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What gives fire and what kills passion at work among the Generation Y?

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Abstract

In the future working life, employees' creativity and social skills are going to be the organisations' key to success. We argue that with this development, employees' engagement is of utmost importance as engaged employees have been shown to be consistently more creative, innovative, and emotionally invested in their work. However, there is a relative lack in understanding how engagement can be led. In this study, we approach engagement through the concept of passion at work in order to highlight the role of emotions in this phenomenon. We tentatively define passion at work as consciously accessible, intense positive feelings experienced by engagement in work activities that people love or like, or find important, and in which they invest time and energy. We study passion in the context of Generation Y, whose members are going to represent the majority of the work force within a decade. In order to uncover the ways to successfully lead the passion of Generation Y, we seek to understand what its members hold important: How they themselves construct the meanings of passion and leadership in their work? To this end, we conduct a preliminary analysis of 30 pilot interviews in four Finnish organisations. Through qualitative content analysis, we study how the members of Generation Y themselves construct the meaning of passion and what enhances or kills their passion at work. Through our results, we gained some tentative confirmation for our initial definition of passion. Our results highlighted the role of meaningfulness, autonomy, and the community in enhancing passion at work. In addition to the lack of enhancers of passion, our results show how the lack of feedback as well as micro-management can kill passion at work. We conclude by giving some tentative ideas on how to lead the passion of the Generation Y.

Introduction

It is a recurring mantra that the working life is changing but, nevertheless, now it seems that a major disruption is underway. The World Economic Forum argues that “65% of children entering primary school today will ultimately end up working in completely new job types that don’t yet exist” (World Economic Forum, 2016, p. 1). Calling it the “Fourth Industrial Revolution” the report (ibid.) highlights, among other things, 3D printing, smart systems, and biotechnology as the harbingers of broader socio-economic, geopolitical, and demographic developments. In Finland, the impact of this coming change has been compared to the change brought by industrialization (Pentikäinen, 2014). In yet another analysis, Frey and Osborne (2013) argue based on their analysis of the US labour market that a whopping 47 percent of total US employment are in high risk of vanishing, largely due to computerization.

What do all these changes mean for people in working life? Because of the scale of the possible disruption, there is considerable debate about what is going to change and how much. One interesting theme is what kind of work will persist and what kinds of workers are needed. Frey and Osborne (2013) suggest that the tasks that are best shielded against these changes are those that require high levels of creativity and social skills. Thus, in order to succeed in the future organizations are going to need highly skilled employees with good social skills.

In this paper, we focus on the challenges these developments pose for leadership. Leading highly skilled people requires different leadership strategies than leading people doing repetitive tasks and thus “traditional models of hierarchical and legitimate power practices are being challenged” (Shuck & Herd, 2012, p. 157). In spite of the recent developments in leadership research, thinking, and practice, commentators argue that in many organizations leadership change is lagging. This clashes with the view of the future of work, where organizations must “inspire and enable employees to apply their full capabilities to their work” (Bakker, Albrecht & Leiter, 2011, p. 4-5). Engaging employees more fully is crucial because engaged employees are consistently and continuously emotionally invested in and focused on creating value for organizations, have higher morale, are more loyal, more creative and innovative, are prepared to “go the extra mile” to delight a customer (Hlupic, 2014), and, most importantly, are more productive (e.g. Bakker & Bal, 2010; Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2009).

Thus, we argue that engaging, motivating, and inspiring people is going to be even more important in future work places. In this paper, we approach people’s enthusiasm and engagement through the concept of passion at work. Defined as ‘a strong inclination toward an activity that individuals like (or even love), that they find important, in which they invest time and energy’ (Vallerand et al., 2007, p. 507), the concept offers a fruitful way to study engagement and emotions. In this study, we concentrate on young adults, or Generation Y. This focus seems appropriate, as they will comprise 75% of global workforce by 2025 (CMI, 2014), so their views about the future of work are paramount.

We seek to understand the phenomenon of passion at work from the viewpoint of the employees. To this end, we focus on the thoughts of the members of Generation Y about passion. Our research questions are: 1) How do members of Generation Y construct the meaning of passion at work? 2) What enhances and what kills their passion at work? Our empirical data consists of 30

semi-structured interviews conducted in four Finnish companies. We analysed the data through data-driven content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007).

Engagement, passion, and leadership

Kahn (1990) was the first to coin the term engagement in organizational research. He defined personal engagement as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). Since then, there has been a large and fast-growing body of research on engagement (Bakker, Albrecht & Leiter, 2011). The field is still characterized as a novel field, which still needs a lot of work to advance. For example, there is a lot of controversy about the definition of the term itself. Although the most often used definition is Schaufeli et al.’s (2002) definition of work engagement as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption”, there are many other definitions drawing more fully from the work of Kahn (Sonnentag, 2011). Interestingly, the emotional dimension present in Kahn’s work is somewhat downplayed in Schaufeli et al.’s approach. Furthermore, work and employee engagement are often conceptualized as separate constructs (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2011).

In their review of the field, Bakker et al. (2011) raise ten issues on engagement that are still to be studied. Here, we present those most important for our approach. In addition to the dilemma of the definition of the term, Bakker et al. (2011) also point out that whether there are fluctuations in engagement over time is not known. In commenting the review, Schaufeli and Salanova (2011) continue with this idea and argue that work engagement and task engagement are different concepts. The examination of task engagement, focusing on whether employees “feel more engaged while performing some tasks rather than other tasks” (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2011, p. 42) moves the research on engagement towards a more “micro” orientation.

Bakker et al. (2011, p. 13) also comment on the research on leadership and engagement by stating that “the role of the leader in fostering work engagement has received limited research attention”. They note that transformational leadership has received some attention and call for using alternative models of leadership to understand how leadership affects engagement. In particular, the exact mechanisms or processes by which leaders influence their followers engagement have not been adequately addressed (Bakker et al., 2011). Another theme they raise concerns the possible dark side of engagement. Although the benefits of engagement have received a lot of attention, the possible negative consequences of over-engagement have not been studied in full (Bakker et al., 2011).

Throughout the review by Bakker et al. (2011) and the comments to it published in the special issue of *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, the relative lack of qualitative research is evident. For example, the questions of possible fluctuations over time of employee engagement, the lack of research on the more micro-level “task engagement”, and the possible negative consequences of engagement are prime targets for a qualitative approach aiming to understand in rich detail what is going on in the everyday life of an organization.

We seek to highlight the role of emotions in engagement. Emotions are a pertinent, although for scholars often a tacit part of leadership. The picture of a leader capturing the hearts and minds of his/her followers, so common in charismatic, transformational, and, lately, authentic leadership literatures, has its roots in Weber's (1947) ideas on charismatic leader's ability to express 'passionate emotions to attract passionate followers and stimulate social and organizational change' (Thanem, 2013, p. 396). During the last two decades, leadership scholars have started to focus explicitly on the role of emotions in leadership (Gooty et al, 2010). This recognition follows a wider preoccupation with emotions and affect in organization studies more broadly (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011; Brief & Weiss, 2002). Scholars contributing to this 'affective revolution' (Barsade et al., 2003) argue that we must study emotions because 'affect is inherent to any situation in which humans interact with each other and their environment, including at work' (Barsade & Gibson, 2007, p. 51).

The interest in emotions in leadership research is evidenced by, for example, the recent special issue in *The Leadership Quarterly* (see the introduction to the special issue in Connelly & Gooty, 2015). Studies have examined, for example, the role of emotional intelligence, emotion recognition, and empathy in leadership. As is readily apparent, studying affect in leadership is riddled with conceptual controversies, although on some areas things are looking brighter (Gooty et al., 2010). Again, these developments closely follow those in organization studies more broadly (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011).

In this study, we wish to contribute to the study of emotions and engagement in leadership through the concept of passion. Vallerand and others (2007) define passion as 'a strong inclination toward an activity that individuals like (or even love), that they find important, in which they invest time and energy' (p. 507). Vallerand and others (2007) also present two distinct types of passion: obsessive passion that creates an uncontrollable urge to engage in the passionate activity, and harmonious passion that engenders a sense of volition and personal endorsement about pursuing the passionate activity. Recognizing the concept's similarities with other concepts, such as flow and motivation, Vallerand and others (2007) argue that the explicit focus in the engagement in activity and the recognition of two different types of passion sets it apart. In addition to Vallerand's research, there exists vibrant research on passion in the entrepreneurial literature. For example, Cardon et al. (2009, p. 517) conceptualize entrepreneurial passion as "consciously accessible, intense positive feelings experienced by engagement in entrepreneurial activities associated with roles that are meaningful and salient to the self-identity of the entrepreneur".

For our approach, the concept of passion is especially useful for four reasons: 1) because it brings together the concepts of engagement and emotions in a useful way, 2) because of its explicit focus on activity, 3) because, through the concepts of harmonious and obsessive passion, it allows for studying both positive and negative sides of engagement, and 4) because, in contrast to the whole scale of emotions, passion is relatively straightforward concept, related to a *specific* activity, and whether a person does or does not feel passion towards an activity is more easily recognized.

Generation Y

By 2025, Generation Y will comprise 75% of global workforce (CMI, 2014), and therefore the importance on understanding them is acknowledged. There is considerable amount of research on Generation Y, thus they seem to be controversial by character. There is little evidence on real differences among generations, and the academic empirical evidence for generational differences in work values is, at best, mixed (Parry & Urwin, 2011).

Followed by the Baby Boomers and the Generation X, the Generation Y has also multiple definitions, the most common being the Millennials. As this generation was born and been raised in a time of rapid technological changes and development, Millennials have also been labelled as digital natives (Kultalahti, 2015) referring to their capability and willingness to harness technology to serve their needs. It has also being described as Generation Me (Twenge et al., 2010), who value leisure time and extrinsic rewards more than previous generations.

Additionally, the Generation Y has multiple definitions of generational cohorts. There is little agreement between scholars concerning the most apt birth years and a definite time frame cannot be stated (Kultalahti, 2015; Parry and Urwin, 2011). In this study we follow the definitions that many scholars have used, stating Generation Y been born between 1980 and 2000 (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Meier & Crocker 2010; Rentz, 2015).

Despite the controversial nature of results according to Generation Y's values and differences with previous generations, we argue that some common characteristics can be found. Members of Generation Y tend to value highly the contents, interestingness and meaningfulness of work (CMI, 2014; Meier & Crocker, 2010; Myllyniemi, 2013; Rentz, 2015). They value opportunities for progression and having the room for growth at work (CMI, 2014; Kultalahti, 2015; Rentz, 2015). Additionally, they value freedom (Cennamo & Gardner, 2007) and a good work-life balance (CMI, 2014; Rentz, 2015). However, according to Pyöriä et al. (2013), arguments stating that Millennials are less work-oriented than older generations are not based on fact. Regardless of age, the value placed on work has steadily stayed at a high level during the past decades. Simultaneously, leisure time as well as home and family have become increasingly important, reflecting a trend that applies not only to Millennials but also to older generations (Pyöriä et al., 2013).

From leadership and management perspectives, members of Generation Y want to be seen as individuals (Bresman, 2015.) as well as being respected, valued and heard by their supervisors (Kultalahti, 2015; Rentz, 2015). Additionally, they tend to be extremely resistant to micro-management (CMI, 2014). Based on the literature, we claim that in order to answer to the needs of future leadership among the Generation Y, further research is needed on how supervisors, managers and leaders can support the professional growth, engagement and passion at work, and thus create an organisation culture that answers the needs of work places of post-industrial era.

Leading the passion of Generation Y

Engagement and motivation have been at the heart of much of leadership discussion, especially after the rise of charismatic and transformational leadership theories in the 1980s and 1990s. Hundreds of studies have been conducted where scholars have sought for the best ways for leaders to achieve the goal of engaged or motivated followers. As is true for much of leadership

research, this stream has overwhelmingly focused on the leader (see e.g. DeRue, 2011) and produced rather abstract and general findings and advice for leaders: be a charismatic leader (Babcock-Robertson & Strickland, 2010), a transformational leader (Zhu, Avolio & Walumbwa, 2009), or exhibit transparent communication and behavioral integrity (Vogelgesang, Leroy & Avolio, 2013). A lot of this research is quantitative, again mirroring the leadership as a whole (see e.g. Glynn & Raffaelli, 2010). Relatively lacking is a perspective aimed at *understanding* the phenomenon, to *expose* meanings of leadership rather than *impose* them (Bryman et al., 1988).

As we have discussed above, research on the role of leadership in inducing engagement and also its role in affecting the emotions of employees is rather scarce. In particular, there is a dearth of studies seeking to gain a richer understanding about the actual everyday leadership actions in affecting them. In this study, we seek to contribute to this stream of research by conducting a qualitative study about passion at work. In this way, we are addressing some of the issues brought forward by Bakker et al. (2011) discussed above: we seek to provide more granular understanding of passion at work, directed towards specific tasks and not the work as a whole; we want to understand the role of leadership in fostering passion at work; and we address the relative lack of qualitative studies in the field.

We also want to break with the traditional view of concentrating on the leader when considering leadership. This coincides well with the usual arguments about the Generation Y, where they are said to value individuality and freedom and detest micro-management. We seek to understand the locally constructed meanings, the members' understandings (Iszatt-White, 2009) of leadership and passion. Therefore, we do not focus on leaders' actions but instead look at the workers' own constructions of what they hold important. Uncovering the workers' thoughts and valuations, our study provides the first step in understanding how the passion of the Generation Y could be led.

As we study how the workers construct ideas about leadership and passion, we do not start with too strict definitions and instead will let them arise from the data. However, we do need a starting point to approach these many faceted concepts. For leadership, we follow Alvesson and Spicer (2011) and start with a broad definition of leadership as entailing some kind of an influence process and invoking locally constructed meanings. The locally constructed meanings give leadership its form in different contexts. For passion, we draw from both Vallerand (2007) and Cardon et al. (2009) and define passion at work as consciously accessible, intense positive feelings experienced by engagement in work activities that people like or find important and in which they invest time and energy. These are the preliminary definitions through which we look at our data. However, as stated, we will let the final definitions to arise from the data.

Method

The aim of this study is to understand how the members of Generation Y construct the meaning of passion at work, and to understand what enhances or kills passion at work. The research questions are:

1. How do members of Generation Y construct passion at work?
2. What enhances and what kills their passion at work?

To answer these questions the research was conducted qualitatively by using semi-structured interviews, providing themes, but letting space for the interviewees to speak freely and reflect their thoughts and emotions around the subjects. Use of semi-structured interview allows the interviewer to follow some preset questions but also to include additional questions in response to participant comment and reactions (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). The themes of the pilot interviews consisted of questions concerning Millennials' values of work, their motivation, perceptions of leadership, perceptions of passion at work, and especially what enhances and kills the passion and finally we asked about their future dreams.

The interviews were conducted between December 2015 and March 2016 in four Finnish organisations in Helsinki and Oulu. The research organisations provide a good sample of Finnish working life and work realities of Finnish Millennials. Two of the organisations are from service sectors, one from B2B and one from B2C sales. The third is an industrial company and the fourth is an association.

The interviewees were chosen using purposive sampling by asking assistance of the HR managers to provide a list of employees that are born in 1980's or 1990's or to directly suggest interviewees that are born in that time line. The total number of interviewees was 30, from which 16 were female and 14 were male. All were born in the 80's and in the 90's. The youngest was 25 years old and the eldest was 35 years old. The total amount of interviews is 30. The approximate length of one interview was 45 minutes, varying from 30 minutes up to one hour and 15 minutes. The interviews were transcribed by a professional organization specializing in transcripts.

Table 1: Information on industry and gender division of pilot interviews

	Female	Male	Total
Service, B2B sales	7	1	8
Service, B2C sales	3	5	8
Industrial company	2	6	8
Association	4	2	6
Total	16	14	30

The preliminary analysis was conducted by using content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013) in order to find frequency and patterns of use of terms or phrases, using inductive approach. NVIVO was used in the analysis process. First nodes were constructed inductively in order to understand what kind of themes arose from the data in general. Then, for this study, nodes were constructed according to our research questions regarding passion at work.

Results

As we have started to analyze our data, we can say that our interviews have tapped well into the working life of the members of the Generation Y and their views on passion and leadership. In the preliminary analysis, analysing our data in an inductive way, the general themes that arose from the data concern trust/confidence; freedom and autonomy; the importance of good

management and leadership including repetitive notions of feedback and appreciation from the supervisors; as well as the importance of the work community, especially good interaction and atmosphere.

Constructions of passion at work

In order to answer our first research question, how the members of Generation Y construct passion at work, we examined their answers to the following interview questions: “How would you describe passion at work?”, “What does it mean to you?”, “Can you remember a situation, where you have felt passion at work?” and “How does it show in your work?” The analysis of the answers for these questions is summarized in Table 2 below. Our analysis shows that the most common meaning given to passion at work consist notions of strong positive feelings of liking or loving ones job.

“That you like what you do. That you like it for real, and not just come to work and count minutes.”

“It means to me that you are enthusiastic about what you do, or you love what you do. It’s like when I am with clients, I have that kind of passion. It’s like that I then love what I’m doing. Like in that moment I understand to be grateful that I can do this job.”

Meaning for passion at work was also constructed through the ideas of investing energy and effort for the work, because the work itself is meaningful, not any extrinsic sources of motivation. Some additional notions of the concepts of “flow” or “drive” were mentioned as well. Additionally, investing time to fulfil the tasks was pointed out.

“It’s kind of winning yourself, like kind of giving more of yourself that what you really can.”

“It’s like drive, that you get into a flow, that you don’t think what time it is [laughing] and how long you have to sit here. That you feel attraction and interest on it in general, and the work itself as meaningful. That you don’t think that you come here for the salary to sit from eight to four and do what you are supposed to do and then go away.”

The Generation Y also referred to strong positive feelings when describing passion at work, and often they were related to the feeling of competence and success in specific tasks.

“The passion comes from when you get the chance to show what you can, that I am able to do this, that I am a bit better than last time”.

“Well, that’s when you get a huge deal, it’s then when you get a really good feeling and like it’s really cool.”

Table 2. Constructions of passion at work.

How to construct the meaning of passion at work	nr of sources	nr of references
Loving or liking the work	16	19

Investing energy and effort	13	16
Feeling of competence and being enthusiastic abt it	11	14
Work identity and professional pride	5	7
Investing time	5	6
Notions of flow and drive	4	4
Not relating passion with work	3	3

What gives fire

In order to answer the first part of our second research question, what enhances and what kills the members of the Generation Y's passion at work, we examined their answers to the following questions: "Can you tell what enhances passion at work?", "Can you describe a situation where you have felt passion at work?", and "Summarize with three concepts or short sentences what maintains the fire of passion at work".

The results show that the most common answers were related to the concept of competence referred often as fulfilling the challenges and feeling of success.

"Well, I felt this type of feeling of success, that even the client thought, that let her speak now, don't disturb her."

"Challenges. Can't think of more."

The results show also the importance of the interestingness of the work, especially versatile and changing work tasks, *"that are not related to your everyday tasks"*. Well-functioning, positive and supporting work community with a good atmosphere plays an important role when feeling and maintaining passion at work.

"Mostly when you feel the positive drive it's also mirroring back from others. That you have a challenging task and nice people around."

"That it (passion) stays on it's sure when the work community works."

The members of the Generation Y also want to be trusted and appreciated in order to feel passion at work. Learning opportunities as well as freedom and autonomy give them fire as well. Good management played a minor role.

Table 3. What enhances passion at work?

What enhances passion at work	nr of sources	nr of references
Feeling of competence	23	39
Interestingness of the work/versatile tasks	14	18
Work community	13	20
Being trusted and appreciated	11	21
Meaningfulness of work	8	10
Learning opportunities	7	8
Freedom and autonomy	5	7

Good management	3	4
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Passion killers

In order to answer the second part of our second research question, we examined how the participants answered to a direct question on what kills passion at work. The results show the importance of a positive and well-functioning work community. If there is poor interaction and a bad atmosphere in the organization, the passion of Generation Y is destructed.

“If I couldn’t communicate with others, it would kill it totally. And also how colleagues and manager take me and how they take their own work.”

They are also very resistant to routines, in the means of unimportant and “useless” tasks as well as bureaucracy. Lack of trust and lack of appreciation was a common theme as well. The role on managers was crucial. Both micro-management and managers not giving feedback were often mentioned.

“Well, that’s easy, you know. I can tell. I have resigned for that. It sure kills passion... I did a good job and then the management changed. We got a new sales manager, a new supervisor who was a real dick. It didn’t work..... He was all the time breathing down my neck and that kills”.

“Then the continuous control, that someone is looking after your performance, that there is no trust that you can do it, that someone suspects all the time and breaths down your neck.”

Lack of freedom kills passion and sometimes the fact that there is not enough time and resources to fulfill the tasks destructs passion at work.

Table 4. What kills passion at work?

What kills passion at work?	nr of sources	nr of references
Bad work community	12	19
Routine	11	13
Lack of trust and appreciation	10	10
Bad management - no feedback	9	14
Lack of freedom and autonomy	7	9
Micro-management	7	8
Lack of time and resources	6	7
Lack of competence	2	2

Discussion

In our literature review section, we tentatively defined passion at work as consciously accessible, intense positive feelings experienced by engagement in work activities that people love or like, or find important, and in which they invest time and energy. The results of our preliminary analysis in Table 2 show that the members of Generation Y in our data have similar notions about passion at work. Loving and liking the work, investing time and effort, and feelings of competence and enthusiasm are featured prominently. There were two interesting exceptions to this. First, we have not included the notion of identity, which is present in Vallerand et al.'s (2007) definition, into ours. In our data, people connected passion with identity, especially professional pride. Second, some people did not see passion as a part of working life at all. These outliers will be an interesting research subject in further analysis.

The results concerning the enhancers of passion are interesting. The majority of the most prominent themes presented in Table 3 – feeling of competence, interestingness of the work, meaningfulness of work, learning opportunities, and freedom and autonomy – are strongly related to intrinsic motivation that grows from inside of the person. The work community and being trusted and appreciated were also highlighted. These themes are related to feelings of belonging and relatedness. Here, we note the close resemblance of our results with self-determination theory (Ryan, R. & Deci, E., 2000) and the exploration of this relation will be addressed in further analysis.

Many of the results concerning the killers of passion mirror the results of the enhancers of passion. The themes of bad work community, routine, lack of trust and appreciation, lack of freedom and autonomy, and lack of competence are the opposites of the enhancers in the above. However, these results also highlight the role of management in killing passion with the categories of bad management – no feedback and micro-management. Tentatively, it seems that leadership can only indirectly enhance passion at work but it can directly kill it.

Our tentative results support some of the recent research on Generation Y. Previous studies have argued that interestingness and versatile work are crucial among Generation Y, which is directly supported by our data. Studies have also shown them to be strongly resistant to bureaucracy, micro-management, and routines, which is also supported by our data. Our results also indicate some ideas on how to lead the passion of Generation Y. In order to enhance passion at work, leaders should strive to organise work so as to support workers' passion: giving them interesting tasks and feelings of competence, trusting them and appreciating their work, and giving them opportunities to learn and exercise autonomy. Leaders should also invest in the work community to make it supportive, inspiring and engaging. In addition, leaders should strive to diminish the effect of the possible killers of passion. The effect of dull routines should be addressed, feedback should be an intrinsic part of work, and micro-management should be avoided.

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