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**Work engagement, burn-out, and alienation: linking new and old  
concepts of positive and negative work experiences**

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## **Work engagement, burn-out, and alienation: linking new and old concepts of positive and negative work experiences**

### **Abstract**

Research has produced calls for organizations to take a more proactive role in making the workplace more conducive to good mental health. This conceptual paper draws on research over a wide range of years to present an alternative perspective on how organizations might respond by revisiting the often overlooked concept of 'alienation' in conjunction with the more recent concepts of engagement and burn-out. It outlines the development of the concept of alienation from its classic articulation by Marx through to the perspective offered by existential psychologists such as Blauner. How alienation thus defined might manifest in the workplace, and its possible linkages to other concepts associated positive and negative work experiences, are then discussed. We argue that alienation needs to be addressed at the systemic and individual level. Strategies to counterbalance the negative effects that systemic and individual changes are unable to eliminate are presented.

**Keywords:** Alienation; work engagement; job burn-out; mental health; human resource management

## **Introduction**

In recent times, increasing recognition of the need to maximize the potential of an organization's human resources, in the pursuit of the goals of increased productivity and innovative capacity, has led to effectiveness in the management of the employment relationship consequently becoming a priority aim for managers in organizations. However an unintended consequence of many of the changes, such as downsizing and an increased emphasis on pay-for-performance, wrought upon the employment relationship in pursuit of these organizational goals has been the emergence of a corresponding concern for mental health in the workplace. Given its social and economic impacts on business and the wider community, a burgeoning of research interest in this phenomenon is occurring across a wide range of academic disciplines, such as medicine, psychology, sociology and management. Much of this research is directed at both understanding issues in relation to the lack of mental wellbeing and exploring ways in which mental health might be improved. It has produced calls for organizations to increase their focus on: (i) preventive measures aimed at promoting and awareness-raising about mental health at both a social and workplace level (Waghorn and Lloyd, 2005), (ii) examining those aspects of work and work environments which promote or detract from mental health; and (iii) taking a more proactive role in changing work environments and structures to better align people and the organization's economic goals (Dewa *et al.*, 2007; Dollard and Winefield, 2002; Turney, 2003).

In this paper, we present an alternative perspective on one possible cause of deteriorating levels of mental health occurring in the workplace, by revisiting the long-established but often overlooked issue of 'alienation'. Of the many reactions to work discussed in contemporary textbooks on management and organizations, alienation appears to have lost relevance; indeed many do not even refer to the concept, and focus interest on newer concepts such as job satisfaction, job involvement, job burnout, and so forth (see for example, Buchanan and Huczynski, 2010; Mullins, 2010). In management research, problems associated with a lack of satisfaction, stress and the need for commitment and empowerment for example, receive major attention but comparatively little new work is published on alienation. In a word, the concept has become unfashionable in the management literature. In the discussion that follows, we draw on research over wide range of years to consider the concept of alienation in terms of the negative feelings experienced by workers, and various attempts to deal with alienation through management initiatives.

## **Conceptualising alienation**

The term 'alienation' originates from the work of Karl Marx on the effects on workers of the capitalist labour process and is well described in a number of studies (Bottomore and Rubel, 1961; Corlett, 1988; Fox, 1974; Hyman, 1975; Marx and Engels, 1968; Taylor, 1967). According to Marx, alienation is a condition in which the individual becomes isolated and cut off from the product of his or her work, having given up the desire for self-expression and control over his or her own fate at work. The individual enacts a role estranged from the kind of life of which the individual is capable. The genesis of this condition can be traced to changes external to the individual arising out of the industrialisation process, with the creation of large factories characterised by organizational hierarchies, job specialisation, and work supervision reliant on formal

authority, and a shift in life focus away from the home and community to the organization.

Industrialisation consumes considerable sums of capital, much of which is used for the purchase of labour. Marx coined the term 'labour process' to describe the interaction between labour and capital (Bottomore and Rubel, 1961; Taylor, 1967). While the process is itself complex, its essentials as described by Marx are easily grasped. In simple terms, workers (employees) have a commodity (labour) which they sell in the marketplace. Through their purchase of that commodity, capitalists (employers) acquire the right to *control* all aspects of labour for the purposes of organizing work for efficiency and minimising costs so that a profit can be made. Because the labour process requires employees to relinquish the right to control their labour, alienation is thus an intrinsic part of the capitalist system and therefore unavoidable. This subordination of employees to their employers thereby makes the activity of work a dehumanising, degrading and thus alienating experience: '[Under capitalism] all the means for developing production are transformed into means of domination over and exploitation of the producer; ... they mutilate the worker into a fragment of a human being, degrade him to become a mere appurtenance, make his work such a torment that its essential meaning is destroyed' (Marx cited by Fox, 1974: 224).

According to Marx, the inequality inherent to the 'labour process' causes workers to experience at least three forms of alienation (Corlett, 1988; Deery and Plowman, 1991):

- Alienation from the product of their labour (dispossessed of what they produce, which is owned by the capitalist);
- Alienation from oneself (only find extrinsic meaning in work and are separated from their true selves); and,
- Alienation from others (the unique qualities of humankind are diminished and so workers are estranged from both their own humanity and others).

These three forms of alienation are in Marxian terms an objective reality (i.e. imposed as an external force) under capitalism, rather than a subjective state of mind (i.e. resulting from factors internal to the individual). Hence, it matters not that people might report that they do not feel alienated, since it is an objective state of capitalism: subjectivity is not part of the analysis. In other words, Marx's concept of alienation and its causes was anchored in factors external to the individual.

It is one of history's ironies that the dialectical principle (the doctrine of opposites and the struggle between opposing forces for control) that underpinned Marx's analysis can be used to explain the subsequent development of an alternative view about the nature of alienation under capitalism. This alternative view is perhaps best encapsulated in the work of Blauner (1964), and leading existential psychologists such as May (1961), Perls (1969) and Rogers (1969), writing a century or so after Marx and apropos of the development of psychology as a discipline.

Reading Blauner (1964), alienation is conceptualised as a state of mind, a subjective feeling that can vary from individual to individual in terms of four dimensions:

- Powerlessness (due to being controlled by others in an impersonal system);
- Meaninglessness (from lacking a sense of how their own work contributes to the whole);
- Isolation (no sense of belonging); and,

- Self-estrangement (detachment, no sense of identity or personal fulfilment).

It is this latter notion of self-estrangement upon which existential psychologists such as May (1961), Perls (1969) and Rogers (1969) focus in their writings, seeing it as the separation of the individual from the real or deeper self arising from factors internal to the individual and other external pressures found, for example, in organizations.

The significant point about the existential view for our discussion is that the individual's personal growth, self-actualisation and meaningful interpersonal relationships are seen to be blocked by separation from the inner self that results from freedom of choice – insofar as this is possible, given capitalistic organizations. [As an aside here, Marx himself was aware of the denial of inner self when, in reference to the labour process, he said that the worker 'must subordinate his will to it' (Marx, 1976: 284)]. A sense of self-estrangement manifests when the individual experiences tension between the inner or 'true' self and the demands of modern organizational life which in turn leads to a crisis of personal identity. Thompson and McHugh (2002) for example describe several responses to problems of identity loss at work, of which one, some or all may be displayed by an individual:

- Contradictory consciousness, resulting in deviant behaviour;
- Unconscious resistance which may give rise to mental disorders;
- Development of individual capacities and interests outside of work; and,
- Participation in collective action through unions or other coalitions.

Hence, as individual employees attempt to reconcile their 'true' and 'artificial' selves, a range of dysfunctional psychological outcomes, such as depersonalisation and loss of self-esteem, can emerge, all of which in turn can have debilitating consequences for the individual's state of mental health.

To summarise then, alienation and problems in connection with the individual's adjustment to the demands of work organizations – and 'that something was dramatically wrong in the individual-organization relationship' (Hunt, 1986: 21) – have long been recognised. A key question in debate about the concept, and one which is central to the management process that might be adopted to deal with its effects, is whether alienation is an objective state externally imposed on all workers under capitalism or a subjective state reflecting internal factors unique to each individual worker. Should it be the former, then no amount of management intervention can provide a remedy under capitalism. But if, on the other hand, alienation is regarded as a subjective feeling then it should be possible to develop remedies at least to alleviate it, and ideally go beyond that to its complete elimination for some if not all employees. As outlined above, Marx held to the former view. However, the psychology-based view sees alienation as a subjective and individual response arising from factors internal to the individual and other pressures found in organizations. As this latter view has become arguably the predominant influence in terms of contemporary management strategies developed to deal with the problem in the workplace, for the purposes of our subsequent discussion, we use Blauner's (1964) four dimensional conceptualisation of alienation to frame our discussion of the various ways in which management has tried to deal with the problem.

### **Alienation and organizations**

The criticism that organization researchers have overlooked the issue of alienation has been levelled over a number of years. In the 1980s, Frost pointed out that 'organization

science ... does not adequately address the issue of organization alienation' (Frost, 1980: 502). He also suggested that organizations themselves can be a source of alienation, as they represent 'a significant barrier that separates them [individuals] from their true natures' (Frost, 1980: 501). A decade later, Heinz (1991: 213) suggests that 'nowadays the concept of alienation carries an antiquated meaning' and 'there seems to be much evidence for a fading romance with alienation in the social sciences'.

Notwithstanding this criticism, probably the form of organization in which it has been most studied is, not surprisingly, the most pervasive – a bureaucracy (Matheson, 2007). The defining characteristics of the bureaucratic structure – job specialisation, authority hierarchy, merit appointment, record keeping, rules and impersonality (Weber, 1947) – have been found to combine to produce a cumulative depersonalising effect on the individual. Impersonal administration may be more desirable than management by whim, by separating the person from the bureaucratic office held; however, it results in the individual feeling a loss of self or personal identity and so experiencing feelings of being a mere cog in a dehumanising machine, an outcome reiterated in recent years (Matheson, 2007; Sanders, 1997). The stifling effect of bureaucracies has long been a concern as Adler (1999: 36) remarks, in respect of bureaucratic red tape, over-controlling bosses and apathetic employees, there is a need to 'set free the creative energy of employees by attacking the bureaucratic features of the organization'. This is not to deny that bureaucratic structures, or assembly lines for that matter, have given much to the world by way of increased efficiency and productivity; but the fact remains that a large part of scholarly research is aimed at trying to redress the dysfunctional effects of these structures in an effort to overcome the feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement they can produce in individuals. Let us now say something about each of these dimensions and the impact of management on them.

### *Powerlessness*

The individual's feelings of a lack of control and powerlessness, especially over important aspects of work spill over to affect the individual's life more generally (Blauner, 1964; Sashkin, 1984). This aspect of alienation can be interpreted in psychological terms as feeling unable to achieve self-realisation and satisfy ego-esteem needs. Kanungo (1992: 414) argues that 'conditions leading to the loss of individuality deprives the workers of self-fulfilment or the realization of who they are or what their essential nature is', and thus is an affront to human dignity.

Advocates of employee empowerment initiatives, including implementation of flat organizational structures and processes such as participative management in which decision-making authority is devolved across the organization, believe that they provide antidotes to the problem of powerlessness experienced by employees (Hodgetts, 1996; Kanungo, 1992; Spreitzer, 1996; Varma *et al.*, 2001). However, several studies cast doubt on whether empowering employees really delivers the promised benefits and helps ameliorate feelings of powerlessness (Belasco and Stayer, 1994; Fulford and Enz, 1995; Hales, 2000; Randolph, 1995; Thompson and McHugh, 2002).

### *Meaninglessness*

According to Blauner (1964), meaninglessness refers to an individual lacking a sense of how their own work contributes to the whole. For the existentialist, a meaningless world

presents psychological dangers for the individual; meaningfulness is tied up with feelings of autonomy, creativity and, most of all, individual choice in order to create a meaningful world. However, a world that is meaningless thrusts the individual into the realm of insanity (Bugental, 1965). In a work setting meaningfulness 'refers to the immediate significance a work operation or product has for the worker' (Rose, 1988: 224); it thus follows that work can be intrinsically punishing to the point of becoming a source of despair.

The idea of meaningful work is one that has been picked up by a number of organizational psychologists, particularly in the areas of job design and motivation. A well known example is the job characteristics model (JCM) of Hackman and Oldham (1980) in which core job dimensions of skill variety, task identity and task significance are linked to the experienced meaningfulness of work. However, after more than two decades of empirical research into the JCM, the hypothesised links between job dimensions and associated critical psychological states have yet to be fully confirmed (Fried and Ferris, 1987; Parker *et al.*, 2001). Other alternative work design approaches have been developed such as the socio-technical systems approach; however, they too remain imperfect tools for dealing with the meaningfulness aspect of alienation.

### *Isolation*

Existentialists note the phenomena of loneliness, isolation, and of apartness which, in turn, are associated with anxiety (Bugental, 1965; Wiesman, 1965). From this perspective, the problem is that the individual can never have direct knowledge of others due to apartness and being isolated. The individual's sense of uniqueness and apartness materialises as isolation and loneliness, resulting in anxiety, undermining a sense of belonging, and threatening well-being. The individual feels separate from but always in relation to others, which arguably is the paradox of being human (Bugental, 1965). This sense of isolation can be exacerbated by being excluded from a work group or performing work that requires little or no contact with work colleagues, and/or working in a geographically isolated situation. In either case, isolation can be said to be the 'absence of a sense of membership in an industrial community' (Blauner, 1964: 24).

Social identity theory holds that social affiliation (Sarbin and Allen, 1968; Walker *et al.*, 1989) provides a sense of personal identity, and is a source of self-esteem and motivation (Tajfel *et al.*, 1971; Turner *et al.*, 1979). For these reasons, many management initiatives designed to incorporate and manage the individual within the organization, for example through team-based work design and organization, have social identity theory at their core. Indeed, the current popularity of teamwork in organizations is based on research which shows productivity, job satisfaction, and high performance positively associated with effective teams (e.g. Guzzo and Dickson, 1996; Richardson and Denton, 2005; Romig, 1996). However, it needs to be recognised that not all individuals are 'team-players'. To operate successfully in a team, individuals may feel required to subordinate their own creativity and individuality to the needs of the collective, a task for some that is psychologically challenging and fraught with peril in terms of mental health. Indeed, for such individuals, teamwork can provide a context in which feelings of isolation may be heightened.



### *Self-estrangement*

The effects of loneliness and isolation may culminate in the individual feeling unable to confront their sense of apartness leading to estrangement in respect to both personal and social identities. The prison of estrangement prevents us from relating to and being with other people in the world. Blauner (1964) views self-estrangement in terms of feelings of detachment, and no sense of identity or personal fulfilment. Bugental puts it this way, 'Estrangement is the experience of being imprisoned in glass, seeing the world in which others move but forever blocked from joining them, pantomiming communication but never really speaking with another person' (1964: 311).

Within organizational settings, self-estrangement is felt when the labour process prevents individuals from feeling a sense of completeness and identity. Whilst this could be interpreted as the culmination of powerlessness, meaninglessness and isolation, Rose (1988: 224) believes that estrangement occurs when work is not an integral part of man as a social being, 'that is, when it is not a central personal, social or religious value, but merely a resented means to other ends'. Our present interest however is in self-estrangement as seen by the existential psychologists and what Ashforth and Humphrey (1993: 99) call self-alienation, in which the individual loses touch with the inner self and perceives that they are acting contrary to that central, valued and salient self. Thus the individual experiences a rupture between the inner self and the artificial self, created by their perceptions of work and organizational life.

Driven by the imperative to control the organization, management has traditionally emphasized the needs of the work and the organization, rather than on those of the individual, as the focus for control. For example, concepts such as 'person-job fit', 'person-organization fit' and 'culture management' treat work and the organization and its values and objectives as the independent variables and the individual as the controllable dependent variable. Even the employee assistance programs of today, involving the provision of psychological counselling services to assist mental health in the workplace, are arguably underpinned by the idea that it is the worker rather than management and the organization that has to change. However, the increasing level of stress-induced mental health problems in the workplace, and the consequent impact on productivity, clearly raise questions about the effectiveness of such management approaches. While they may superficially mask for a time the deleterious effects of alienation, sooner or later ongoing organization's needs will constrain, overpower and dominate the individual's freedom to self-realise, thus producing a sense of self-estrangement that affects the individual's work performance adversely.

### **Nub of the problem**

Since its appearance as a concept in management theory, exemplified in the 1950s with the work of Argyris (1957) and Merton (1957), alienation has been variously linked to, even conflated with, issues such as: work engagement, and satisfaction at work (Hallberg and Schaufeli, 2006; Korman and Wittig-Berman, 1981; Trist, 1977; Vecchio, 1980; Westley, 1979), cynicism, burnout and depersonalisation (Andersson, 1996; Lee and Ashforth, 1993; Maslach *et al.*, 2001; Sanders, 1997), work stress and alcohol use (Frone, 1999), powerlessness and a lack of control (Kanungo, 1992), and emotional labour (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). These are in turn often attributed, for example, to external factors such as mass production technologies, oppressive work of one sort or

another, poor management and organizational leadership problems (e.g. Ashforth, 1994; Blauner, 1964; Sarros *et al.*, 2002).

Before proceeding further let us pay some attention to two particular concepts that have more recently received increasing attention in management research – burnout (disengagement) and work engagement – as these might be argued to have embraced and thus supplanted the concept of alienation. The concepts have been often represented in the literature as two sides of the same coin: burnout (disengagement) being the negative side and engagement the positive side of experience of work (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). In other words, each represents one polar end of a continuum with burnout (disengagement) defined as the opposite of engagement by an individual in their work. According to Schaufeli *et al.* (2002) the concept of burnout, which has its roots in the traditional deficit-oriented approach to psychology, is most often measured as a three-dimensional state comprising:

- Emotional exhaustion – feelings of fatigue and loss of emotional energy;
- Cynicism – feelings of indifference towards, and detachment from, others at work; and,
- Reduced efficacy – feelings related to the absence of a sense of professional accomplishment.

On the other hand work engagement, the origins of which lie in the positive psychology movement and its emphasis on building on an individual's psychological strengths, is often characterized as a persistent, positive state of mind (Maslach *et al.*, 2001: 417), that is also measured on three dimensions:

- Vigour – feelings of energy, persistence, and resilience;
- Dedication – feelings of high work involvement, motivation, and inspiration; and,
- Absorption – feelings of immersion in and strong attachment to work.

High scores by the individual on these three dimensions are taken to indicate a state of engagement; low scores indicate disengagement, the opposite of engagement.

While it is possible to see conceptual overlap, we argue that neither burnout nor disengagement effectively capture one of alienation's important fundamental dimensions as viewed from the existential perspective, that is the notion of self-estrangement from the 'true' self arising from factors internal to the individual. Both burnout and disengagement focus primarily on work and organizational factors external to the individual as the source and focus of the feelings experienced by the individual in relation to their work. By recognising that dysfunctional psychological outcomes that have been linked to burnout, such as depersonalisation and cynicism, can also be generated by factors internal to an individual offers potential for a better understanding of the condition itself, as well as the ways in which management might optimise attempts to ameliorate its likely occurrence in and impact on the workplace. Similarly, for management's purpose of predicting and influencing behaviour towards organizational goals, acknowledging the importance of factors internal to the individual, about and over which management may have little if any control in an individual case, is essential.

We suggest that the key to understanding the problem of managing alienation, particularly in terms of the self-estrangement dimension but also across its other three dimensions, rests in recognising the dialectic that operates between the individual and the organization. In other words, the struggle over and the conflict between the individual's need for freedom and the organizational need for control is a root cause of alienation.

With the emergence of models of human resource management (Beer *et al.*, 1984; Fombrun *et al.*, 1984) it might have been thought that a unitarist style of managing people could provide a remedy for the effects of alienation; however, these models have been disappointing and have been strongly critiqued (see for example, Legge, 1995, 2001; Guest, 1989, 1990, 1999, 2011; Keenoy, 1990).

The conflict between the individual and the collective is not new, having existed since humans discovered the power of organization. Its fundamental importance as a potential source of alienation is perhaps best articulated in a modern context by Whyte who, when writing in the mid-1950s about what he perceived to be a growing and malign emphasis on collectivism in American business, warns in polemical style of the dangers of a 'soft-minded denial that there is a conflict between the individual and society' (1960: 18). Whyte's views, about who should bear responsibility for the damage that such a denial would cause, is clear: 'Management has tried to adjust the [individual] to The Organization rather than The Organization to the [individual]. It can do this with the mediocre and still have a harmonious group. It cannot do it with the brilliant; only freedom will make them harmonious' (Whyte, 1960: 197). The dilemma for management is that the mediocre will not suffice in terms of generating competitive advantage for which creativity and innovation are essential. To focus solely on managers as the cause may be misleading, however, since agency theory (Eisenhardt, 1989), and Marx too for that matter, portray managers as the agents merely carrying out the wishes of capitalist principals. As such, managers and even professionals can experience alienation as do other workers (Greene, 1978; Hunt, 1986; Korman and Wittig-Berman, 1981; Lee and Ashforth, 1993; Whyte, 1960).

### **Managing the impact of alienation**

We have argued so far that, *inter alia*, stress, burnout, and especially alienation are negative work experiences. Alienation is an 'internal' state, representing an underlying condition impacting on certain 'external', observable outcomes such as disengagement and burnout. To put this another way, alienation may be regarded as a set of feelings, a state of mind, acting as a precursor to negative work experiences associated with, but not necessarily limited to, burnout and disengagement.

As an underlying precondition to a range of behaviours symptomatic of negative work experiences, the role of alienation may be examined in more detail. Taking powerlessness first, this follows when individual discretion and decision making is removed from a work role. Marx might, of course, identify assembly lines as a prime example, but there are other more subtle instances found in contemporary work environments. Employees at call centres, for example, rely on computerised work routines and technology to respond to customer enquiries, others have their work monitored electronically through CCTV and computerised tracking of keystrokes.

Even with sport, such as in the case of tennis, cricket and football, there is increasing use of electronic devices and television replays to check umpiring decisions. No doubt such innovations increase the level of technical efficiency and decision making but they erode the ability of people to exercise discretion. Herein is the dilemma: we give recognition to Max Weber (1947) for pointing out the deleterious effects of 'rule by whim' but in the process have created vast bureaucracies which strangle individual freedom.

There are many contradictions arising from bureaucratic control, as discussed by Thompson and McHugh (2002: 38-41), especially in the context of the emergence of large-scale organizations. Admittedly, some have called for a move away from such stultifying places, advocating more democratic organizations with fewer pernicious rules and regulations (for example, Semler, 1995); however for the most part such calls have been ignored. The task for organizations is to allow employees to have discretion over their immediate work environment whilst at the same time retaining managerial strategic direction. This is not rocket science so to speak; the unwillingness of managers to change remains a major stumbling block.

In the corporate field it seems to be the age of company take-overs and the resulting emergence of very large organizations – the banking, mining and manufacturing industries provide many examples. Little wonder, then, that individuals come to perceive themselves to be little more than meaningless cogs in gigantic organizations. In offices many employees are encouraged to use e-mails rather than make personal contact with colleagues, contributing to feelings of isolation. Coffee and tea breaks no longer present the opportunity to gather in small social groups; instead employees must visit the ubiquitous dispensing machine and then return to their workstation. Meaninglessness and isolation are separate but related issues in this context. As jobs become ever more fragmented within behemoth organizations, little wonder that employees feel their work is purposeless and disconnected from the end product. In addition, minimal social interaction with colleagues heightens feelings of isolation.

It is ironic that the lessons of Trist and Bamforth's (1951) observations have been ignored over the intervening years. It is surely not too difficult for managers and front line supervisors to inculcate camaraderie among workers. It is possibly not quite so easy to overcome feelings of meaninglessness; however, it may be as simple as giving regular feedback to the frontline work group as to their performance and contribution to total output. In a study by Nelson (2005), factory management engaged workers by connecting with them at primary supervisory levels and providing regular, objective information on group performance, thus giving meaningfulness to their work and, at the same time, avoiding any dormant feelings of isolation.

Finally, feelings of self-estrangement can arise due to poor job-person fit. Many studies in this area have examined, for example, values, culture, and personality; often additionally focussing on person-organization fit (Kristof, 2006; Arthur *et al.*, 2006; Cable and Judge, 1996; Holland, 1997). There are two main issues here – firstly ensuring that selection processes take into account what existential psychologists proclaim as the real or deeper self, as outlined earlier in this paper and, secondly, sufficient management flexibility to adjust work roles compatible with that inner self. Unfortunately, conventional selection methods often focus on comparing measures of individual abilities, skills, personality tests and so forth, with job requirements. These are supplemented with references and work samples, all of which seem to fall short of revealing the relevant underlying nature of a person. Sensitive interviewing during selection may be the most likely way to achieve such a breakthrough, in which candidates are given sufficient opportunity to reveal their inner or true self that extends beyond mere technical job-related skills. Organizations often take a rigid view of positions; however, with even superficial changes it can be possible to align a role more in keeping with an individual. This is plausible apropos work teams where minor changes to duties or

positions can be effected. For example, working on the front desk of a hotel someone may feel more at home handling bookings rather than dealing with customers face-to-face. Such nuances may provide more meaningful and satisfying work and avoid problems associated with major reconfigurations of work roles.

### **Conclusion**

The growing research interest in the significance of mental health in the workplace has produced calls for organizations to take a more proactive role in changing work environments and structures to make the workplace more conducive to good mental health and so enhance productivity. In this paper we have presented an alternative perspective on how organizations and management might respond by revisiting the often overlooked concept of 'alienation' and its connection with other negative work experiences.

In conclusion, we believe that the key to unravelling the problem of organizational alienation lies in management that recognises alienation needs to be addressed at two levels: firstly, at the systemic level in terms of factors external to the individual such as work and organizational systems and processes, and secondly in terms of internal individual factors such as his or her state of mind. To these ends managers, at all levels but particularly at the frontline, need to find means by which work can be transformed to deal with problems of powerlessness, isolation, meaninglessness and self-estrangement.

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