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EMPOWERMENT AS A CONSTRUCT OF WORKER ENGAGEMENT AND WELLBEING

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This qualitative study evaluated empowerment as a construct of worker engagement. Research within the construction industry has not concisely grouped, developed and validated workforce empowerment based on the four cognitions of **knowing**; **doing**; **decision-making** and **influencing**. These emphasize workers' experiences of empowerment; with measures of the construct requiring the workers to discuss what has made them feel empowered in relation to their work activities. The criticality of the issues identified; the impact on workers; and their relative perception of such issues e.g. 'knowing' the value of a work goal; 'doing' a given task with some level of capability; 'decision-making' about work activities and methods; and 'influencing' certain work or organizational outcomes were all captured. Previous research suggests that engagement is positively related to good health, and that engaged workers are better able to perform well. Given the significant contributions of workforce empowerment (positive job attitudes, higher degrees of performance, motivation, job satisfaction, commitment, and reduction of job-related stress) to organizational success, it is essential to grasp how it improves worker engagement and wellbeing.

Keywords: Empowerment, Engagement, Knowing, Doing, Decision-making, Influencing

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

The concept of worker engagement (WE) is "*a process where every worker on a construction site is motivated and empowered to participate in improving health and safety through meaningful discussions with workers in advance of decisions being taken, influencing others, and is committed to sharing their experiences and knowledge; and managers positively encourage workers to identify and resolve health and safety problems in a culture of trust, leading to every worker on site benefiting from safe and healthy working conditions*" (**Lawani et al. 2017**). There are both legal and ethical reasons for management to engage with the construction workforce for the improvement of Occupational Safety, Health and wellbeing. The HSE Construction Division's 'worker involvement and engagement' initiatives encourage the industry to rise above the minimum legal requirement, moving towards 'best practice'. Research shows that worker engagement has many positive job outcomes such as job satisfaction and performance (**Gruman & Saks 2011; Schaufeli & Salanova 2007**), active coping style (**Storm & Rothmann 2003**) and creativity (**Bakker & Xanthopoulou 2013**). Empowerment has also been vital in many positive job attitudes (**Shockley-Zalabak et al. 1999; Fedor & Werther 1996; Scholefield 2000**); making significant contributions to organisational success. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the factors and the contributory role of empowerment on construction worker engagement.

Although **Conger & Kanungo (1988)** defined empowerment as the motivational concept of self-efficacy, it was **Thomas & Velthouse (1990)** who argued that empowerment is complex and its principles cannot be captured by a single concept. They offered a broader definition of empowerment as increased intrinsic task motivation manifested in a set of four cognitions

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which reflects an individual's orientation to his or her work role - *meaning, competence, self-determination and impact*. **Spreitzer (1995; 1996); Spreitzer et al. (1997)** developed a measure of psychological empowerment capturing these four sets of essential cognitions which this study aligned with and redefined into four levels for characterising workforce empowerment from preliminary interviews conducted: **knowing**, **doing**, **decision-making**, and **influencing; Table 1 & Figure 1.**

Table 1: Developed cognitions of construction worker empowerment from preliminary interviews

Empowerment Level	Description
1. **Knowing**	Knowing the value of a work goal judged in terms of a worker's own values, beliefs or standards (**important to the individual**).
2. **Doing**	Worker's belief in his/her capability to successfully perform a given task or activity (**capable and resourced**).
3. **Decision-making**	Worker's sense of choice about activities and work methods (**autonomy over working methods**).
4. **Influencing**	The extent to which workers believe they can influence certain work or organisational outcomes (**on wider organisational decisions**).

These four levels combine additively to form empowerment; and lack of any single level will decrease the empowerment scale but not eliminate the overall degree of empowerment experienced by the worker (**Spreitzer 1995**); and items measuring worker empowerment focuses on their subjective experience. Linked to this is 'psychological safety'; the ability to raise concerns without fear of negative consequences, **(Edmondson 1999)**. Engagement is considered as meaningful when it deals with critical and operational rather than solely welfare issues, to positive improvements rather than negative complaints. Previous studies identified three arguments regarding the importance of including the workforce in decision-making and planning for OSH. These include potentially improving psycho-social and organisational development; improving productivity and efficiency; and, ethical and legal requirements **(Shearn 2004)**. This is in contrast to **Bowen and Lawler's (1992, 1995)** analysis of empowerment trends in the private sector where it is assumed that the key constituent is power sharing and decision-making authority with lower level workers. This resulted in many empowerment programs failing and such failures have been associated with the absolute focus on power sharing devoid of redistributing information, knowledge and rewards. This is unsustainable within the construction sector because the industry is made up of workers whose capacity goes above and beyond their assigned roles and responsibilities.

Further to the direct effect of empowerment on worker engagement, it is expected that empowerment could moderate the relationship between trust and engagement in such a way that workers who are psychologically empowered will be more engaged irrespective of the level of organisational trust. For example, trust has been found to explain why some workers effectively complete their jobs and also go above and beyond their job description with no notable reward. This effect is very close to the concept of 'workers going the extra-mile' which is representative of engaged workers **(Schaufeli & Bakker 2010)**. Workers that are psychologically empowered through engagement are more likely to have higher degrees of performance, motivation, job satisfaction and commitment, and this can reduce job-related stress; see **(Thomas & Velthouse 1990; Quinn & Spreitzer 1997)**. Worker empowerment and engagement should be seen as an ongoing, ceaseless challenge for everyone within the workplace; helping workers get the best out of themselves, making them grow, and creating a

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working environment that encourages high-quality work and innovation. Empowering leadership in which leaders allow workers to make decisions and pursue objectives on their own tend to facilitate worker performance and satisfaction, and to suppress dysfunctional worker resistance **(Vecchio et al. 2010)**. In a workplace with high-quality engagement relationships, leaders tend to exchange strategic advice, social support, feedback, decision-making freedom, and opportunities for stimulating and high-visibility assignments with workers. Therefore, the drivers of worker empowerment can be related to managements' sincere interest in the wellbeing of workers; and the extent to which workers believe that they have improved their skills and capabilities over the course of time. These are related to a strong and transparent organisational leadership; engaging managers; an effective and empowered employee voice and organisational integrity, **(MacLeod & Clarke 2009)**.
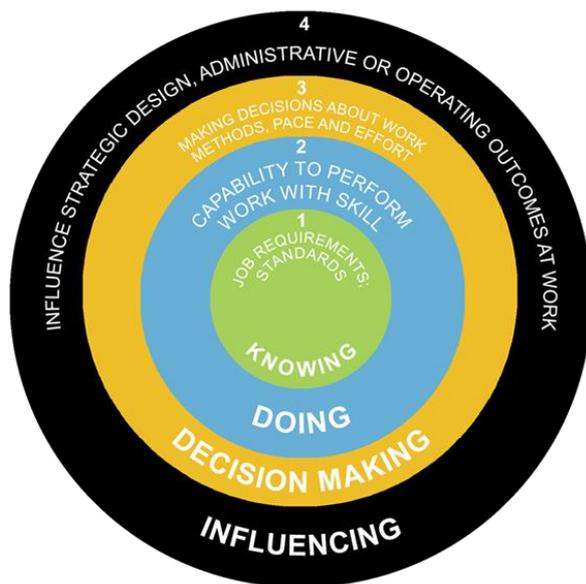

Figure 1: Developed Empowerment framework from preliminary interviews

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this paper is to qualitatively validate a construct of workforce empowerment in relation to WE and OSH based on the four cognitions of *knowing, doing, decision-making* and *influencing*.

METHOD, DESIGN & INTERVIEW

This paper adopted phenomenological research inquiry (a qualitative research approach) useful in obtaining adequate data that captures the context of workforce empowerment; their wellbeing and engagement. This specific type of research inquiry can adequately describe the empowerment, engagement and wellbeing experiences of the workforce; see **(Creswell 2014)**. Phenomenological research design is deeply reliant on strong philosophical foundations and it involves conducting interviews, see **(Giorgi 2012)**. These involve interview questions asking participants 'what and how' in order to convey an emerging theme where the operatives and working supervisors describe their experiences **(Creswell 2013**; **Giorgi 2012).** This enabled the building of themes that were constantly checked against the literature. A purposeful sampling strategy for construction sites and engaged workers was utilised, selecting from a pool of site options made available by the research Steering Group.

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A total of 28 'engaged' workers were initially interviewed using semi-structured questions to develop the framework; and characterise the empowerment cognitions until saturation of themes was reached **(Creswell 2013; 2014; Marshall & Rossman 2016; Creswell & Poth 2017**; **Charmaz, 2014)**. Engaged workers are those who are involved in OSH initiatives, contribute to health and safety discussions, and are proactive about OSH behaviours, and influence their colleagues. Furthermore, 22 workers were interviewed during the validation phase of the empowerment framework which this paper focuses on. Interview data were transcribed and analysed by highlighting significant statements or quotes that provided an understanding of how the operatives and supervisors experienced the empowerment phenomenon. These statements were categorised and ranked in line with the four theoretical cognitions of empowerment; and validated by an expert Steering Group using **Figure 1**. This was an iterative process using the Delphi method **(Hsu & Sandford 2007; Hasson et al. 2000)**, where all significant statements were allocated to each of the four indicators in hierarchical lists. Each list went through three reviews before consensus was reached. These four cognitions developed from the literature into the empowerment framework were matched to practical data from validation interviews. The interview process collected data from eight construction projects across mainland Britain, covering housebuilding, commercial and civil engineering sectors.

VALIDATION, FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

The four levels of hierarchical criteria for WE were developed based on comparisons between the validation interview data and the theoretical constructs from the preliminary interviews. The items measuring empowerment were consistent with this conceptualization by focusing on the workers and their subjective experience of workplace empowerment. Although empowerment perceptions reflect the characteristics of a workplace, these perceptions emerged from a psychological process in which workers ascribe meaning to the structures and practices in place within their organisation.

The empowerment's four cognitions were validated using data from additional 22 workers. The development of empowerment criteria was adopted by assigning levels of issues perceived by the workers that have empowered them in relation to their work activities. The criticality of the issues identified; the impact on workers; and their relative perception of issues such as 'knowing' the value of a work goal; 'doing' a given task with some level of capability; 'decision-making' about work activities and methods; and 'influencing' certain work or organisational outcomes were all captured in the empowerment validation**; Table 2**.

The workers involved in the validation exercise were grouped as either 'highly' or 'averagely' engaged based on the following selection criteria in conjunction with their employers: a highly engaged worker is someone who has won health and safety awards; (or) actively contributes to health and safety discussions, committees or initiatives; (or) a health and safety champion; (or) show enthusiasm for health and safety matters when you speak to them. An averagely engaged worker is as any other worker that fulfils their work role or duties. The validation interview were analysed in relation to these two categories so that the rankings could be assessed for their ability to separate 'average' from 'highly' empowered workers. The four levels of the empowerment cognition from the preliminary interviews were assigned incremental weightings of 25% each (100% maximum) for validation. The output from the validation interview of 22 workers identified 11 workers clustering around 50% (knowing and doing) and these were ranked as 'averagely empowered'. The other half of the 11 workers clustered around 75% (six workers capable of knowing; doing; decision-making) and 100% (five workers capable of knowing; doing; decision-making; influencing) levels and were ranked as highly empowered; **Figure 2**. The validation exercise categorised the highly and

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averagely empowered workforce based on their range of performance on the interview questions from the empowerment cognitions, i.e. knowing, doing, decision-making and influencing. **Table 2** shows some of the quotes and how the empowerment construct was tailored for OSH for the different levels.

Table 2: Validation of empowerment levels from interviews

OSH Example Quotes	
1. **Knowing**	"I need to know if I'm working at height or confined space so that lets me know the sort of PPEs and right tools for the job"
2. **Doing**	"To carry out what I do safely I require permit to work on a daily basis; correct PPE sums it up – it could be harness, gloves, eye protection, respiration mask"
3. **Decision-making**	"We always need briefing, paperwork, and sign up to method statements describing the works and everything that will be done; I sometimes suggest if work can be done in a different way"
4. **Influencing**	"Most of the planning work is done with briefing and pre-starts and I have lots of opportunities because we sit and speak with the construction managers and senior construction managers as they give you ownership on the sector you're working"
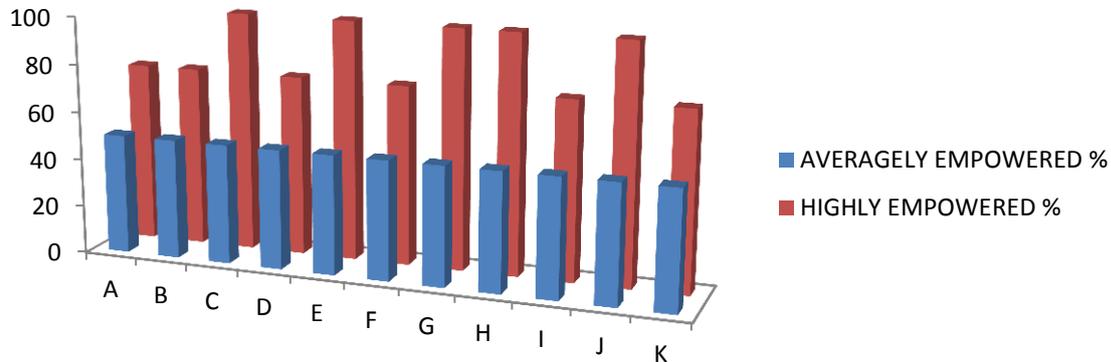
Figure 2: Validation of the Empowerment for averagely and highly engaged workers

Knowing - The validation exercise recognized that the 22 workers involved knew the values of their work goals, beliefs and standards within their workplaces. This could potentially result in greater homogeneity among workers' in terms of personalities, attitudes, and values which further enhances greater consistency about their perception of their roles and workplace.

Doing - The validation of the '**doing**' appraised the capability or competence of the workers to successfully perform a given task (work-specific self-efficacy). Eleven workers cumulatively displayed qualities that aligned with knowing and doing criteria (levels 1 & 2). These were workers that knew the requirements of their tasks; have clarity regarding goals

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and work procedures, and their areas of responsibility but lacked the power to make some strategic decisions. They were grouped as average in the empowerment scale. However, one worker in the average empowerment scale showed characteristics of a highly engaged worker. The validation also revealed that one of the workers considered by their employer as highly engaged and empowered did not display such characteristics, but rather that of an averagely engaged and averagely empowered worker. Therefore, deficiencies in role clarity, training and technical support, and unrealistic goals have the potential to lower the empowerment and engagement levels of the workers.

Decision making - A worker's immediate supervisor has an important role in creating a non-controlling environment that empowers self-development and decision-making. Supportive managers and supervisors encourage workers' sense of decision-making and personal initiative, which in turn increases the workers' interest in work and enhanced creative achievement. Six workers cumulatively displayed qualities aligned with knowing, doing and decision-making regarding their work roles, thus making them high in the empowerment scale. The attainment of levels 1 to 3 is based on their perception of empowerment within their workplace. However, one of these workers considered high on empowerment scale displayed qualities of an averagely engaged worker. The need for an empowering work environment; one that provides informational feedback, offers choices with clear consequences, recognizes the problems the worker faces and provides a reason to act is important when workers need to make decisions around the tasks they undertake. The criticism that often comes with workers making decisions on OSH issues is the idea that management is seen as pushing responsibility onto workers, and with it comes liability if things do happen to go wrong. The ability to make decisions consists of having some control over work pace, and the ability to contribute to the development of risk assessments and method statements in partnership with management.

Influencing - The workers' own understanding that they can directly influence some strategic, administrative, and operating outcomes within their workplaces has the ability to drive their attitudes and behaviours. Five workers cumulatively displayed qualities that aligned with levels 1 to 4, thus making them very high on the empowerment scale. These were based on their perception of their levels of knowing, doing, decision-making and influence regarding their work roles in their workplaces. The five workers that demonstrated levels 1 to 4 characteristics on the empowerment scale were also classed as highly engaged. These workers had clear vision and well-defined goals, roles, and procedures and some level of autonomy within the workplace. These five workers that showed very high levels of empowerment and engagement were all working supervisors. However, the absence of network-forming opportunities, presence of high rule structure, low advancement opportunities, lack of meaningful goals and limited contact with senior management can significantly impact on the ability of the operatives to influence decisions.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The four cognitions of worker empowerment were developed with a focus on validating the empowerment levels of workers and their engagement as individuals within their workplaces. The result shows that these four cognitions can be combined cumulatively and used in determining the levels of empowerment and engagement of workers and also reveal their active orientation to a work role. These perceptions complement the more objective, job-oriented characteristics and worker differences as it is focused at the level of the operatives and supervisors in relation to their work environment.

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Based on the output from the validation, this paper concludes that there is a pattern between the levels of workforce empowerment and engagement which can be related to their wellbeing. The results identify a pattern that workers showing average engagement characteristically also identified as average in the empowerment scale (knowing and doing levels). These were also identified to be majorly operatives within the workplace. Workers that were identified as highly engaged likewise demonstrated characteristics associated with high empowerment which was expected. These were identified as supervisors that have been deeply involved with supervisory roles within their workplaces. It can be inferred that high levels of workforce engagement tend to be be associated with high levels of empowerment and wellbeing while average levels of engagement can be associated to average empowerment and worker wellbeing.

It can be inferred that the 'doing' (e.g. doing task safely) and 'influencing' (e.g. OSH policy; CDM) levels are most likely related to managerial effectiveness; while 'knowing' (e.g. safe systems of work) what to do within the role and the measure of 'decision-making' (e.g. stopping work if unsafe) are related to work effectiveness and job satisfaction. If workers are unaware of the extent of their authority and what is expected of them, they will hesitate to act and make decisions and thus feel incapable to influence decisions. Furthermore, the limits of decision-making should be clear so that workers are more confident about their OSH decisions, rather than being fearful about possible consequences for decisions made under vague circumstances. Thus, assessing worker empowerment and engagement has revealed that it can serve as a useful indicative tool because it not only allows businesses to determine what levels of empowerment are perceived by their workers, but through its validation, could provide managers with useful information on some of the qualities that could be reformed to achieve even greater levels of perceived empowerment and wellbeing on the part of the workers.

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