Examining the Career Engagement of Canadian Career Development Practitioners

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Authors Note

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine the career engagement of Canadian Career Development Practitioners (CDPs), a group of professionals tasked with helping Canadians with career and employment-related concerns. Previous studies with this participant sample have not focused on engagement, which is considered to be an important metric for worker satisfaction and productivity. As a result, this study established an important foundation for ongoing work.

A mixed-method approach, using the newly developed quantitative measure of career engagement supported by some qualitative questions, was used for the study. Findings indicate that, overall, Canadian CDPs are engaged with their careers; however, the sector's youngest and newest as well as oldest and most senior workers are least likely to be engaged.

Although this study produced meaningful results, more research is needed. A larger sample size, with better geographical representation would help confirm workers most at risk for lower engagement. In addition, it is likely important to identify whether CDPs with lower engagement levels are at risk of providing a poorer quality of service to clients and, perhaps, subsequently impacting a client's ability to be successful.

Careers in the new millennium are like nothing we have seen before; the days of "one job for life" from years past, and foundational to many traditional career theories, have largely disappeared. The trend is now towards multiple work roles and/or employers, contract or project-based work, or boundaryless careers. The result is a growing need for individuals to consider their career paths, and manage their careers, in the context of an ever-changing labour market and complex global economy (Barnett & Bradley, 2007; Blustein, 2006; Herr, 2001; Inkson, 2004).

Organizations are also impacted by this complex, post-modern world with global competition for business and workers, the flattening of organizational structures, and anticipated skills shortages and skills disconnects. As a result, organizations are paying close attention to *employee engagement*, a relatively new construct that is related to employee satisfaction, motivation, and commitment, but not clearly defined within the literature (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Martin, Anderson, Cronin, Heinen, & Swetharanyan, 2010). Recent employee engagement studies have indicated that 17-27% of the global workforce is actively disengaged, ranging from employees being dissatisfied, disinterested, frustrated, and unproductive to them doing "just enough," hating their jobs, and spreading their negative feelings throughout the workplace (AON Hewitt, 2012; Gallup Consulting, 2010; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Swindall, 2007). Given that, on average, individuals spend approximately 25% of their lives engaged in work-related activities (an estimated 90,000 to 100,000 hours; Bennett, 2009; Tomlinson, 2010), it could be surmised that 17-27% of the working population may spend up to one-quarter of their lives in jobs they hate.

Regardless of the specific environment in which CDPs work (e.g., government-funded agency, post-secondary education, vocational rehabilitation), their work is similar; it focuses on helping clients identify work that is a good fit for who they are, understand the labour market, prepare resumes and cover letters, be successful in job interviews, and manage their careers over the long term in order to maximize opportunities for engaging, stimulating, and pleasing work. When applying global workforce disengagement numbers to Canadian CDPs, the implication is that approximately 25% of CDPs are unproductive, disinterested, and have an overall lack of commitment to their work. Further, in a recent study of Canadian CDPs, 50% of respondents noted an intention to leave the field (Canadian Education and Research Institute for Counselling, 2011). Combined, this

could result in poorer quality of service delivery.

The focus of this study was to examine the career engagement of Canadian CDPs. The career engagement model was developed to "illustrate the dynamic interaction between capacity and challenge that is required to keep individuals fully engaged in their work" (Neault & Pickerell, 2011, p. 185). Career engagement, the core construct of the model, is defined as the current emotional and cognitive connection to one's career; it is a state in which one is focused, energized, and able to derive pleasure from activities linked to work and other life roles.

Literature Review

In the sections that follow, the separate constructs of career and engagement are briefly explored, helping to situate *career engagement* in established areas of inquiry. Next, the career engagement model is introduced, its underlying theoretical foundation is briefly discussed, and the various elements that comprise the career engagement model are presented.

Exploring the Concept of Career

"Career" as a term in vocational theory gained prominence in the late 1950s with Super's (1957) *The Psychology of Careers*, despite the fact that the literature exploring how individuals make career decisions, and how careers develop, can be traced back 100 years. Debate continues on how careers should be defined. The European Lifelong Guidance Partnership Network (Jackson, 2012) defined career as "the interaction of work roles and other life roles over a person's lifespan, including how they balance paid and unpaid work, and their involvement in learning and education" (p.3); this is the definition used within the career engagement model.

Understanding Employee/Work/Job Engagement

Within the literature, the concept of engagement relates to the state of being attracted and committed to, and fascinated, stimulated, and absorbed by, something; it is most commonly used with a preceding descriptor such as *employee* engagement, *work* engagement, or *job* engagement (Attridge, 2009; Kular, Gatenby, Rees, Soane, & Truss, 2008; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010).

A challenge for almost anyone researching engagement is that a single, agreed-upon definition does not exist (Gibbons, 2006; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010; Swindall, 2007). For Kahn (1990), engaged workers are both physically and psychologically present when performing tasks. Rothbard (2001) also used present but added attention (i.e., thinking about the role) and absorption (i.e., depth of focus on the role) as two critical components. In their review of the literature, Macey and Schneider (2008) stated "the term [engagement] is used at different times to refer to psychological states, traits, and behaviours" (p. 3); Attridge (2009) came to a similar conclusion in his literature review. Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001), however, considered engagement to be the opposite of burnout; rather than exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness, which are noted to be the three dimensions of burnout, engagement involves energy, involvement, and efficacy.

A further challenge throughout the engagement literature is identifying whether authors are speaking about *employee* engagement, *work* engagement, or *job* engagement. Regardless of their specific approach, definition, and/or label, each group of scholars and practitioners are working with similar constructs. In addition, most seem to agree that engagement is different from other constructs present in the organizational literature (e.g., organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behaviour; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2006). Lastly, most agree that engagement is an important component of an organization's success (Attridge, 2009; Gibbons, 2006; Macey & Schneider, 2008). As noted by Macey and Schneider (2008), however, both practitioners and scholars are "saddled with competing and inconsistent interpretations of the meaning of the construct" (p. 3).

Our interest is in *career* engagement. It brings together the broad notion of career, which includes the multiple paid work roles and other life roles (e.g., parent, spouse, child, volunteer) individuals have throughout their lives, and engagement, which is the state where one is focused, energized, and stimulated. As authors of the career engagement model, our goal was not to further complicate the engagement literature but to address an important gap. The existing engagement literature focuses on the relationship the worker has either with his or her employer or with his or her specific role; all of these focus specifically on the context of the work environment. In our reviews, nothing in the engagement literature sufficiently addressed how the roles outside of work impact an individual's ability to be engaged in his/her work; nor did the literature address how one might be committed to a career within an occupation or sector but not necessarily to one specific employer or organization.

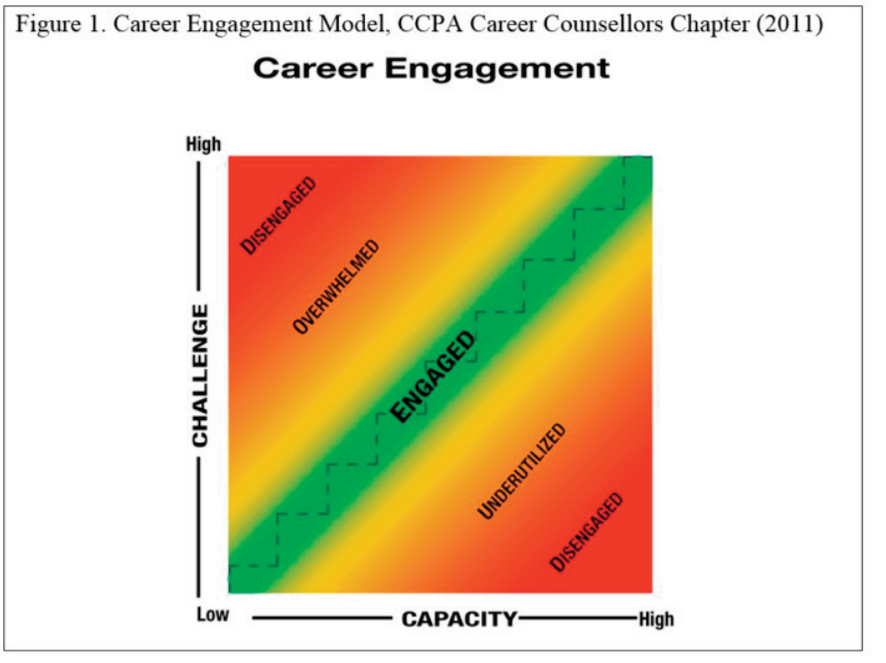
Career Engagement

The career engagement model demonstrates that a dynamic interaction between the challenges one is experiencing and the level of individual and organizational capacity to face those challenges contributes to one's experience of engagement. Insufficient challenge results in movement out of the zone of engagement towards feeling underutilized; too much challenge results in feeling overwhelmed. The career engagement model (Figure 1) is color-coded; drawing from traffic lights, green for the zone of engagement is a good place to be. The dotted line within this zone of engagement is inspired by Vygotsky's (1978) work on the Zone of Proximal Development indicating that learning and development is continually occurring. As one masters new challenges, capacity increases; as capacity increases, so too should the level of challenge to ensure individuals stay in the zone of engagement.

The model shifts to yellow, representing caution, then orange as individuals move towards either underutilized, where challenge is too low, or to overwhelmed, where challenge is too high; it ends at both extremes with red for disengagement. This dynamic interaction of challenge and capacity is an important addition to the literature; disengagement is the same negative state regardless of whether an individual became disengaged through being overwhelmed or underutilized. The route to disengagement, however, is important. An individual who is overwhelmed will need different supports than someone who is underutilized.

The career engagement model is grounded in Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) work on flow, "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter" (p. 4). The experience of flow is akin to being fully immersed in, focused on, and energized by a specific task or activity; it is losing oneself in the moment. As engaged workers are psychologically present, fascinated by, and attracted to their work (Gibbons, 2006; Kahn, 1990), the experience of being engaged and in flow are quite similar.

Figure 1. Career Engagement Model, CCPA Career Counsellors Chapter (2011)



In seeking to explain flow, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described "the two theoretically most important dimensions of the experience, challenges and skills" (p. 74). Essentially, the level of challenge must be in balance with the level of skill for flow to occur. Neault (2002) added to the understanding of flow by emphasizing the importance of resources as well as skills, noting it is possible that someone could have sufficient skills for the level of challenge but be unable to access enough of such resources as time, people, equipment, materials, or money. Although Neault's addition of resources was important, it did not adequately address those who may be highly skilled and have access to needed resources but, for some other reason, are still unable to achieve flow.

Similar to Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow model, in the career engagement model challenge relates to level of difficulty and the notions of stimulating, invigorating, and interesting tasks. With the right amount of challenge, an individual can become fully engaged; with a mismatch, that same individual could feel underutilized or overwhelmed. However, the level of challenge alone is insufficient to explain career engagement; capacity also has a crucial role to play. An individual's capacity comprises skills, as in Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow model, and also resources, as added by Neault (2002). However, capacity also includes many of the elements impacting today's workers including life roles, relationships with colleagues and supervisors, work structure, work-to-life conflicts, hours of work, fit, optimism, and under- and over-qualification. There are also organizational factors that influence capacity (e.g., staffing, equipment, supplies, deadlines). Although these tend to reside outside of an individual's sphere of influence, and are therefore less useful as targets for individual career interventions, they are also important to acknowledge.

Interpreting the dynamic interaction between challenge and capacity is key to working with the career engagement model; balancing these two components results in individuals experiencing engagement. If these two components are unbalanced, however, individuals feel either overwhelmed or underutilized. Unlike many other types of engagement (e.g., work, job, employee), career engagement acknowledges the influences of factors beyond the current workplace. Further, career engagement identifies whether an individual became disengaged through becoming overwhelmed or underutilized. This understanding of the route to disengagement is a key component of the career engagement model and something that is missing from other engagement literature. Only through identifying the route to disengagement can targeted interventions be designed to help return individuals to the zone of engagement.

Research Method

The purpose of this research was to examine the career engagement of Canadian Career Development Practitioners (CDPs). To date, no pan-Canadian studies of the engagement level of this group of workers has been conducted. As CDPs are tasked with helping unemployed and underemployed Canadians find long term attachment to the labour market it is important to ascertain their engagement level. Disengaged CDPs may have similar negative workplace behaviours as other disengaged workers (e.g., becoming unproductive or disinterested) and, therefore, be unable to fully support the re-employment goals of their clients.

Research Design

This exploratory study utilized a fixed mixed-method design (i.e., both quantitative and qualitative approaches; Creswell, 2003; Rocco, Bliss, Gallagher, & Pérez-Prado, 2003). The survey tool (i.e., Survey of Career Engagement) is a quantitative measure of career engagement comprising 35 questions. Two additional quantitative questions and three open-ended qualitative questions were added to "aid in the interpretation of data in the core project" (Morse, 2003, p. 192). The quantitative and qualitative data interacted at multiple points and were analyzed separately and together.

Participants

Study participants were drawn from a nonprobability sample (Creswell, 2003) of Career Development Practitioners (CDPs). Snowball or chain sampling was used to maximize the potential reach of the survey invitation. The demographic information collected at the beginning of the survey matched other studies conducted with this same participant sample (e.g., Bezanson, O'Reilly, & Magnusson, 2009; Canadian Education and Research Institute for Counselling, 2011; Pickerell & Neault, 2012) and included type of agency, institution, or organization; region, gender; age; and number of years worked in the career development sector.

Of the 226 total usable responses, 52 (23%) were male and 174 (77%) were female. The majority of respondents (n=118, 52.2%) were 48-65 years of age with the remaining indicating an age of 31-47 years (n=91, 40.3%), 30 years or younger (n=9, 4.0%), or over 66 years (n=5, 2.2%); 3 respondents did not answer this question. The bulk of respondents had been employed in the career development sector for 10+ years (n=110, 48.7%) with the remaining respondents employed in the field 5-9 years (n=72, 31.6%), 1-4 years (n=36, 15.9%), or less than 1 year (n=7, 3.1%); 1 respondent did not answer this question. Although these numbers are disproportionate (i.e., mostly older, female, and in the sector for 10+years), they are representative of the population of workers as demonstrated in two recent pan-Canadian surveys (e.g., Bezanson, O'Reilly, & Magnusson, 2009; Canadian Education and Research Institute for Counselling, 2011). As such, the cases were not weighted in any of the analyses exploring the career engagement level of the participants, broken down across various demographic categories.

The highest number of respondents was from British Columbia (n=108, 47.8%) with the remaining from Alberta (n=43, 19%), Ontario (n=37, 16.4%), New Brunswick (n=8, 3.5%), Nova Scotia, (n=6, 2.7%), Saskatchewan (n=5, 2.2%), Manitoba (n=4, 1.8%), Northwest Territories (n=2, 0.9%), Newfoundland, (n=1, 0.4%), and Quebec, (n=1, 0.4%). In addition, four respondents (1.8%) did not identify geographical region, two were from the United States (.9%) and five were international (2.2%) from Australia, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom. Given the uneven distribution among regions, respondents were grouped for all analyses exploring career engagement of participants. Groups included BC, comprising all British Columbia respondents; Prairie comprising Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Northwest Territories; Central, comprising Ontario and Quebec; and Maritime comprising New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland. US, international, and respondents who did not indicate a region were grouped into an "other" category. Respondents in this latter category were removed

for the purposes of this study.

The final demographic question focussed on where respondents worked. Most (n=129, 57%) worked in private and/or non-profit community based-agencies or organizations, some of which would receive government funding. The remaining worked in post-secondary college or university career/placement services (n=47, 21%), career services provided directly by government (n=14, 6%), the K-12 school system (n=11, 5%), and in a career services/HR unit within a company (n=9, 4%).

Survey Instrument

This study used the Survey of Career Engagement that was developed for the purpose of Pickerell's (2013) doctoral research. Several versions of the tool were developed and tested during a specialized doctoral studies seminar. The final version of the survey produced meaningful and accurate results (i.e., if someone, during initial discussions, self-reported as being overwhelmed, completion of the survey also resulted in an overwhelmed score).

Within the survey tool, there are 10 questions related to challenge and 25 questions related to capacity. There are more capacity questions to account for the variety of issues being measured (e.g., skills, education, available resources, life roles, support network, approach to self-care), whereas challenge focuses on level of difficulty and opportunity to perform stimulating, engaging, and invigorating tasks.

Responses follow a Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with reverse scoring required on two of the challenge questions and eight of the capacity questions. To get an overall indication of career engagement, raw scores for challenge and capacity, the two components of career engagement, were converted to percentages. The intersection of these two scores, on the career engagement diagram indicates an individual's level of engagement. For the purposes of this study, additional questions were included at the end of the survey to give respondents an opportunity to self-report their perceived level of career engagement.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected using SurveyMonkey®, an online survey tool, allowing for respondents to remain anonymous; at no time were respondents asked to provide names or contact information. A statement of informed consent was posted as the introduction, advising potential participants that continuing with the rest of the survey indicated their consent to participate and include their results in data analysis.

An invitation to participate was sent to an extensive list of CDPs throughout Canada and posted through relevant social media sites such as LinkedIn, Twitter, and the CERIC Google Group. The invitation included a description of the study, a rationale for participating, instructions for accessing the online survey, and a request to forward the invitation to other colleagues/networks (i.e., snowball or chain sampling; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). In total it is estimated that the survey invitation reached over 4,000 Canadian CDPs.

Results

The goal of this study was to explore the career engagement of Canadian Career Development Practitioners (CDPs) and, where not engaged, whether they were more likely to be overwhelmed or underutilized. In addition, the researchers also explored how factors such as age, gender, region, years in the sector, and type of work environment impact career engagement.

Career Engagement of Canadian CDPs

Overall, Canadian CDPs are engaged with their work, though there is a slight trend toward being more overwhelmed. As shown in Table 1, 25.1% of respondents fall within the zone of engagement whereas 56.8% can still be considered engaged, but moving out of the zone of engagement towards being overwhelmed (somewhat engaged: n=78, 36.3% and slightly engaged: n=44, 20.5%). A further 5.1% are slightly overwhelmed. Some practitioners' scores indicate movement towards feeling underutilized, though these numbers are lower with 9.8% at somewhat engaged and 2.3% at slightly engaged.

In Figure 2, respondent scores are plotted on the career engagement model, showing that although the majority of respondents are within the zone of engagement there are differences in the level of challenge and capacity.

Even though average scores, overall, fall within the zone of engagement, and the trend of movement towards overwhelmed is consistent regardless of the demographic breakdown, there are some differences in the results worth exploring.

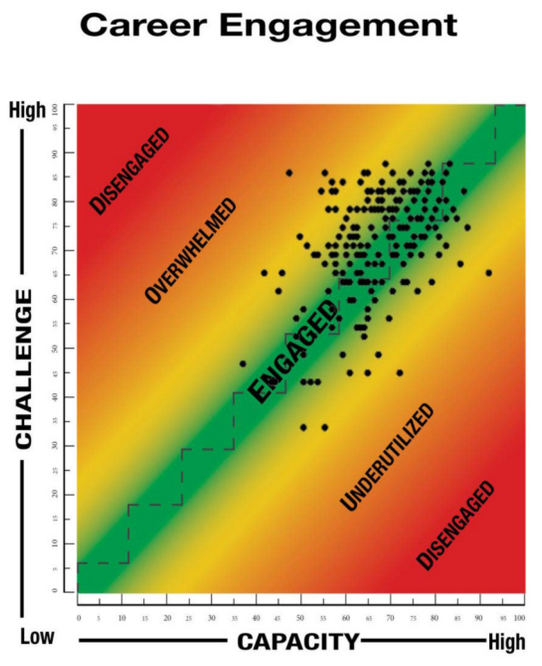
More BC respondents (29.6%) are in the zone of engagement compared to their counterparts in the Central regions at 26.3%, Prairies at 18.5%, and Maritimes at 13.3%, indicating that respondents in the Maritime regions are least likely to fall within the zone of engagement; further, they are more likely to be overwhelmed than CDPs in other regions. Men are more likely to be engaged than women (i.e., 37.3% of men fall in the zone

Table 1

Engagement Level of Participants

	Frequency	Percent
Slightly Underutilized	1	.5
Slightly Engaged (U)	5	2.3
Somewhat Engaged (U)	21	9.8
Zone of Engagement (Very Engaged)	54	25.1
Somewhat Engaged (O)	78	36.3
Slightly Engaged (O)	44	20.5
Slightly Overwhelmed	11	5.1
Somewhat Overwhelmed	1	.5
Total	215	100.0

Figure 2: Respondent Scores Plotted on Career Engagement Model



of engagement compared to 21.3% of women). Further, only 5.9% of men show any movement towards being underutilized compared to 14.0% of women.

In considering age and engagement scores, 11.1% of workers 30 years and under are within the zone of engagement compared to 27.6% of workers aged 31-47 years and 25.2% of workers aged 48-65; no one in the 65+ age group fell within the zone of engagement. Instead, all of the workers in this latter group were somewhat engaged, moving towards feeling overwhelmed.

The number of years employed in the career development sector also impacted level of career engagement. Respondents who are relatively new to the field and the most senior workers are least likely to fall in the zone of engagement with scores at 28.6% and 19.0% respectively.

Also worth noting is how engagement differs according to the type of agency / employer. CDPs working in private, for-profit, career services organizations and also those working directly for the government are least likely to fall in the zone of engagement, followed closely by those working in post-secondary institutions and the self-employed.

The survey also asked respondents to self-rate their level of engagement and whether they were more likely to feel overwhelmed or underutilized. There are some differences when comparing survey results to self-ratings of level of engagement. Over twice as many respondents self-rated as *very engaged* compared to the number of respondents who fell into the zone of engagement based on the survey results. In addition, 11 respondents reported being *very overwhelmed* and 7 reported being *very underutilized*, yet the survey did not result in any respondents being at either extreme. Possible reasons for this disconnect between self-ratings and survey results are explored in the Study Limitations and Recommendations section.

Respondents were also asked what contributed to them feeling overwhelmed and underutilized. A wide range of factors were listed including heavy work / client loads, unwieldy case management software, and lack of supervisory / management support. Another common theme related to an inability to establish work-life balance. Factors relating to feeling underutilized were dominated by management and/or the service delivery model not making effective use of skills and talents. There was a sense that practitioners are spending more time writing case notes or entering information into client files rather than working directly with clients.

Many participants, when responding to the statement "I am optimistic about my career opportunities," were not optimistic. Less than 1% strongly agreed with the item, only 6% agreed, and, conversely, 44.7% disagreed and 33% strongly disagreed.

Respondents were also asked to identify whether they found one or more of their life roles overwhelming and, for those selecting "yes," to list those roles. Of those who responded to this question, a specific role was not typically identified. Instead, participants commented that it is not any particular role but, rather, trying to balance multiple roles that can be most overwhelming. However, of the individual roles mentioned, the work role was selected almost twice as often as any other single role (n=19, 24.6%).

According to this study, Canadian CDPs are, overall, engaged with their work, although

some differences in career engagement level do exist. Geographically, workers in the Maritimes are less likely to be within the zone of engagement than those from other regions. Conversely, workers in BC are *more* likely to be within the zone of engagement. Age also seems to impact career engagement, with youth and older workers less likely to be engaged than those 31-65 years of age. This latter finding may have broader implications to the sector; the majority of workers are older and, if the trend is for the sector's oldest workers to be less engaged, then that may begin to reduce overall engagement levels. Lack of engagement for younger workers is also concerning; the sector needs to attract youth but this could be difficult if there are fewer opportunities for this cohort to be fully engaged.

Discussion

Canadian CDPs are, in general, engaged with their work with 25% of study respondents falling within the zone of engagement (i.e., very engaged). However, combining the zone of engagement scores with the two *somewhat engaged* categories, one on the overwhelmed side and one on underutilized and this figure jumps to over 2/3 of respondents being somewhat or very engaged (n=153; 68%). Unfortunately, where not engaged, CDPs are more likely to feel overwhelmed.

Although only a small number of CDPs were feeling underutilized, even this slight trend should not be ignored. Underutilized CDPs could be a valuable resource to those who are overwhelmed, offering to take on additional tasks to help ease their burden. Colleagues are an important resource when considering a need to reduce challenge or build capacity. In addition, underutilized employees can become bored and, without intervention, apathetic – resulting in employees no longer caring about their work (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Rothlin & Werder, 2008). The implication of this potential lack of caring within Canadian CDPs goes beyond the individual workers to the clients they serve; underutilized workers may begin to care less about their clients and give less energy to contributing to those clients' success.

The trend towards being overwhelmed is similar across demographic categories, demonstrating that CDPs as a broad group are more likely to be overwhelmed regardless of age, gender, years in the sector, or geographic region. Workers in the Maritimes are slightly less engaged / more overwhelmed than workers in any other region in the country, with just 13.3% of respondents in the zone of engagement, and 73.4% either somewhat or slightly engaged, towards being overwhelmed. Conversely, workers in British Columbia and the Central region are almost twice as likely to fall in the zone of engagement. This is somewhat surprising with the launch of a new service delivery model in British Columbia as, anecdotally at the time of the study, British Columbia's CDPs reported being overwhelmed with difficulties adjusting to the new model. It was interesting, as well, to find that CDPs in British Columbia were almost twice as likely as practitioners in any other region to move out of the zone of engagement towards feeling underutilized. This trend may indicate that some CDPs are in roles that are not making effective use of their expertise. It could also indicate a potentially biased sample; those practitioners who are feeling engaged may have wanted to contribute to the study, whereas those feeling overwhelmed may have felt they already had too many tasks piling up, resulting in lower participation rates by overwhelmed practitioners.

Only 11.1% of younger workers (i.e., 30 years and under) are in the zone of engagement. When not in this zone, younger workers are just as likely to be overwhelmed as underutilized. The majority of Canada's CDPs are not in this younger age group; studies consistently show that workers in this sector are more likely to be older and in their second or third career, implying that becoming a CDP is not a *career of choice* for youth. If younger workers are not likely to be engaged, this could be a possible reason why fewer youth are in the field. In future research, it may be helpful to examine why youth are not as engaged in their work in this sector, leading to interventions that more effectively engage and retain younger workers.

CDPs who have been in the field for 10 or more years are less likely than any other cohort to be in the zone of engagement; they are more likely to be slightly engaged, towards becoming overwhelmed. As many Canadian CDPs have been in the field for 10 or more years, these findings are important. The trend implies that the longer one works in the field, the less likely it is that he or she will be engaged. This trend holds true when looking at this cohort by age; older workers are also less likely to be engaged. Combined, these trends indicate that the field has a problem engaging both youth and older workers.

Study findings indicated that, although generally engaged with their careers, there is a tendency for CDPs to be overwhelmed. Within the career engagement model, being overwhelmed is the result of too much challenge for the available capacity. This state can lead to increased levels of stress and anxiety, putting CDPs at risk of burnout and other stress-related ill-

nesses (Csikszentmihaly, 1990; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Jawahar, Stone, & Kisamore, 2007). Without reducing challenge or increasing capacity, CDPs could become increasingly overwhelmed and, ultimately, disengaged, bringing the problem behaviours associated with disengagement into their workplaces. In turn, this could result in poorer quality of service given to clients, perhaps reducing the clients' ability to be successful. As the majority of CDPs work in funded settings, where client success is at least in part tied to funding dollars, poorer client outcomes could ultimately result in a loss of revenue.

As it is easier to correct only a slight imbalance between challenge and capacity, now is the time for those CDPs feeling even just a small sense of being overwhelmed to take action. Within the career engagement model, there are two approaches CDPs can take; one would be to reduce the level of challenge and the other would be to increase their capacity.

When indicating reasons for being overwhelmed, respondents listed a wide range of items including unwieldy case management software, heavy caseloads, increased complexity of individual cases, policy changes, and lack of support from managers and supervisors. With many of these factors, it may be difficult to reduce the level of challenge; CDPs cannot turn away or refuse to see clients, cannot refuse to use required case management software, and may have little ability to influence changes in policy. Instead, CDPs may need to focus on increasing both individual and organizational capacity.

Professional development, or skills upgrading, is one way to increase capacity, thereby helping CDPs better understand how to manage complex client cases, use case management software, or understand new policies. Access to additional resources, such as staff, community partners, and job aids, can also increase capacity. Unfortunately, a potential problem with any attempt at increasing capacity is the limited optimism reported by Canadian CDPs (i.e., less than 7% agreed or strongly agreed that they were optimistic about their career opportunities). Within the career engagement model, being optimistic helps to boost one's capacity for coping with challenging situations and times and, in previous research, optimism was the single best predictor of both career success and job satisfaction (Neault, 2002). Although most are at least somewhat engaged with their careers, at the moment almost none of the Canadian CDPs responding to the survey were hopeful about their future career opportunities within the sector. However, it is important not to over-interpret this finding; general optimism, as explored by Neault (2002) was not a focus of this study; instead, there was only one optimism-related question specific to future career opportunities. Therefore, the lack of optimism amongst study participants may simply represent a realistic view of the labour market or working conditions within the sector at the time of the study. As such, this finding is presented as something to be further explored.

Within flow theory, which influenced the development of the career engagement model, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) does not ignore the role the employer plays but does emphasize the individual's responsibility for achieving flow. The career engagement model, however, stresses the key role that organizations play in fostering career engagement, both in providing sufficient challenges for their workers' capacity and also in ensuring access to appropriate supports (e.g., time, money, resources, and family-friendly workplace policies).

Within this study, lack of support from managers/supervisors was listed as one reason Canadian CDPs feel overwhelmed. There is a lack of sector-specific management training through most parts of Canada; many supervisors and managers move through the ranks, ending up in supervisory roles with extensive front-line experience, but limited awareness of management-related skills and competencies. Others are recruited directly into supervisory roles, coming into the field with the required management skills and education (e.g., MBA), but with little to no knowledge or understanding of the day-to-day work. Insufficient management and/or career development skills and knowledge will likely result in supervisors/managers having insufficient capacity, resulting in them, as well as those they supervise, becoming overwhelmed. As engagement begets engagement (Swindall, 2007), it is crucial that managers and supervisors reflect on their own level of career engagement. Managers and supervisors who are overwhelmed may struggle to find the time, energy, or resources (i.e., the capacity) to support the engagement of their subordinates.

Although the preceding sections shared strategies for supporting CDPs who are feeling even slightly overwhelmed or underutilized to return to the zone of engagement, it is important to note that results were positive overall; most Canadian CDPs were engaged with their work. Therefore, it is important to take a strengths-based approach and maintain what is currently working well, continuing to ensure an appropriate balance between challenge and capacity.

Study Limitations and Recommendations

The findings will make a meaningful contribution to ongoing discussions both within, and outside of, the career development community, in Canada and internationally. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study and also present recommendations for further research.

It is interesting to examine the apparent disconnect between the survey results and some respondents' self-rating of their level of engagement and whether they are more likely to become overwhelmed or underutilized. In response to a direct question, twice as many respondents self-rated as *very engaged* compared to their results from the survey of career engagement. There are several possible explanations for this which future research could examine. It is possible that the raw scores used to calculate percentages would convert to different percentiles if standardized; such standardization and norming can occur once more data has been collected, ideally across a more diverse group of participants. Another challenge with self-ratings vs. survey results is that, for the self-ratings, respondents were not provided with a definition of career engagement, leading to the possibility of a different understanding of career engagement both between respondents and also between respondents and the authors of the model. A definition would have helped provide the context for the questions and, perhaps, resulted in a different set of responses.

Response pattern bias may also have contributed to a difference between self-ratings and survey results. The zone of engagement is likely perceived as a good place to be; respondents may have chosen "very engaged" as it looks and feels better. This would have biased results, indicating practitioners are more engaged than they actually are.

Although there were sufficient participants to run the various analyses, the participant sample was small (n=226) and, therefore, study results cannot be generalized across the full Canadian CDP workforce. Data collection was completed in early December (i.e., close to Christmas) and the survey period was relatively short. In addition, we heard from many people in the field who did not receive an invitation to complete the survey despite what was believed to be a very active campaign to generate responses. Both of these could have contributed to the low response rate.

In addition, 50% of respondents were from British Columbia, a region that had recently experienced a complete redesign of the service delivery model for those working in government-funded employment programming. The impact of this transition on career engagement remains unclear; it is impossible to predict whether or not British Columbia's CDPs would have been more or less engaged within the old model and/or if engagement levels will be different once they are comfortable working within the new system.

Most of Canada's career development practitioners are women and this uneven gender representation was replicated in the study. It is unclear how, or if, a more equal distribution of gender may have impacted the results of this study.

In addition to a relatively small sample size, there was little variability in the data; the majority of respondents were engaged with their careers. Although this is good news, it may also be indicative of those who chose to respond to the survey. It is possible that those interested in the study were the engaged CDPs, inspired to give back to their professional community. However, overwhelmed CDPs may have chosen to not participate, deciding that they couldn't manage one more task. Those with low fit within the sector or limited commitment to their careers may have also self-selected out, choosing not to respond.

Response pattern bias may have also contributed to higher engagement scores; in another recent study mapping the skills profile of British Columbia CDPs, CDPs tended to rate themselves as highly skilled yet rate their colleagues as only somewhat skilled (Neault & Pickerell, 2013). It is possible this pattern held true when completing the survey (e.g., respondents rating themselves as having high capacity), resulting in higher capacity scores and, therefore, more scores falling in the zone of engagement than if, for example, capacity was being rated by their colleagues.

Using the broad definition of "career" may be adding a layer of complexity that, perhaps, would not be there if another term was used (e.g., work engagement). Although CDPs are generally aware of the broader focus of career, it is possible many still feel *career* is synonymous with *work*. In addition, a definition of career engagement was not provided to study participants; a definition would have added clarity when participants were asked to self-rate their level of engagement.

To further explore the career engagement of Canadian CDPs a larger sample, with more equal representation across various demographic categories, is required. The workforce may benefit from a follow-up study with the goal of increasing the sample size. To accomplish this, we would recommend aligning data collection with the sector's annual conferences; this approach would help ensure Canadian CDPs are aware of the study and provide industry leaders, and the

researchers, an opportunity to encourage participation.

The tendency for CDPs to self-rate as highly skilled while rating colleagues as only somewhat skilled is likely to impact any future study of this kind with this population. Research to explore this tendency may be necessary to assess how widespread this response pattern is within the workforce. Rather than a separate study, it would be possible to add two questions in any follow-up research about career engagement of Canadian CDPs. These two questions, (1) "How engaged are you with your career?" and (2) "How engaged do you think the average CDP is with his/her career?" would allow researchers to see if this tendency to rate oneself as *higher* or *better* than colleagues holds true, and to consider how that response pattern may impact study results.

The chosen participant sample (i.e., CDPs) could be expected to have better career management skills than average workers, resulting in career choices that would maximize their engagement. Intuitively, we would expect this population to have high levels of engagement and this study demonstrated this to be the case. Additional research with random samples of workers would provide clearer insight into level of career engagement that could be extrapolated across a broader population. In addition, targeting specific groups could also help identify where, and what types of, interventions may be required to maximize and/or restore engagement. We would be especially interested in such research with internationally trained professionals (ITPs), youth, individuals in the trades, and aboriginals. The benefit, and uniqueness, of the career engagement model is with the directionality. Although other studies may indicate, for example, that ITPs are disengaged, knowing if that was due to being overwhelmed or underutilized is crucial in designing appropriate interventions.

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