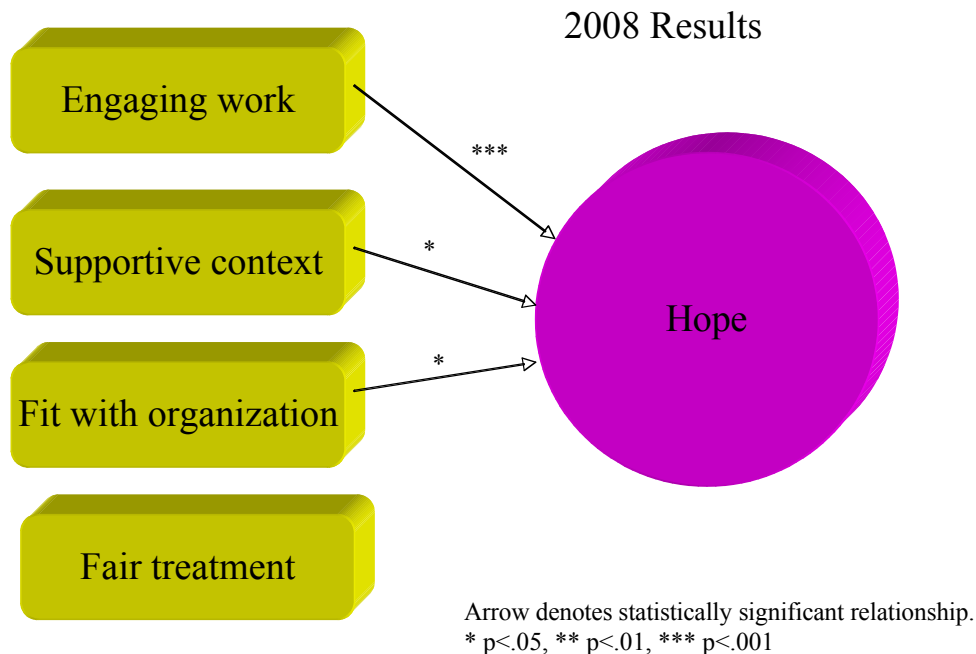


Figure 23: 2008 features of the managed work environment linked to hope

Encouraging Optimism

Optimism appears more directly related to how secure and supported someone feels at work. The 2007 pattern is largely repeated in the 2008 results, with the exception of the weak relationship for fair treatment, which is not replicated in the 2008 study.

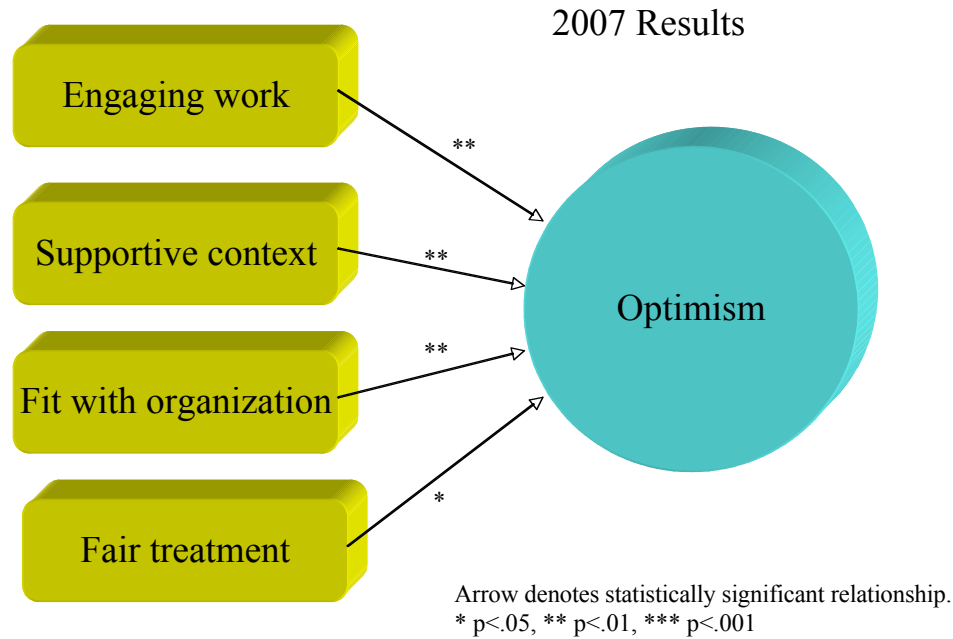


Figure 24: 2007 features of the managed work environment linked to optimism

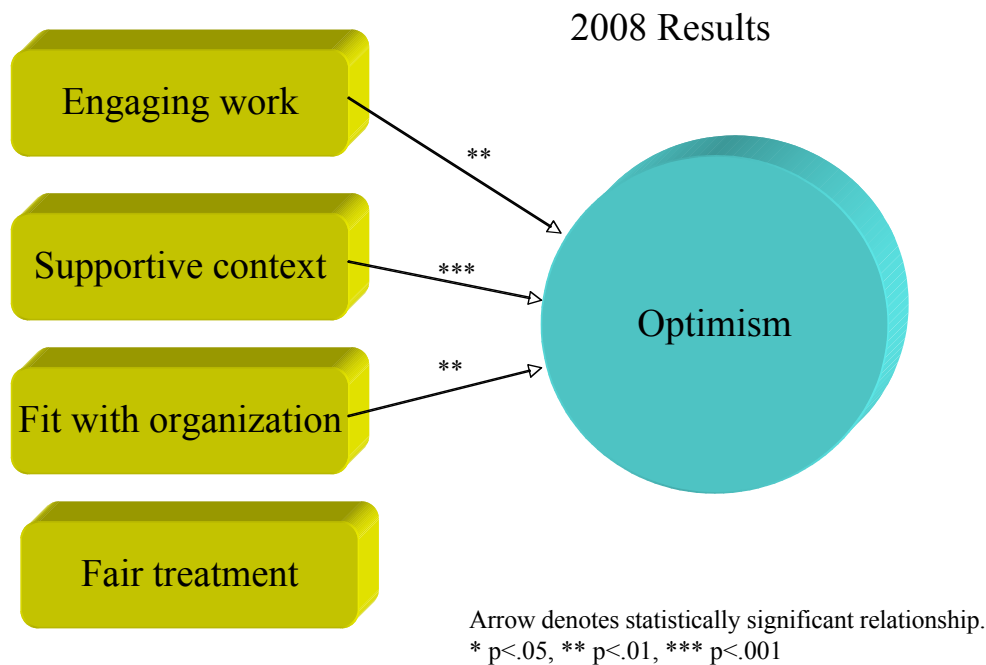


Figure 25: 2008 features of the managed work environment linked to optimism

Developing Resilience

In 2007, resilience scores were most strongly related to feeling that the work context was safe and supportive. In 2008, however, only work engagement was positively related to resilience. An analysis of data from people who contributed to both studies also indicated that only 2007 engagement scores were correlated with 2008 resilience scores.

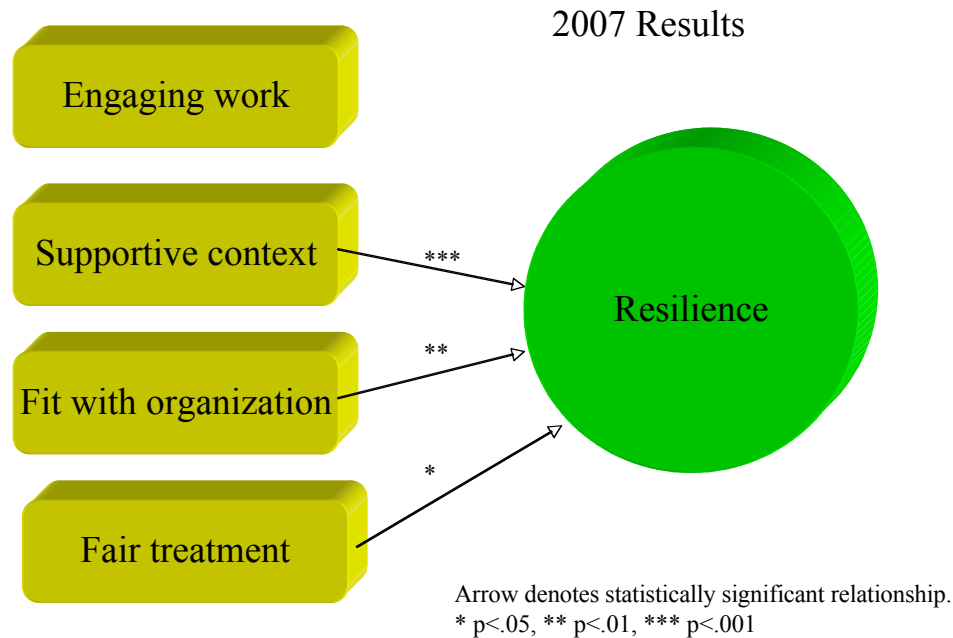


Figure 26: 2007 features of the managed work environment linked to resilience

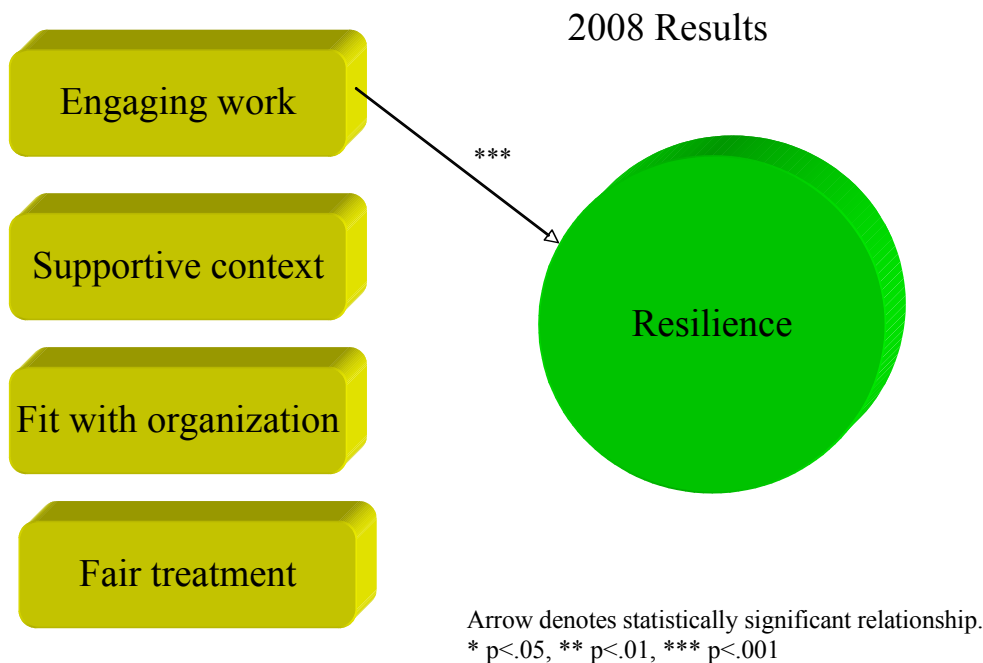


Figure 27: 2008 features of the managed work environment linked to resilience

Building Confidence

The overwhelming influence on people's levels of confidence in 2007 and 2008 was the extent to which work roles were perceived as energising, absorbing and meaningful. The degree to which rewards were perceived to be fair was negatively associated with confidence on both occasions.

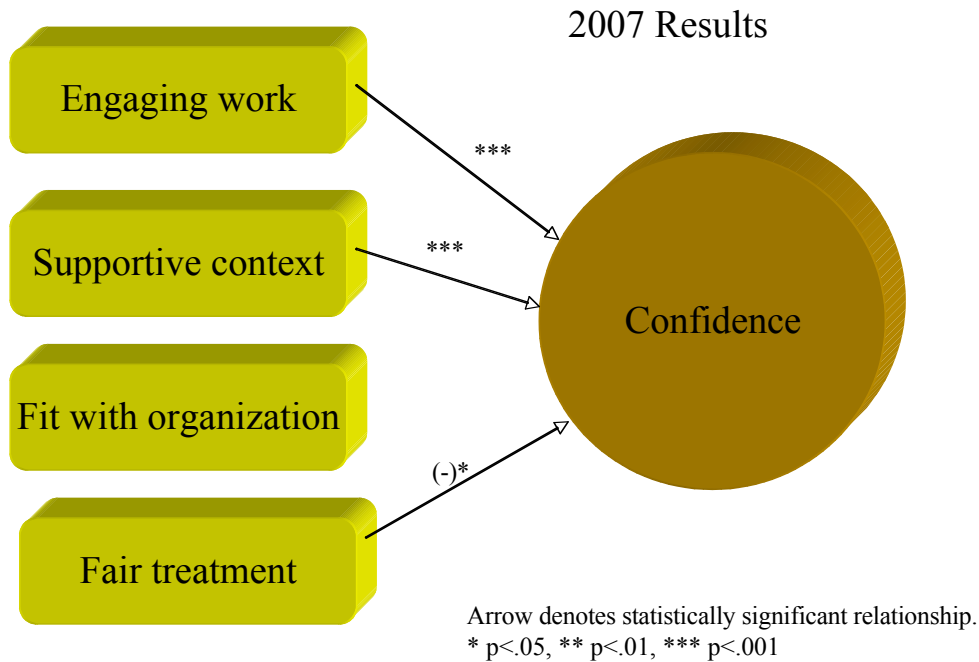


Figure 28: 2007 features of the managed work environment linked to confidence

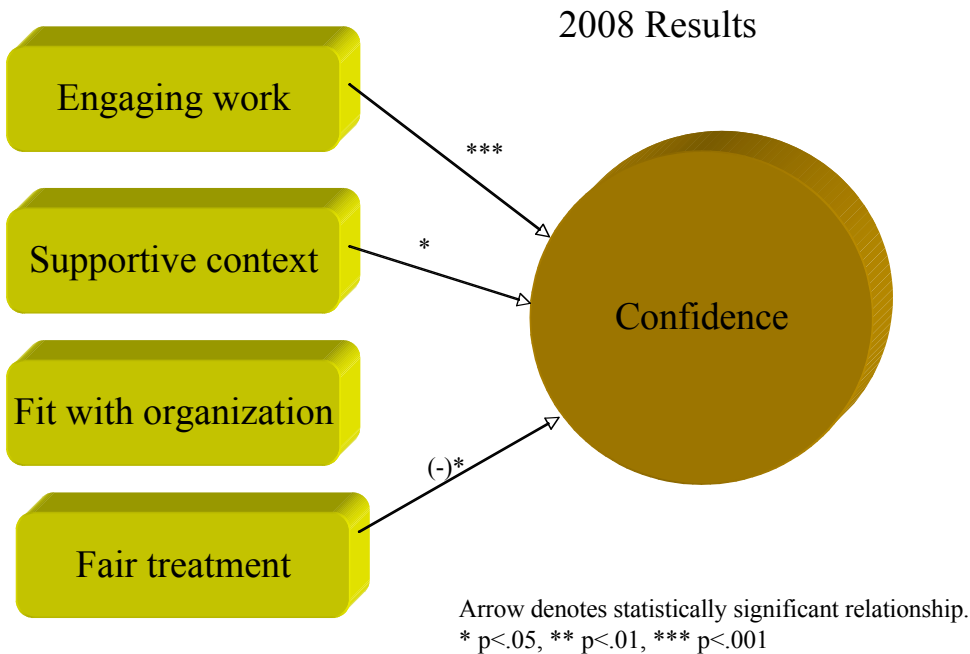


Figure 29: 2008 features of the managed work environment linked to confidence

Summary & Conclusions

The results of this program of research so far give rise to a number of conclusions regarding the causes and effects of positive psychological capital at work.

First, the research strongly supports the conclusion that being able to view one's work through a positive lens generates distinct benefits for individuals and, potentially, for employers. People reporting higher PsyCap scores overall report fewer symptoms of psychological ill-health. They also report higher levels of job satisfaction, and are less likely to be seeking to leave the job that they are in. These findings are consistent across two studies, separated in time.

Second, the research confirms that not all ways of approaching work positively have the same consequences. Hope and optimism appear consistently, and positively, related to beneficial outcomes at work. Optimism, the capacity to look on the bright side, appears to always be important for individuals in their work. Hope, the capacity to identify realistic and effective pathways to deal with challenges and problems being faced, appears to be more important to people and their well-being when working life and its associated challenges are perceived as relatively difficult or tough. Resilience appears to be mostly related to psychological health, and its importance also appears greatest when people are experiencing significant demands and challenges at work. This aspect of PsyCap can be seen as a kind of buffer or moderator of work-related stressors. Confidence in one's abilities was consistently found to be the least strong correlate of psychological well-being, job satisfaction and intention to quit. This is not to say that confidence is not an important component of overall PsyCap, rather that it is not related to the particular outcomes that were the subject of this research. It may well be that confidence is a stronger positive predictor of outcomes such as learning and work motivation.

Third, our research shows that positive outlooks are co-vary with major features of the managed work environment, such as the content of work roles, person-organization fit, the level of personal support, and how fairly people feel they are treated. This is important, since it confirms that PsyCap is something that organizations can do something about, rather than simply viewing it as a static reflection of someone's personality – fixed from the moment someone is selected into a job. For example, the research found that people tended to be more optimistic and hopeful when the tasks and roles they performed on a daily basis were experienced as challenging and personally meaningful. Hope and optimism were also increased when people perceived higher levels of personal support and respect from co-workers and supervisors, and when they felt they were a good fit to the culture and values of the organization that employed them. Resilience and confidence also tended to vary, although not consistently, with features of the work context.

In addition to those organizational antecedents focused on in this research, it is possible to identify a number of specific strategies that managers and organizations may use to build PsyCap.

For example, strategies that have been identified by psychological researchers as building realistic hope include the following:

- goal-setting,
- contingency planning
- development of problem-solving skills and repertoires
- resonant leadership
- participative decision making

Strategies that have been shown to develop optimism include:

- constructive performance appraisal and feedback,
- positive reframing by enhancing positive internal dialogue
- reattribution training to reveal cognitive biases
- developing problem solving skills and cognitive flexibility
- assertiveness training

Ways to build resilience have been identified as including the following:

- mentoring
- cooperative learning
- development of peer support networks
- effective communication
- developing realistic goal expectations
- improving decision-making and problem-solving skills
- positive error management

Finally, confidence has been found to be increased by a range of strategies, including:

- personal mastery
- vicarious experience
- modeling
- encouragement by others

In conclusion, this research provides further support for the view that organizations and their managers need to explore ways to encourage their workforce to approach their work with a positive outlook. Hope, optimism, resilience and confidence are important correlates of well-being and satisfaction at work, and also influence desire to remain with an employer. It therefore seems clear that a realistic accentuation of the positive has much to recommend it as a management technique.

Appendix A

The principal measures used in our surveys are described below.

Positive Outlook

Hope was measured using a scale comprising 5 questions taken from the state-based hope measure developed by Snyder et. al (1996)². Respondents are asked to think of their present work circumstances, and indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with various statements. Sample items include “If I should find myself in a jam, I could think of many ways to get out of it” and “At this time I am meeting the goals that I have set for myself”. In the present study, the scale was found to have good internal reliability (Coefficient alpha = 0.85).

Optimism was measured using the 12-item Life Orientation Test (Revised form), developed by Shifren & Hooker (1995)³. Respondents are asked to think of their present work circumstances, and indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with various statements that reflect state optimism. Sample items include “If something can go wrong for me it will” and “Right now, I’m optimistic about my future”. In the present study, the scale was found to have good internal reliability (Coefficient alpha = 0.82).

Resilience was measured using 6 questions from the scale developed by Jenson (2003)⁴. Respondents are asked to think of their recent job experience, and indicate the degree to which various statements apply to them. Sample items include “I would describe myself as being tough in the face of adversity” and “I quickly get over disappointments”. In the present study, the scale was found to have good internal reliability (Coefficient alpha = 0.81).

Confidence was assessed using a 3-item scale developed specifically for this study. The items were “I can effectively solve problems that arise in my job”, “During work, I feel confident that I am effective in getting things done”, and “In my opinion, I am good at my job”. In the present study, the scale was found to have acceptable internal reliability (Coefficient alpha = 0.74).

Outcomes

We assessed respondents’ *psychological well-being* using the 12-item version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12). The GHQ is one of the main self-report devices used to measure minor psychiatric illness in the general community⁵, and is frequently used as an indicator of work stress. The questionnaire lists 12 common symptoms of strain, depression, anxiety and non-coping, and asks respondent to indicate the degree to which they have experienced each symptom over recent weeks. Respondents receive a score from 0 to 12, based on the number of ‘symptomatic’ responses.

² Snyder, C.R, Sympton, S.C., Ybasco, F.C., Borders, T.F., Babyak, M.A., & Higin, R.L. (1996). Development and validation of the State Hope Scale. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70, 321-335.

³ Shifren, K. & Hooker, K. (1995). Stability and change in optimism: A study among spouse caregivers. *Experimental Aging Research*, 21, 59-76.

⁴ Jenson, S.M. (2003). Entrepreneurs as leaders: Impact of psychological capital and perceptions of authenticity on venture performance. *Unpublished PhD dissertation in Business*, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

⁵ Donath, S. (2001). The validity of the 12-item General Health Questionnaire in Australia: A comparison between three scoring methods. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 35, 231-235.

Intention to quit was measured using a three-item scale, developed by Mitchell et. al. (2001)⁶. Respondents are asked to indicate their extent of agreement with statements that include “I occasionally think about leaving this organization” and “In the next few months I intend to leave this organization”. In the present study, the scale was found to have acceptable internal reliability (Coefficient alpha = 0.77).

Job satisfaction was measured using a 3-item measure developed by Lee et al. (2004)⁷. Items include “All in all, I am satisfied with my job” and “In general, I don’t like my job” (reverse scored).”. In the present study, the scale was found to have good internal reliability (Coefficient alpha = 0.88).

Work context

Work engagement was measured using a 16-item version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale⁸. This well-validated measure assesses the degree to which people feel that they are energized and absorbed by the work roles they are required to perform. Items include “I find the work I do full of meaning and purpose” and “At work, I feel full of energy”. In the present study, the scale was found to have exceptional internal reliability (Coefficient alpha = 0.91).

Supportive context was measured using a 4-item scale adapted from the measure of psychological safety developed by Edmondson (1999)⁹. Items include “There is a supportive environment at work” and “I’m not afraid to be myself at work”. In the present study, the scale was found to have acceptable internal reliability (Coefficient alpha = 0.65).

To measure *organization fit*, we used the 6-item measure of job embeddedness¹⁰. Sample items include “I feel I am a good match for this organization” and “If I stay with this organization, I will be able to achieve most of my goals”. In the present study, the scale was found to have good internal reliability (Coefficient alpha = 0.79).

Finally, distributive, procedural and interactional justice perceptions were measured using scales developed by Colquitt (2001)¹¹. The questions ask about how a person’s rewards (ie pay & promotion) have been determined, and sample items include “ The rewards I have received reflected the effort I have put into my work” (distributive), “I have been treated with dignity” (interactional), and “Those procedures are free of bias” (procedural). In the present study, the scales were found to have excellent internal reliability (Coefficient alphas = 0.88, 0.94 & 0.96).

⁶ Mitchell, T.R., Holtom, B.C., Lee, T.W., Sablinski, C.J., & Erez, M. (2001). Why people stay: Using job embeddedness to predict voluntary turnover. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44, 1102-1121.

⁷ Lee, T.W., Mitchell, T.R., Sablinski, C.J, Burton, J.P., & Holtom, B.C. (2004). The effects of job embeddedness on organizational citizenship, job performance, volitional absences, and voluntary turnover. *Academy of Management Journal*, 47, 711-722.

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