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# **Organizational Goal Ambiguity and Senior Public Managers' Engagement: Does Organizational Social Capital Make a Difference?**

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## **Abstract**

The Job Demands-Resources model highlights that aspects of the work environment that place high demands on employees are potential job stressors, which can reduce their levels of engagement with their work and organization. By contrast, social support for employees is a resource that can sustain their engagement and enable them to cope with high demands. We analyse the separate and combined effects of two key job demands and resources on the engagement of more than 4,000 senior public managers in ten European countries: organizational goal ambiguity, which may demotivate employees; and organizational social capital, which can prompt employees to share knowledge in constructive and helpful ways. The statistical results suggest that there is a negative relationship between goal ambiguity and engagement, and a positive one between social capital and engagement. Further analysis revealed that organizational social capital weakens the negative goal ambiguity-engagement relationship.

## **Points for practitioners**

This study emphasizes the value of organizational social capital for enhancing senior managers' engagement. Not only do positive co-worker relationships lead senior public managers to feel more engaged with their work and organization, but they also protect that engagement from the damaging effects of organizational goal ambiguity. The findings we present therefore provide a strong basis for the introduction of policies and practices that can support the development of social capital within public organizations.

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## **Introduction**

Employee engagement is one of the most important issues in the theory and practice of human resource management (Baldev and Anupama, 2010; Brunetto, Shacklock, Teo, and Farr-Wharton, 2014). Individuals who are committed to the organization and involved with the work that they do are the source of positive contributions to organizational functioning (Albrecht, 2010). The perceived need for an engaged workforce has become especially prevalent within the public sector, with governments across the world seeking to transform service provision by increasing levels of employee engagement. The Canadian, United Kingdom and United States governments have all run evaluation projects seeking to understand how to better support the engagement of civil servants (i.e. the Public Service Employee Survey, the Civil Service People Survey and the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey). The growing emphasis on employee engagement reflects a wider turn towards positive psychological states in organizational psychology (Meyers, van Woerkom and Bakker, 2013). Indeed, recent applications of the Job Demand-Resources (JD-R) model highlight the role that the presence of specific demands and resources within the working environment can play in shaping positive employee outcomes, such as engagement, as well as negative ones like employee burnout (Crawford, LePine and Rich, 2010). Nevertheless, although attention has been devoted to the determinants of employee burnout and disengagement in the public sector (e.g. Demerouti et al., 2001; Hallberg and Sverke, 2004; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004), there is a need for more research that evaluates the organizational factors that might shape the positive engagement of public employees. Such work has already been undertaken among street-level bureaucrats and professionals (e.g. Brunetto et al., 2014; Di Simone et al., 2016), but has rarely addressed the engagement of senior public managers, even though the efforts of these individuals are critical to the success of public service organizations.

For the purposes of our study, we view engagement as the degree to which an employee is motivated to contribute to organizational success and is willing to display attitudes and behaviours that help in the achievement of organizational objectives (see Wiley, Kowske and Herman, 2010). Employee engagement is typically associated with positive work-related outcomes, such as improved job performance and citizenship behaviours (Saks, 2006; Yalabik, Popaitoon, Chowne and Rayton, 2013). However, despite growing interest in the organizational factors that might shape engagement (Christian, Garza, and Slaughter, 2011; Rayton and Yalabik, 2014), comparatively little attention has so far been devoted to the antecedents of senior managers' engagement. In particular, research has yet to fully explore how ambiguous organizational goals and positive co-worker relationships might influence the engagement of senior public managers, even though these are job demands and resources that many argue are characteristic of managerial work in the public sector (Burke, Noblet and Cooper, 2013). To address these gaps in the literature, we examine the separate and combined effects of organizational goal ambiguity and social capital on the engagement of high-ranking public officials across Europe.

Research on employee engagement is influenced by the organizational psychology literature, especially work on employee burnout (e.g. Maslach, Jackson and Leiter, 1996). While there has been an explosion of interest in the antecedents and effects of engagement in recent years, it has proven to be an elusive concept to define, measure and theorise (Saks and Gruman, 2014), becoming a kind of “omnibus term” that captures several positive employee attitudes and behaviours (Baldev and Anupama, 2010). As such, it is an employee outcome that fits well within the JD-R model. In our study context, the relative clarity with which organizational objectives are expressed and the quality of the relationships between co-workers seem particularly likely to be job demands and resources that will influence engagement.

Organizational goal ambiguity refers to the extent to which the objectives of an organization are not clearly stated and communicated to employees (Weber and Weber, 2001). Social cognitive theories suggest that in organizations where aims and objectives are ambiguous and unclear, employees will be less motivated to achieve the goals that are set for them (Locke and Latham, 1990). Hence, organizational goal ambiguity represents a substantial job demand because it requires additional cognitive effort on the part of employees, especially for senior managers responsible for communicating objectives effectively to subordinates. At the same time though, senior managers' engagement may be sustained by the psychological and social resources available to them within an organization, especially strong co-worker relationships (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004).

From a psychological perspective, employees with trusting and supportive interpersonal relationships are likely to experience psychological safety and feel free to be authentic at work (Kahn, 1990). This, in turn, increases their willingness to become engaged in both their work and organization (Avery et al., 2007; Olivier and Rothmann, 2007). From an organizational perspective, positive co-worker relationships are collectively-owned "assets" which can facilitate much-needed knowledge transfer (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998, 243). Such assets can be conceptualised as Organizational Social Capital (OSC), consisting of structural (connections among actors), relational (trust between actors) and cognitive (shared goals and values among actors) dimensions (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). The connections, trust and shared values that make up OSC are valuable resources that may hold the key to senior managers' engagement. In organizations where individuals are more willing to work together, trust each other and share similar organizational values, managers are able to rely on a supportive environment for their efforts to achieving organizational objectives.

In addition to being an important job resource that can support senior managers' engagement, OSC may also mitigate the worst effects of stressful job demands on that

engagement. Where managers can rely upon employees to work together productively, they may be less likely to feel demotivated by ambiguous goals and objectives, in particular. This issue is especially important in public organizations, because their goals and objectives are strongly influenced by political principals, particularly within central government where the working relationships between ministers and civil servants are critical (Brans, Pelgrims and Hoet, 2006; Page and Wright, 1999). By examining how organizational goal ambiguity and OSC shape the engagement of senior public managers in such agencies, this study therefore casts valuable light on the work of administrative elites across Europe.

The article begins by exploring theoretical perspectives on, and developing hypotheses about, the separate effects of ambiguous goals and OSC on employee engagement. We then assess the role that OSC might play in conditioning the relationship between goal ambiguity and employee engagement, elaborating arguments about the positive moderating effects of social capital. Following that, the data and methods employed in the study are described and the results of the analyses that are carried out are reported. The article concludes by discussing the implications of the findings.

### **Organizational goal ambiguity and senior managers' engagement**

Social cognitive theories suggest that goal ambiguity imposes additional demands on employees because when organizational goals are not easy to understand, individuals' capacity for self-efficacy and self-regulation is correspondingly diminished (Bandura, 1991; Kanfer, 1990). The more difficult it is to interpret organizational objectives, the more likely it is that employees will misunderstand and misdirect their efforts towards unproductive or unimportant work activities. As a result, organizational goal ambiguity poses an especially serious threat to employees' engagement. Clear and easily understood goals motivate employees to work harder because it is easier for them to diagnose the actions necessary to

achieve desired organizational objectives (Bandura, 1991). By contrast, ambiguous organizational goals make the task of synchronizing one's work efforts with the requirements of the organization much more demanding.

Although some public management scholars question whether organizational goal ambiguity is always a bad thing (Davis and Stazyk, 2014; Rainey and Jung, 2015), empirical studies connect it with worse employee and organizational outcomes (e.g. Jung, 2014; Rainey and Jung, 2010; Stazyk and Goerdel, 2011; Stazyk, Pandey and Wright, 2011). When organizational goals are ambiguous and unclear, employees must work harder to understand the relationship between the activities that they undertake and the resulting performance of the organization. In addition, because the criteria for goal attainment are not easily understood the connection between individual effort and subsequent rewards becomes murkier. In these circumstances, employees are more likely to display low levels of engagement because they are not certain whether investment in one activity or another will be time and effort well-spent (Jung, 2014; Wright, 2004).

The problems posed by goal ambiguity may be especially acute for senior public managers in central government agencies, since they are directly accountable to politicians for the performance of the organizations that they manage (Christensen, Klemmensen and Opstrup, 2014). Previous studies find that organizational goal ambiguity is associated with lower job satisfaction and work motivation among public sector employees (Wright and Davis, 2003; Wright, 2004). It is also associated with a decreased propensity to interact with external stakeholders (Davis and Stazyk, 2016). The reduced self-efficacy and heightened anxiety that accompany the presence of ambiguous organizational goals therefore seem likely to be a job demand that translates into lower levels of engagement among senior managers. Hence, we hypothesize that:

**Hypothesis 1:** Organizational goal ambiguity is negatively related to the engagement of senior public managers.

### **Organizational social capital and senior managers' engagement**

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) identify three dimensions of OSC, which may constitute valuable job resources for senior managers seeking to coordinate organizational activities: structural; relational; and cognitive. The structural dimension of OSC refers to the connections between organizational members, especially the frequency with which individuals share information. This knowledge exchange can facilitate intra-organizational cooperation and mutual accountability (Leana and Pil, 2006). The relational component of OSC refers to the degree of trust among individuals. Organizational members who trust each other experience higher levels of psychological safety (Kahn, 1990), which makes them more likely to exchange sensitive and important information (Leana and Pil, 2006). The cognitive dimension of OSC refers to the shared vision for the organization, which can help to create a sense of collective responsibility. Each dimension of social capital both reinforces and is reinforced by the others. Individuals who share the same work values are more likely to have high quality relationships with each other and regularly share information (Leana and Van Buren, 1999).

Managers' perceptions of the social capital present within the organizations in which they work seems likely to shape their attitudes towards work and the organization (Bolino, Turnley and Bloodgood, 2002). Where there are stronger norms of information sharing, trust and a shared vision, senior managers, in particular, are likely to be more engaged because they are more confident that they have the necessary organizational resources required to achieve organizational goals. Frequent information sharing increases employees' sense of responsibility and obligation toward the organization, and thereby enhances their integration

within the organization (Yang, Gong and Huo, 2011). In trustful relationships, individuals feel more comfortable in sharing information and knowledge because of their confidence that such openness will be reciprocated (Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2011). This then tends to be associated with increased organizational identification (Yang, Gong and Huo, 2011). In these circumstances, employees become connected and bound together by common aspirations that enhance their engagement (Dvir, Kass and Shamir, 2004).

For senior managers working in organizations that have high levels of OSC, positive relationships between subordinates are a potentially valuable job resource that can help them to achieve work goals (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Not only can confidence in their subordinates boost the motivation of managers, but it is likely to have further self-reinforcing effects as managers, in turn, are moved to demonstrate their faith in subordinates in ways that strengthen co-worker relationships. Leader-member exchange theory, for example, highlights how organizational leaders who hold a positive perception of followers' work values and attitudes are more likely to take a proactive role in team-building and development (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Given the general expectation that OSC enhances the engagement of all employees, plus the strength of the connection between OSC and other positive employee behaviours, such as a willingness to share resources across different sub-units (Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998), we hypothesize that:

**Hypothesis 2:** Organizational social capital is positively related to the engagement of senior managers.

### **The moderating effects of OSC on the goal ambiguity-engagement relationship**

Where employees are uncertain about the goals of the organization, they are likely to rely on other sources of support to negotiate the cognitive demands posed by goal ambiguity.

Positive co-worker relationships represent an especially important source of such support. While organizational goal ambiguity may have numerous undesirable consequences, its negative effects on the engagement of senior managers could therefore be mitigated by the quality of the social capital within an organization. Where there are stronger norms of information sharing, trust and a shared vision, senior managers may feel greater confidence that they are able to implement strategies that will achieve organizational goals, especially those which appear unclear and ambiguous. According to Stark and Bierly (2009), open communication among organizational members usually results in a sense of collective responsibility which, in turn, contributes to a 'we are all in this together sentiment' (p. 464). This confidence in one's co-workers' will correspondingly be reflected in greater ability to overcome the demotivating effects of ambiguous organizational goals.

Given that senior managers are responsible for overseeing workplace relationships, it seems likely that their experience and perceptions of the social capital present within the organizations in which they work will shape their attitudes towards their work, organization and prospects of goal achievement (Bolino et al., 2002). OSC can facilitate the pursuit of organizational objectives in the absence of formal processes of coordination (Leana and van Buren, 1999), and it seems likely to be a valuable resource for managers seeking to resolve collective action problems when clear and transparent goals are not present. Hence, for all of the above reasons, we anticipate that the harmful effects of goal ambiguity on the engagement of senior managers will be conditioned by the confidence that those managers have in their colleagues' norms of information sharing, trust and a shared vision. Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

**Hypothesis 3:** OSC will weaken the negative relationship between goal ambiguity and the engagement of senior managers.

## **Method**

### *Sample and procedures*

The analysis utilizes data from a large-N questionnaire survey of senior public managers conducted in ten European countries (Austria, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and United Kingdom). The survey was based on a full census of all central government ministries and agencies, covering all top and higher level public sector managers working in all policy areas. For example, in France, top civil servants in all the ministries, prefectures, regional ministerial directorates, departmental directorates and executive agencies were surveyed, whilst in Germany, all senior managers in federal and state (länder) government ministries and agencies were surveyed. In the UK, senior civil servants in all central government departments, devolved governments and executive agencies were surveyed (Hammerschmid, Oprisor and Stimac, 2013).

The survey was implemented in the form of an online survey with standardized versions of the webpage in different languages. It was conducted by separate research teams in each country, with data cleaning and harmonization carried out by a central research team. The survey was implemented in two rounds (May-July 2012, and September-November 2012). These two rounds combined were sent out to over 20,000 high ranking civil servants in the ten participating countries via post and email (using either a personalized access link or an anonymous one). In cases where response rates were low, teams took additional measures, such as phone or postal reminders, to increase the number of survey participants. In the beginning of November 2012, all surveys were closed and datasets cleaned, checked and harmonized according to a standardised procedure.

By the end of 2012, there were 4,814 valid answers and an overall response rate of 23.7%. Table 1 shows the total number of questionnaires distributed and the response rate in each country. Non-response bias was assessed by comparing early and late respondents (first

10% and last 10% of returned questionnaires) in each country. Late respondents tend to have similar characteristics to non-respondents (Armstrong and Overton, 1977). Independent sample t-tests revealed no significant differences between both groups in all ten countries, suggesting that non-response bias is not an issue. Of the respondents, 68% were male; a percentage consistent with the proportion of male public managers in Europe (OECD, 2013). With regard to age, 5% of respondents were less than 35, 18% were between 36 and 45, 37% were between 46 and 55, and the remainder were above 55. A total of 13% of respondents had a PhD, 59% a master's degree, and the rest a bachelor's degree. The data are subject to strict anonymity regulations.

[Table 1 here]

### ***Measures***

Short scales were used to lower the response burden, increase survey response and reduce non-response bias, particularly as our data was collected from senior managers (Edwards et al., 2002). Responses to all questionnaire items were measured on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Full descriptions of all the survey items are shown in Appendix A.

*Senior managers' engagement* was measured using a three-item scale developed by Wiley, Kowske, and Herman (2010). The Cronbach's alpha for the employee engagement measure was 0.73. Our scale items, which are widely used by governments and consultancy firms, are consistent with Schaufeli's (2013) definition of employee engagement as they represent an employee's satisfaction with their work and connection to their organization.

*Goal ambiguity* was measured using three items akin to those used by Wright (2004) and Davis and Stzyk (2014) to gauge the clarity of organizational goals. The Cronbach's

alpha for this 3 item scale was 0.77. We measured each of the three dimensions of *OSC* identified by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) with three items taken from the scale developed by Leana and Pil (2006). Consistent with prior research (e.g. Chuang, Chen and Chuang, 2013; Leana and Pil, 2006), we averaged the items within each dimension and treated the dimension scores as three indicators of a higher order, overall *OSC* construct. Cronbach's alpha for the *OSC* scale was 0.94.

In commenting on organizational goal ambiguity and social capital, survey respondents were requested to regard their organization as: “the organisational entity that you work for. Usually, it is a ministry (in the UK this is a ‘Department’) or an agency. It is never only a section, division, or subunit within a ministry or agency. Agencies or other subordinate bodies who have autonomy versus the Ministry should be regarded as own organisation and not part of the Ministry.”

Prior research has shown that autonomy, organizational size and employees' age, gender, and education are related to employee engagement (Christian, Garza, and Slaughter, 2011; Avery, McKay and Wilson 2007). Accordingly, these variables were controlled for in the current study to rule out potential alternative explanations for the findings.

## **Results**

We analysed the data using structural equation modelling (SEM) with AMOS 21. Maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) was utilised, which is the most common method of estimation in SEM (Iacobucci, 2009). The analysis followed Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step procedure, estimating the measurement model prior to the proposed structural model.

### ***Measurement validation***

The measurement relationships were analysed and the reliability and validity of all the study constructs were evaluated using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). To assess model fit, we used the comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI). The overall measurement model fit was acceptable ( $\chi^2$  (df = 111) = 2551.910,  $p < 0.01$ ; CFI= 0.922, RMSEA= 0.068, and TLI= 0.880). Results showed that the constructs possessed high internal consistency with composite reliability scores above 0.75 and average variance extracted scores above 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). As shown in table 2, the square root of the average variance extracted for each construct was higher than the corresponding inter-construct correlation estimates, suggesting that discriminant validity was satisfied (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

[Table 2 here]

### ***Common method bias***

Since all the study variables were measured using data from the same respondents, the effects of common method bias (CMB) were assessed. First, we performed Harman's single-factor test. A measurement model in which all the indicators were loaded onto a single factor had an extremely poor fit ( $\chi^2$  (df = 170) = 1977.124,  $p < 0.01$ ; CFI = 0.628, RMSEA = 0.174, and TLI= 0.541), suggesting that common method bias is not a serious problem. We also used the more stringent unmeasured latent method factor technique (Cole, Bedeian and Bruch, 2011), which involves estimating a measurement model where items are allowed to load on both their theoretical constructs and the latent common method factor. This model exhibited a good fit ( $\chi^2$  (df = 144) = 360.238,  $p < 0.01$ ; CFI = 0.956, RMSEA = 0.066, TLI = 0.935), but the variance extracted (AVE) by the common method factor was 0.38, falling below the 0.50

value that Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggest indicates the presence of a substantive construct. Therefore, again, CMB did not appear problematic.

### ***Structural model estimation with latent interactions***

To examine the moderating role of OSC on the relationship between goal ambiguity and engagement, Little, Bovaird and Widaman's (2006) residual centring approach was used. This approach involves a two-step procedure. First, an indicator is selected from each first-order construct (goal ambiguity and OSC), and multiplied together (e.g. GA1\*INFSHARING). The cross-product is then regressed on all indicators of the first-order constructs (GA1, GA2, GA3, INFSHARING, TRUST and SHVISION) and residuals are saved, in this case (GA1\*INFSHARING\_res). The procedure is repeated for each (3 x 3 = 9) cross-product. Second, the nine sets of residuals are treated as indicators of the latent (goal ambiguity-OSC) interaction term when estimating the structural model. Finally, correlated covariances are estimated between residual-centred indicators if the original cross-product comprised the same first-order indicator (e.g. GA1\*INFSHARING\_res and GA1\*TRUST\_res may share unique variance associated with indicator GA1).

The proposed structural model provided a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2$  (df =302) =3303.106,  $p < 0.01$ ; CFI = 0.959, RMSEA = 0.045 and TLI = 0.948). The predictor variables explained 47% of the variance in engagement ( $R^2 = 0.471$ ). Goal ambiguity had a significant negative association with engagement ( $\beta = -0.336$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Thus, our first hypothesis was supported. OSC, on the other hand, had a significant positive association with engagement ( $\beta = 0.471$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Hence, our second hypothesis was also supported. The analysis also revealed that the interaction between goal ambiguity and OSC was significant and positive ( $\beta = 0.077$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Figure 1 shows the moderating effect of OSC on the goal ambiguity–engagement relationship. As proposed, the negative relationship between goal

ambiguity and engagement was weaker for managers perceiving high levels of OSC than for those perceiving low levels. Thus, our third hypothesis was also supported.

[Figure 1 here]

### ***Robustness tests***

To examine the hypothesized relationships in each of the countries comprising our sample, we tested a multi-group structural model in which groups were defined by country. As shown in Table 3, goal ambiguity had a significant negative association with engagement in nine of the ten countries, while OSC had a significant positive association with engagement in all ten countries. However, the interaction between goal ambiguity and OSC was significant and positive in only six out of the ten countries. We return to this finding in our discussion of the results.

[Table 3 here]

## **DISCUSSION**

In this article, we have applied the JD-R model by exploring the separate and combined effects of goal ambiguity and OSC on the engagement of senior managers in European central governments. Our study highlights that ambiguous organizational goals appear to be a particularly challenging job demand for senior public managers, as they are associated with a weaker sense of engagement. By contrast, positive working relationships amongst organizational members seem to be a valuable job resource for senior managers as they are associated with stronger feelings of engagement. Moreover, OSC seems to mitigate the potentially damaging effects of goal ambiguity on the senior managers' engagement.

We advance theories of human resource management in the public sector by identifying a negative relationship between organizational goal ambiguity and the engagement of senior public managers within multiple countries. In addition, we find that OSC is a source of support that can help managers cope with the demands associated with goal ambiguity. In doing so, our study affirms the insights of the JD-R model, highlighting that it is not only applicable to questions of burnout amongst front-line public services professionals (e.g. Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004), but also to the positive engagement of senior public sector managers. Importantly, our findings confirm that goal ambiguity may be an especially important job demand within public organizations, while positive co-worker relationships may be critical job resources for public managers, particularly those confronting high job demands (Burke, Noblet and Cooper, 2013).

Although the independent effects of goal ambiguity and OSC on engagement are largely consistent across the ten countries, we do find that OSC moderates the negative goal ambiguity-engagement relationship in only six countries: Estonia, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and the UK. It is conceivable that this finding is attributable to the different HRM systems in those countries. The public administration literature distinguishes between career-based HRM systems in the public sector, which emphasize early-entry, life-long service and progression by seniority, and position-based HRM systems that emphasize competitive entry, flexible working arrangements and performance-related rewards and progression (Laegrid and Wise, 2015; Van de Walle, Steijn and Jilke, 2015). Survey respondents from the countries in which we find a statistically significant interaction effect reported higher levels of ‘flexible employment’, a development associated with a move towards a position-based HRM system (Hammerschmid et al., 2013; see also the OECD's Government at a Glance publications for 2009 and 2011, and the Quality of Government Expert Survey 2012). Civil servants in more position-based systems are likely to be better

qualified, and more motivated and skilled than those in more strongly career-based ones (Ketelaar, Manning and Turkisch, 2007). Such individuals may therefore be more inclined to utilise OSC to overcome the collective action problem posed by goal ambiguity, rather than attempt to rely on long-established rules, regulations and routines. Systematic comparison of the dynamics of senior public managers' engagement in countries with different HRM systems would cast valuable new light on the relative strengths and weaknesses of different ways of structuring the senior public service in central governments.

In practical terms, our study suggests that efforts to reduce goal ambiguity are likely to have beneficial effects for public managers. Clear goals help provide a 'summative evaluation' of how employees performance supports such goals, which in turn, clarifies job performance expectations (Wright and Davis, 2003; 84). Public sector organizations can therefore enhance senior managers' engagement by constant evaluation of their objectives and via clear statements of desired performance standards and how they are to contribute to the achievement of the organizational mission. At the same time, where employees exchange information, trust each other and share the same conception of the organization's mission, the engagement of organizational leaders is likely to be stronger and more resilient to the problems posed by goal ambiguity. Although OSC tends to be path-dependent and evolve comparatively slowly, it is nevertheless something that managers and organization can cultivate (Leana and van Buren, 1999). This can potentially be accomplished by implementing HRM practices and organizational structures that are conducive to norms of collaboration, trust and sense of mission (see, for example, Cabrera and Cabrera, 2005).

### **Study Limitations**

While the statistical findings provide strong support for our hypotheses, the study has a number of limitations. First, the cross-sectional nature of the data prevents any definitive

conclusions regarding causality. Future research with longitudinal or experimental designs could address this issue. Second, although the analysis deals with organizational constructs, it is carried out at the individual level because the confidentiality protocol for the survey does not permit us to identify respondents with specific organizations. Subsequent research could use multi-level modelling to examine cross-level interactive effects (Payne, Moore, Griffis and Autry, 2011). Third, although we found that common method bias is not a serious threat to our findings, research designs that utilise different sources for the measures on each side of the equation would be valuable. Finally, the analysis presented here has examined a particular group of senior public managers and organizations during a specific time period. It would be important to identify whether the relative importance of goal ambiguity and OSC for the engagement of senior public managers differs over other time periods and in other organizational settings.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined the separate and combined effects of organization goal ambiguity and social capital on the engagement of senior managers within central government agencies in Europe. In doing so, it highlights that ambiguous organizational goals may place demands on senior managers that weakens their engagement, but that information-sharing, interpersonal trust and a sense of shared mission are organizational resources that can enhance that engagement. Moreover, such OSC can mitigate the negative effect of goal ambiguity on senior managers' engagement. These findings represent an important contribution to theories of human resource management in the public sector and can assist in further unpacking the ways in which positive psychology interventions could prove beneficial. Further research is therefore required which investigates the effectiveness of different approaches to harnessing the benefits of organizational social capital.

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**Table 1.** Number of questionnaires and response rates

Country	Questionnaires Delivered	Questionnaires Completed	Response Rate %
Austria	1745	637	36.50
Estonia	913	321	35.16
France	5297	1193	22.52
Germany	2295	566	24.66
Hungary	1200	351	29.25
Italy	1703	343	20.14
Netherlands	977	293	29.99
Norway	1299	436	33.56
Spain	1778	321	18.05
UK	3100	353	11.39
<b>Total</b>	<b>20307</b>	<b>4814</b>	<b>23.71</b>

**Table 2.** Inter-correlations and reliability estimates

Construct	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Goal Ambiguity	3.13	1.28	0.77, (0.80)						
2. Social Capital	4.79	1.13	-0.50***	0.87, (0.90)					
3. Employee Engagement	5.11	1.28	-0.53***	0.64***	0.72, (0.76)				
4. Decision Autonomy	3.54	1.52	-0.29**	0.25**	0.30**	0.70, (0.83)			
5. Gender (male=1, female=2)	1.32	0.47	0.01	-0.05**	-0.04	-0.05			
6. Age	3	0.89	-0.06*	0.07***	0.13***	0.05	-0.10		
7. Education	2	0.56	0.06	-0.02	-0.01	-0.01	-0.03	0.07**	
8. Organizational Size	3.72	1.52	-0.01	0.09***	0.01	0.07	-0.03**	-0.01**	-0.03

*Sub-diagonal entries are the latent construct inter-correlations. The first entry on the diagonal is square root of the AVE, whilst the second entry in parenthesis is the composite reliability score. n=4814.*

*\*\*\*p<0.01, \*\*p<0.05, \*p<0.10*

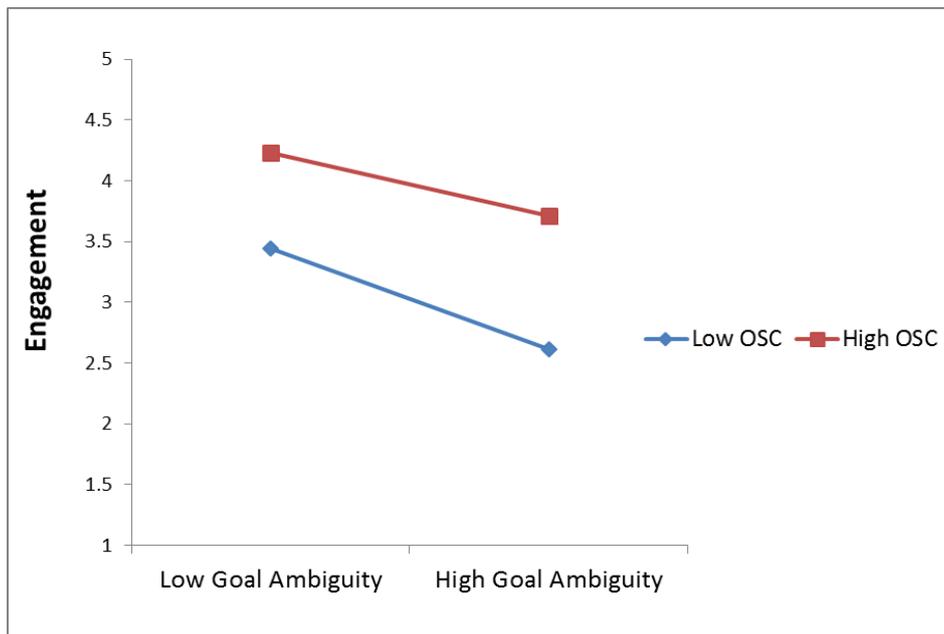
*Age, education and organizational size were measured as multichotomous variables (for age, 35 or less=1, 36-45=2, 46-55=3, 56-65=4 and 66 or older=5; for education, graduate degree (BA level) =1, postgraduate degree (MA level) = 2 and PhD/doctoral degree =3; whereas for organizational size, less than 50 employees=1, 50-99=2, 100-499=3, 500-999=4, 1000-5000=5 and over 5000 employees=6).*

**Table 3.** Path coefficients for individual countries

	GA → ENGAG	OSC → ENGAG	GA*OSC → ENGAG
Austria	-0.383**	0.386**	-0.074 <sup>n.s.</sup>
Estonia	-0.350**	0.621**	0.175**
France	-0.464**	0.461**	0.073 <sup>n.s.</sup>
Germany	-0.271**	0.632**	0.128*
Hungary	-0.359**	0.321**	0.018 <sup>n.s.</sup>
Italy	-0.108 <sup>n.s.</sup>	0.551**	0.234**
Netherlands	-0.539**	0.461**	0.748**
Norway	-0.385**	0.379**	0.156**
Spain	-0.255**	0.467**	0.028 <sup>n.s.</sup>
UK	-0.304**	0.423**	0.048*

Note: GA: goal ambiguity, ENGAG: engagement. OSC: organizational social capital  
 \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.10$

Figure 1 Moderating effect of OSC on the goal ambiguity–engagement relationship



Appendix 1A. Survey items used for the analysis (7-point Likert scales)

**Employee engagement**

*When thinking about my work and the organisation I work for:*

I get a sense of satisfaction from my work

I would recommend it as a good place to work

I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organisation

**Organizational goal ambiguity**

*To what extent do the following statements apply to your organisation?*

Our goals are clearly stated (reverse coded)

Our goals are communicated to all staff (reverse coded)

It is easy to observe and measure our activities (reverse coded)

**Organizational social capital**

*People in my organisation:*

...engage in open and honest communication with one another (*information sharing*)

...share and accept constructive criticisms without making it personal (*information sharing*)

...willingly share information with one another (*information sharing*)

...have confidence in one another (*interpersonal trust*)

...have a strong team spirit (*interpersonal trust*)

...are trustworthy (*interpersonal trust*)

...share the same ambitions and vision for the organisation (*shared vision*)

...enthusiastically pursue collective goals and mission (*shared vision*)

...view themselves as partners in charting the organisation's direction (*shared vision*)