



Managing Employees to Perform Emotionally Laborious Work

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In Brief

Emotionally laborious work (ELW) occurs when an employee's duties require handling emotionally difficult situations. Examples of jobs with such duties may include (but are not limited to): medical professionals involved in patient care; law enforcement or corrections officers interacting with victims or alleged perpetrators of crimes; or customer service representatives discussing eligibility for housing, disability, food, medical care, or similar benefits. Such positions are common in the Federal civil service. Thus, it is not surprising that in response to questions on our 2016 Merit Principles Survey (MPS), 32 percent of respondents agreed that they performed ELW.¹

ELW levels can vary greatly between Federal agencies, with one MPS agency having 52 percent of its workforce report that they perform ELW, while another agency had only 15 percent agreement. But, with a minimum of 1 out of every 7 employees performing ELW—and in some agencies as many as 1 out of every 2 employees—ELW is important for all agencies.²

ELW can be stressful, depending upon the employee and the situation. Often, in order to effectively perform these duties, an employee must pretend to have feelings they do not actually feel or hide true feelings. This behavior, which we refer to as Feelings Pretense, can occur for the best of intentions, including to help members of the public experience a more positive interaction with the Government. For example, if a member of the public is behaving aggressively, it is important for the employee not to respond in kind, but instead to deescalate the situation, even if it means suppressing the employee's own frustrations at such behavior. In law enforcement positions, such Feelings Pretense can be the single most important skill for an employee to have.

Feelings Pretense is internal to a person. It involves an individual coping with their own, personal feelings and either suppressing them or expressing a modified version of them in order to complete the task at hand. In contrast, ELW is about the job and its duties, which involve the emotions of others or emotional issues.³ While ELW can increase the potential that an employee may need to engage in Feelings Pretense, it is possible to have such pretense without ELW, or to have ELW without the employee engaging in Feelings Pretense. However, it is far more common for the two to coincide.⁴

While ELW (like any work) can be tiring, it is Feelings Pretense that tends to be more costly and draining for employees. Data from our MPS show that when an employee feels the need to engage in Feelings Pretense to accomplish his or her duties, there is an increase in emotional fatigue, a lower intent to remain in the position, fewer good performance behaviors, lower performance appraisal results, and reduced engagement. However, ELW has a much less negative

¹ A composite of 4 questions was used to assess ELW. Figure A in the Data Appendix provides a more granular look at how strongly respondents agreed or disagreed with the survey questions on the ELW nature of their duties. For more information on the composite, see the Methodology Appendix.

² For the levels of ELW by MPS agency, see Figure B in the Data Appendix.

³ Some positions, such as undercover law enforcement, are by their very nature automatically higher in Feelings Pretense.

⁴ See Figure C in the Data Appendix for more information.

relationship to emotional fatigue and desire to leave compared to the results for Feelings Pretense. Furthermore, ELW has a positive relationship to several other outcomes, including better self-reported performance behaviors, higher performance appraisals, and higher levels of engagement. (For more on this, see the Data Appendix, Figures D–I.)

Because of the differences in how ELW versus Feelings Pretense interacts with these items, our data indicates that the challenge for agencies of having a workforce that efficiently and effectively performs ELW is not entirely controlled by the nature of the work itself. Rather, it rather may be influenced by the selection and management of the workforce to reduce the need for Feelings Pretense or to help the employee handle the strain of engaging in such pretense when performing ELW. This brief uses information from agency questionnaires to offer suggestions for how agencies may be able to use recruitment and assessment strategies, performance management, training, and workplace support programs to affect how much an employee must pretend and how the employee handles that pretense when performing ELW.

Methodology

To assess the effect of ELW and Feelings Pretense in the civil service, we asked a series of questions on our 2016 MPS. There were approximately 11,000 respondents for these questions. We also sent questionnaires to 27 agencies, asking about practices related to the employment of individuals performing ELW and coping with the feelings such work can generate. Agencies were permitted to submit a single reply to the questionnaire, or to have separate bureaus or locations submit replies. Nineteen agencies responded to the employment practices questionnaire with one or more completed forms, with a total of 370 responses.⁵

Candidate Recruitment and Assessment

An ideal approach to assessment (for any job) takes advantage of multiple hurdles so that the validity of each hurdle can layer upon the others to increase the potential of making a good selection.⁶ Each of these assessment steps also represent an opportunity to determine the capabilities of the applicant to effectively perform and tolerate ELW by managing Feelings Pretense.

Vacancy Announcements

Vacancy announcements can serve as an opportunity for assessment by encouraging candidates to assess themselves and their Feelings Pretense capabilities before they make the decision to apply for the job, making it the first of the assessment stages. Of those agencies that reported they had positions which required a higher level of ELW, most reported that they made no mention of ELW in their vacancy announcements, other than to simply list the duties and leave it to the applicants to recognize that there was an emotional component to the work and thus Feelings Pretense might be required. However, this misses an important opportunity for the applicants to perform a more effective self-assessment process. Applicants for entry-level positions may not fully understand the emotional labor involved in such duties or the need to manage feelings to

⁵ For more on the methodology, see the Methodology Appendix.

⁶ The concept is that less resource-intensive hurdles are used earlier in the process to winnow the candidate pool and more resource-intensive tools are used in the later stages on the candidates with the most potential. A combination of assessments is more accurate than any one assessment standing alone. The most resource-intensive assessment tool of all is the probationary period, which comes last but still should be used thoroughly before the appointment is finalized. For more on multiple hurdles, see U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Identifying Talent Through Technology: Automated Hiring Systems in Federal Agencies* (2004), Appendix D, available at www.mspb.gov/studies.

accomplish that work. Applicants for journey-level positions may understand the emotional labor required elsewhere to perform similar duties but could lack familiarity with the unique challenges offered by a particular agency's customer base or mission.

We have repeatedly encouraged agencies to include in their announcements a statement: "This job is for you if..."⁷ This may be particularly helpful for jobs with a higher level of ELW or positions requiring Feelings Pretense. The box below uses mock examples to illustrate the difference between describing a duty, describing ELW (and its prevalence), and describing how the duties can be expected to interact with the applicant's own feelings. The Feelings Pretense statement may vary, based upon whether the agency wants to emphasize the desirability of effectively pretending or whether the agency seeks to hire an individual who can avoid the need for pretense at all.⁸

A vacancy announcement could include one or more of the following types of statements:

(Duty): You will assist customers with benefits applications.

(Emotionally Laborious Work): You will assist customers who often may be angry or frustrated and occasionally may be frightened, embarrassed, or nervous.

(Using Feelings Pretense): *This job is for you if you are easily able to present a calm face and professional demeanor when dealing with emotional customers. This job is not for you if you find it exhausting to pretend to feel calm when dealing with emotions of others.*

(Avoiding Feelings Pretense): *This job is for you if you are able to feel empathy and a genuine desire to assist people who are emotional, disorganized, or difficult, knowing that they are in need and you can make a positive difference for them. This job is not for you if you are easily frustrated by the emotions of others.*

The agency is in the best position to know, in general, the likely emotional state of the customers that the employee will be expected to deal with and how frequently the customers will be in such a state. The applicant is better able to know how he or she is likely to react when presented with a person expressing particular emotions. Some people may have difficulty handling customers who shout, while others might find tearful customers more stressful. As one agency noted, "Employees are also individuals, whose sensitivities and levels of empathy are varied, which means that for the same given set of circumstances one employee may be hiding their true feelings while another is empathetic."

Describing to an applicant the nature and frequency of the emotions that the job will require an employee to cope with can help the applicant to know what questions to ask of himself or herself before applying, and what questions he or she should ask when interviewing the agency as a

⁷ See, e.g., "Fitting the Pieces Together: Exploring the linkage between job fit, discretionary effort, and performance," *Issues of Merit* (Fall 2017) available at www.mpsb.gov/studies.

⁸ Literature on this topic often discusses the distinction between "surface acting" and "deep acting." In surface acting, the employee projects outwardly the impression of feelings that do not exist internally. In deep acting, the employee makes the effort to change his or her own feelings into whatever the work requires and then projects those modified feelings. However, there is also a third possibility: a person who feels the desired emotion naturally and therefore is not required to expend energy shaping his or her feelings or pretending. It may not be practical to expect a person would always be in this third state every day, but the closer to that state the employee can be, the less energy that may be required to perform the ELW.

potential employer. (Remember, the agency is applying to be a potential employer and the individual is applying to be a potential employee. A good assessment process helps both sides to make the best decision.)

For some positions (such as law enforcement), it may be more desirable for the employee to present an impassive demeanor, while others (such as nursing) may benefit from a more empathetic demeanor. Whether it is best to avoid the need to pretend an emotion, or to present the face of no emotion at all, will depend heavily on the duties at hand. But whichever is preferable, describing it in the vacancy announcement is an opportunity for the potential employee to assess if he or she is a good match for the position. A private, internal self-assessment by the candidate before a heavy investment in the process can be of great value to the agency if it helps to eliminate early those who would be a poor fit.

Job Simulations

Some agencies informed us that as part of the structured interview process for ELW positions, an applicant would be asked to pretend to respond to a situation that is likely to occur on the job. It is best if such an interview is conducted by a panel and the applicant is rated against pre-established benchmarks. However, as we explained in our 2009 report on job simulations, higher fidelity simulations use real materials, equipment, and/or scenarios to represent the duties of the job.⁹

For example, to assess applicants for a customer service position, an employer may sit applicants at an actual customer service work station with a telephone, computer, manual of standard operating procedures, and other work materials and have them role-play one or more scenarios. Making the simulation more realistic may be more resource intensive, but it can also improve the predictive quality of the test by more closely approximating what would happen on the job. After all, when on the job, the individual would not have access to the facial reactions or body language of an interview panel to help guide how he or she responds to phone calls.

This is true for positions that exist throughout most agencies, even if the mission involves limited direct interaction with the public. For example, in response to our 2016 survey of supervisors, approximately one-third of respondents stated that the individuals who provide a variety of HR services are in the same building as the supervisor, while one-third said it was the same commuting area, and one-third said HR staff were outside the commuting area. If customer service—internal or external—is not provided face-to-face on the job, then a simulation that allows for the reading of body language and facial expressions is not a high-fidelity simulation. Similarly, telephonic communication (interpreting the customer’s tone of voice, ability to interrupt the other party for clarification) is not the same as e-mail communication. The more realistic the simulation, the more accurate it can be. The more that emotions play into the performance of duties, the more important it may be to make simulations as accurate as possible.¹⁰

Agencies do not necessarily need to choose between assessing customer service in an interview or a more realistic simulation. For example, a structured interview that incorporates job scenarios

⁹ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Job Simulations: Trying Out for a Federal Job* (2009), at 9–10, available at www.mspb.gov/studies.

¹⁰ See Filip Lievens and Fiona Patterson, “The Validity and Incremental Validity of Knowledge Tests, Low-Fidelity Simulations, and High-Fidelity Simulations for Predicting Job Performance in Advanced-Level High-Stakes Selection,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2011), Vol. 96, No. 5, 927–940, 935 (explaining that high-fidelity simulations are particularly valuable when non-cognitive duties such as interpersonal relations are important).

could be used to identify which candidates should then proceed to the more high-fidelity simulation.

Reference Checks

A few agency responses mentioned using reference checks for job candidates in ELW positions. As we noted in our report on reference checking, the most reliable predictor of future behavior, such as job performance, is past behavior.¹¹ If a job requires that an employee project particular emotions or suppress other emotions, it is possible that an individual could manage to do this for a short time (such as during an hour for an assessment test). However, that is not the same thing as being able to do so for hundreds or thousands of hours per year. A reference check provides the opportunity to ask questions of someone who witnessed how the individual performed emotion-laden work more long-term.

Reference checks may be able to confirm factual information (i.e., dates of employment) more accurately than subjective information (i.e., opinions on how well the individual has handled angry customers in the past). However, as we discussed earlier, assessment tools are most effective when several complimentary tools are used in succession.¹² A reference check cannot substitute for a more effective assessment tool, but it can enhance the effectiveness by identifying potential areas of concern for further inquiry. Questions about how the applicant handled ELW in the past, with requests for specific examples of the candidate's competency at managing his or her own emotions, may be beneficial.

Emotional Labor Performance Management

As noted earlier, higher levels of ELW are associated with better performance behaviors, while higher levels of Feelings Pretense tend to limit such performance.¹³ Most agencies took the view that work tasks, in general, were assessed for performance and recognition with no particular identification of the extra efforts that ELW might require. However, some agencies did recognize that emotional labor was a component of such work to be considered when discussing performance with employees and when rewarding good performance by an employee.

Performance Feedback

As we discussed in our recent research brief, *The Roles of Feedback, Autonomy, and Meaningfulness in Employee Performance Behaviors*, by choosing which things to discuss, management is—in effect—sending a message about which things matter. Specifically recognizing the ELW component of the work, and expressing appreciation for an employee managing emotions well, may help reinforce the message that handling the emotions of others, and one's own emotions, is important.

Discussing poor performance of ELW or Feelings Pretense may be particularly sensitive. Employees tend not to enjoy being told they have done something poorly, and criticizing an

¹¹ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Reference Checking in Federal Hiring: Making the Call* (2005), available at www.mpsb.gov/studies.

¹² For example, the vacancy announcement could have a realistic job preview; an application screening form could include asking candidates to describe how they have handled a particular task in the past; the interview could include asking candidates what they would do if faced with a specific situation; the high-fidelity simulation could present them with an interactive opportunity to demonstrate how they would perform; and then a probationary period would provide a more long-term assessment opportunity. Each step would winnow the candidate pool so that a smaller number of candidates would proceed to the next step.

¹³ See the Data Appendix for more information.

employee's emotional reaction to the work is likely to elicit a new (and unpleasant) emotional reaction from that employee. As we discussed in our research brief, *Performance Management is More than an Appraisal*, the past should be seen as an opportunity to offer lessons learned, but the emphasis should be on how to take advantage of that information to grow. This is particularly true for ELW and Feelings Pretense.

Rotational Assignments

Several agencies include the possibility of offering rotational assignments as part of the performance management of the ELW workforce. One agency noted:

When previously successful employees begin to exhibit poor performance of their normal duties, a manager's first course of action is to check-in with the employee to determine what might be affecting them or how their personal situation may have changed. In positions of higher stress, if a manager determines that the exposure to the environment is the source of the performance issues, a temporary or permanent reassignment of duties would be discussed to see if the situation could be mitigated.

For the sake of morale and mutual respect, it may be important to express to such employees that the decision to rotate out of this work is not a "failure" by the individual employees, but rather that their sacrifices to perform such work are deeply appreciated and that they have sacrificed enough.

For some positions, catching such burnout early may make it possible for the person to return to the ELW later, once the employee has recovered. For others, a return may not be practical, but the employees' skills and experiences can be valuable in future assignments. The important thing is to intercede before it is too late. As we have previously reported, our data shows that once an employee becomes too exhausted, it is very difficult for the supervisor to influence that employee's desire to remain on the job.¹⁴ Keeping an employee in ELW too long may create a lower return on investment than there would have been in encouraging the employee to rotate sooner. An employee who can avoid burnout may be productive in other duties and possibly be able to later return to the particularly stressful work, whereas one who is too exhausted may be lost entirely.¹⁵

In some agencies, where ELW is especially common or inherent in an entire occupation, routine rotational assignments for everyone involved in ELW may not be practical. However, the higher the level of ELW in a position, or the greater the need for Feelings Pretense, the larger the potential becomes that some rotational opportunities may be necessary.

Training for Performing and Supervising Emotionally Laborious Work

Several agencies indicated that they offered training for employees on how to handle emotional work. Training for customer service positions tended to focus on dealing with others, while

¹⁴ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Understanding the Effect of Emotional Exhaustion on Employees' Intent to Leave," *Issues of Merit* (Spring 2017), available at www.mpsb.gov/studies.

¹⁵ For more on burnout, see U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Job Burnout: The 'Dark Side' of Job Stress," *Issues of Merit* (Winter 2016), available at www.mpsb.gov/studies. Burnout is also addressed in our situational equation model, Figure G, in the Data Appendix.

training for many law enforcement positions focused on how an employee could cope with his or her own emotional reaction.

Managing the Emotions of Others

One customer service agency has a series of courses for entry-level positions, tailored to the nature of the interactions. For example, employees who interact with the public face-to-face are given a course that “provides employees with tips on how to communicate with the public efficiently and professionally. It includes lessons on how to effectively assist claimants who have special needs as well as how to effectively manage difficult interview[s].” Those who interact with the public by telephone receive training unique to that form of communication. “At the end of each module, trainees are tested on the training material, including the role-play of a mock call with a customer. Following the completion of these activities, trainees participate in on-the-job training before processing to the next module.”

This agency may have been able to allocate the resources to develop and implement such specialized training because customer service is so central to the mission. But there are also classes of jobs that exist across many agencies that require managing the emotions of others, such as human resources or contracting officers’ technical representatives (COTRs).¹⁶ When an agency is too small or has too few resources to commission high-quality, professionally-developed, situationally-appropriate training, it may be beneficial to obtain such training from another agency that faces similar ELW challenges.¹⁷

Managing One’s Own Emotions

Most of the training for handling one’s own emotions tended to focus on coping with the effects of having performed ELW rather than on emotionally preparing to perform ELW. However, if the damage can be avoided, or its impact reduced, that can be even more beneficial.

Training in advance may be particularly appropriate for positions in which trauma from the ELW is especially likely. One agency has employees who are required to work with materials involving the abuse of children, including explicit materials. The training for these employees “includes orientation and pre-exposure training for employees who will be exposed to graphic material.”

A different law enforcement organization has a program for employees in positions that have been identified as having particularly strong emotional labor requirements. The program “provides three-days of didactic and experiential learning which offer coping skills to mitigate or effectively deal with the potential for emotional labor.”

Another agency has a one-week orientation program that includes topics such as employee suicide and employee trauma. This agency was also pilot testing a program called “Mindfulness”

¹⁶ The Federal Acquisition Institute (FAI) recognizes the importance of communication in managing projects, including the ability to “separate people and emotions from the issue.” FAI has also stated that the ability to “build and manage relationships across functions and organizations” is a core capability for COTRs. Similarly, the Defense Acquisition University’s training for COTRs states that such work involves “colorful and engaging interpersonal relationships.” FAI, *Project Manager’s Guidebook* (Nov. 24, 2015), at 183-185, available at <https://www.fai.gov/sites/default/files/FAI-Project-Managers-Guidebook.pdf>; FAI, *Contracting Officer’s Technical Representative (COTR) Training Blueprint* (Nov. 2003) at 6, available at https://www.acq.osd.mil/dpap/ccap/cc/jchb/Files/Topical/COR/guides/cor_blue_book.pdf.

¹⁷ One agency refers to managing conflict as a “competency” and offers its employees a 2-day class on how to “handle emotions—yours and others’—better during a conflict[.]” Department of Veterans Affairs, *Becoming Conflict Competent*, available at https://www.va.gov/adr/docs/Becoming_Conflict_Competent_Brochure_508.pdf.

which is intended “to enhance resilience and performance for individuals working in very stressful environments.”¹⁸

Managing Subordinates’ Engaged in Emotionally Laborious Work

We asked agencies to “describe any specific training your agency provides to supervisors of employees who perform emotional labor.” Most agencies—even those who recognized the importance of assessing and training employees engaged in ELW—did not have any such training. One notable exception was a law enforcement organization whose employees deal with child exploitation cases. Their program for such employees includes not only training for the employees, but also requires supervisors of employees in these assignments to participate in training that provides orientation to what employees will deal with and information about mitigation services.

When a supervisor is expected to manage subordinates engaged in ELW, it may be wise to train that supervisor on unique responsibilities associated with supervising such employees. These include, but are not limited to: (1) how to communicate ELW expectations in a manner that shows an understanding of the difficulties of ELW; (2) warning signs to look for that ELW is causing more stress for an employee than that person may be able to handle; and (3) what supervisors can do to help an employee facing such stress (e.g., what counseling services are available or how to obtain a rotational assignment to allow for a recovery period).

Resources for Coping with Stress Caused by Emotionally Laborious Work

As discussed above, some agencies used training to provide preparatory or preventative tools to cope with ELW-related stress. But most of the agencies described coping resources that approached the situation *after* an employee was already feeling the effects.

By far, the most common coping resource mentioned by agencies was the availability of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). In many agencies, EAP is designed to help with a wide range of stressors, some of which are not directly related to work duties, such as financial matters, health problems, or personal relationships. However, law enforcement organizations tended to have additional resources available to employees. Several offer a Peer Support Program and at least one had a Chaplaincy Support Program.

At least two organizations have (or are designing) programs to address the effect of ELW on an employee’s family. One agency mentioned that they provide an “an orientation for the families of the [employees] that introduces them to the roles and responsibilities of the [employees], the importance of health and lifestyle, the availability of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP)... and firearms safety in the house.” An agency in a different cabinet department told us that they are also planning to introduce a ‘Spouse and Family Orientation’ program.

One thing these resources have in common is the concept of providing external support to the employee. Whether the support comes from a chaplain, a peer, a counselor, or a family member, the employee should not feel that he or she is bearing the burden alone.

¹⁸ Mindfulness has been described as “moment-to-moment, nonjudgmental awareness of one’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences.” The goal is to help law enforcement officers to “develop the skills they need to de-escalate volatile situations, improve community relations, and better handle the demands of their jobs.” Jill Suttie, “How Mindfulness Is Changing Law Enforcement,” *Greater Good* (May 18, 2016) available at https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_mindfulness_is_changing_law_enforcement.

Conclusion

Emotionally laborious work can pose extra challenges for the employees and their supervisors. But, some people can thrive on such challenges. The data show that ELW, in and of itself, can make work more meaningful and has a relationship to higher levels of engagement and self-reported performance behaviors. However, ELW becomes more costly when an employee must hide true feelings or pretend to feel emotions that are not present. Such pretense can increase emotional fatigue and the desire to move and has a negative relationship to several outcomes, including self-reported performance behaviors, performance appraisal ratings, and levels of engagement.

ELW tends to be particularly important work and worthy of the investment of agency resources to ensure that the ELW workforce is managed as effectively as possible. Below is a summary of a few steps agencies can take to improve the ability of employees to handle ELW and to either limit the need for Feelings Pretense or to reduce the harm of engaging in such pretense.

Recruitment:

- Use realistic job previews in vacancy announcements to encourage candidates to self-assess.
- Develop high-fidelity simulations with results assessed against established benchmarks.
- Make reference checks that seek examples of how candidates handled ELW in the past.
- Utilize the probationary period to assess how well individuals can cope with extended periods of ELW.

Performance Management:

- Recognize the challenges of ELW and Feelings Pretense when developing performance standards and providing performance feedback.
- Be prepared, in advance, to provide rotational assignments for positions with exceptionally high levels of ELW or Feelings Pretense.
- Offer other employees in ELW or Feelings Pretense positions rotational assignments when possible.

Training:

- Provide employees with orientation to prepare for stressors of ELW and Feelings Pretense.
- Teach coping skills that can be used when facing ELW and Feelings Pretense.
- Teach ELW-unique supervisory skills (including understanding what employees face, providing feedback on ELW, and information on the support available to employees).

Support:

- Provide a support system (e.g., mentors, EAP) to help employees cope with ELW and Feelings Pretense.
- Inform employees about available support programs and systems, and encourage employees to use them.

Methodology Appendix

Survey Methodology

In July-September 2016, MSPB administered the Merit Principles Survey (MPS). MSPB has conducted the MPS periodically for more than 35 years. The MPS contains some questions that are asked in multiple administrations to track perceptions and some questions that are unique to a single survey administration. In 2016, to reduce the demands on survey respondents, the MPS was divided into three paths so that all respondents would only be asked a fraction of the total number of questions. The data discussed in this report comes from “Path 2” of that survey. Overall, 37,397 civilian employees were invited to respond to Path 2 and 14,473 responded, for a response rate of 38.7%. There were 10,900 respondents to our series of questions on ELW and 10,898 respondents to our series of questions on Feelings Pretense.¹⁹

Agency Questionnaires

On October 11, 2018 we sent questionnaires to 27 agencies. Respondents were permitted to submit a single reply, or to have separate bureaus or locations submit replies. Nineteen agencies responded with one or more completed questionnaires for a total of 370 responses. These agencies included:

Department of Agriculture	Department of State
Department of Air Force	Department of the Interior
Department of Army	Department of Transportation
Department of Defense	Department of Treasury
Department of Education	Department of Veterans Affairs
Department of Energy	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
Department of Homeland Security	General Services Administration
Department of Justice	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
Department of Energy	Social Security Administration
Department of Navy	

Composite Measures

To measure ELW, Feelings Pretense, emotional fatigue, intent to move, discretionary effort, and work meaning, MSPB used factor analysis to develop composites from a set of survey items related to each dimension. For all composites except discretionary effort, the survey items each had five response options (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree). The measure was the sum of the item responses, with “strongly agree” assigned a value of 5 and “strongly disagree” assigned a value of 1. For discretionary effort, the survey items each had four response options (great extent, moderate extent, small extent, and not at all). After taking the sum for each composite, we then assigned each employee to one of three groups within that composite (e.g., higher, moderate, and lower) of approximately equal size based on the measure responses. The items and groupings are summarized in the table below.

¹⁹ For more on the methodology for the 2016 MPS, please visit MSPB’s Freedom of Information Act electronic reading room (e-FOIA), at www.mspb.gov.

Composites	Items	Groups
Emotionally Laborious Work	(1) My work requires me to guide people through sensitive and/or emotional issues. (2) My work involves dealing with emotionally charged issues as a critical dimension of the job. (3) My job requires that I manage the emotions of others. (4) My work requires me to provide comfort to people who are in crisis.	Higher ELW: 16-20 Moderate ELW: 12-15 Lower ELW: 4-11
Feelings Pretense	(1) My job requires that I pretend to have emotions that I do not really feel. (2) My job requires that I hide my true feelings about a situation.	Higher FP: 7-10 Moderate FP: 5-6 Lower FP: 2-4
Emotional Fatigue	(1) I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally. (2) I leave work feeling tired and run down. (3) I leave work feeling emotionally exhausted.	Higher Emotional Fatigue: 10-15 Moderate Emotional Fatigue: 7-9 Lower Emotional Fatigue: 3-6
Intent to Move	During the next two years, do you plan to: (1) Move to a different occupation or line of work? (2) Move to a different organization within their current agency? (3) Move to a different agency within the Federal Government?	Stronger Desire to Move: 9-15 Moderate Desire to Move: 6-8 Weaker Desire to Move: 3-5
Discretionary Effort	To what extent do you do the following things in your job: (1) Look for ways that I can help others with their work. (2) Take the initiative to collaborate with others on work. (3) Look for ways to solve work problems. (4) Foster work-related discussion among my colleagues. (5) Look for ways to better apply my abilities at work.	Higher Discretionary Effort: 19-20 Moderate Discretionary Effort: 16-18 Lower Discretionary Effort: 5-15
Work Meaning	(1) My work supports a purpose, cause, or mission that is important to me. (2) The work I do is important. (3) My work gives me a good opportunity to make a meaningful difference or impact.	Stronger Meaning: 14-15 Moderate Meaning: 12-13 Weaker Meaning: 3-11

MSPB's Engagement Scale

MSPB's engagement scale was first designed for our 2008 report, the [Power of Federal Employee Engagement](#). Each of the 16 scale questions contained a five-level response scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree. We assigned a point value ranging from 1 to 5 to each of these possible responses with Strongly Disagree equating to a value of 1, and Strongly Agree equating to a value of 5. This means that our employee engagement scale ranged from 16 to 80. These scores were then grouped based upon the overall tenor of the attitude. A score of less than 48 was placed in the "not engaged" category, a score of 48-63 was placed in the "somewhat engaged" category, and a score of 64 or more was placed in the "engaged" category. Because these were the categories used to establish the connection between engagement and other positive outcomes (e.g., fewer workplace injuries, fewer equal employment opportunity complaints, less sick leave usage, and better program results) we have kept these scale divisions for this research brief.

Structural Equation Modeling

We used structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the complex relationship between emotional labor and emotional fatigue and how they may affect feelings pretense, discretionary effort, effort in general, burnout, intentions to leave as well as performance appraisal ratings (both what people stated they actually received and what people believed they should have received). We used SEM software to estimate a maximum likelihood structural equation measurement model including nine measured workplace variables and their respective indicators.

These latent measured variables, the number of indicators, and measures of reliability (coefficient alpha α and correlation r) included emotional fatigue ($n = 3$, $\alpha = .87$), intention to leave ($n = 3$, $\alpha = .84$), discretionary effort ($n = 5$, $\alpha = .87$), effort ($n = 5$, $\alpha = .87$), emotional labor ($n = 4$, $\alpha = .93$), burnout ($n = 5$, $\alpha = .83$), feelings pretense ($n = 2$, $r = .64$). The two perspectives on performance appraisals—(1) what rating was awarded, and (2) what rating the respondent thought should have been awarded—were treated as observed rather than measured variables.

For this model latent endogenous variables were covaried. We found evidence of the presence of common method bias factor which affected the magnitude of the parameter estimates. Therefore, we included a common method factor (with paths to the item indicators) as a control. A single common latent factor (CLF), with variance set to zero, was included with unconstrained paths to each of the indicators of the seven latent variables. We included Burnout and General Effort in the model to provide more opportunity to estimate commonality and because they were found to be involved with other emotional variables we studied. In this way, the common source bias among the indicators was accounted for and controlled by the CLF. We used the software's regression imputation feature to derive factor scores as measured variables which were then re-modeled using only these measured variables. Here, we added salary and education variables and set paths to control for their effects on: (1) discretionary effort; (2) effort in general; (3) intentions to leave; and (4) burnout. We fit a structural model using the CLF-adjusted observed variables, treating Feelings Pretense and emotionally laborious work as exogenous variables, while emotional fatigue, discretionary effort, effort in general, intentions to leave, burnout, and the two performance appraisal items were endogenous variables. The model sample size was 8,364 ($DF = 19$). The Chi square ($\chi^2 = 232.987$) over the degrees of freedom was 12.262 with $RMSEA = .037$, $PCLOSE = 1$, $CFI = .99$.

Data Appendix

Figure A: Prevalence of Emotionally Laborious Work for MPS Respondents

As shown in the chart, perceptions of ELW varied greatly and ran the full spectrum from strong disagreement with all four questions (score of 4) to strong agreement with all four questions (score of 20). As noted in the Methodology Appendix, the dividing lines between lower, moderate, and higher were drawn to create nearly equal thirds of the respondent population. However, the line between moderate and higher is also where a line would be drawn between a person who averaged agreement with all four questions (score of 16) and a person whose average response was just below that level of agreement.

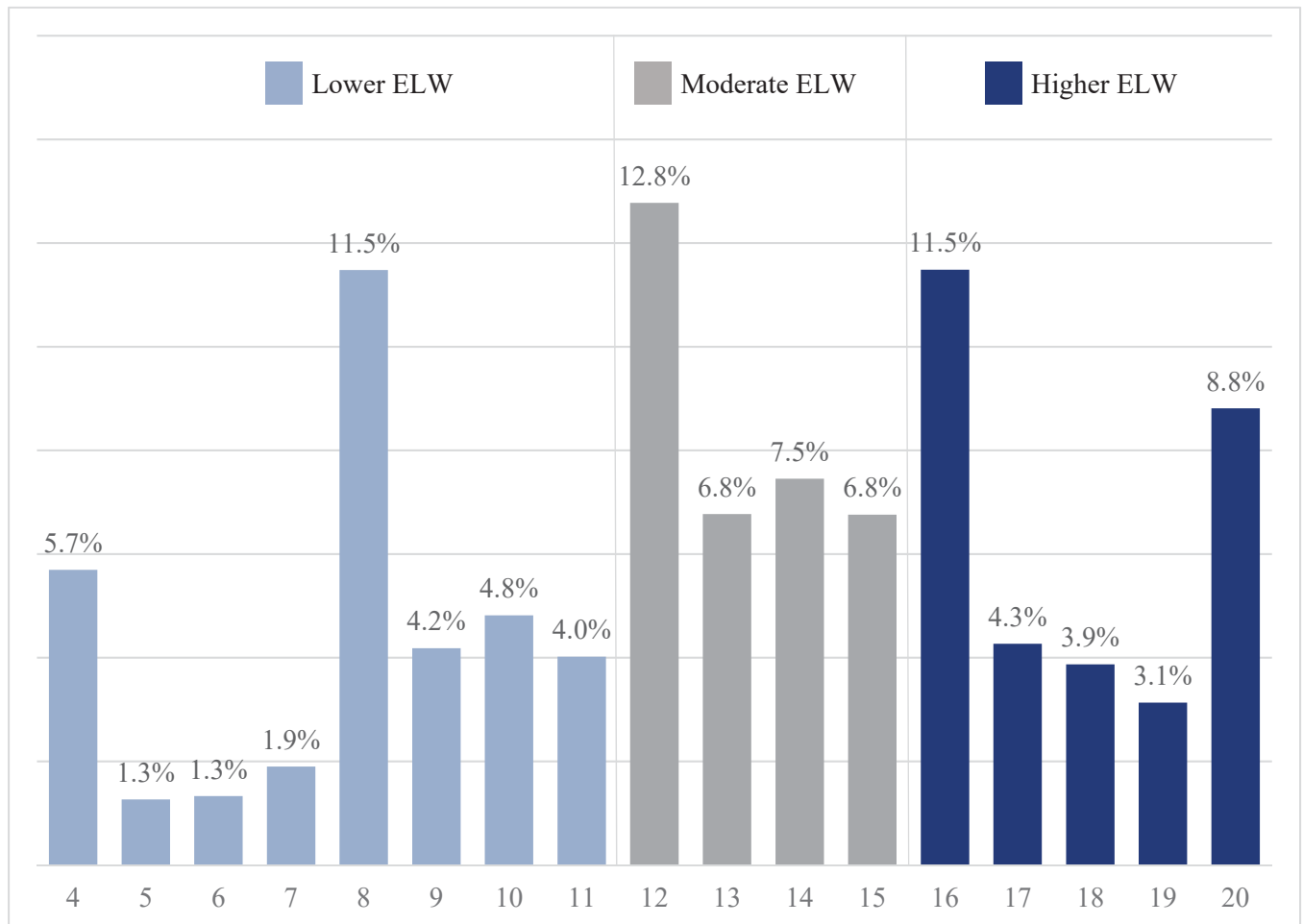


Figure B: Levels of Emotionally Laborious Work in Individual Federal Agencies

As shown in the chart, the percentage of employees who reported higher levels of emotional labor varied greatly by agency. (Only agencies with at least 200 unweighted survey respondents are included in the chart.)

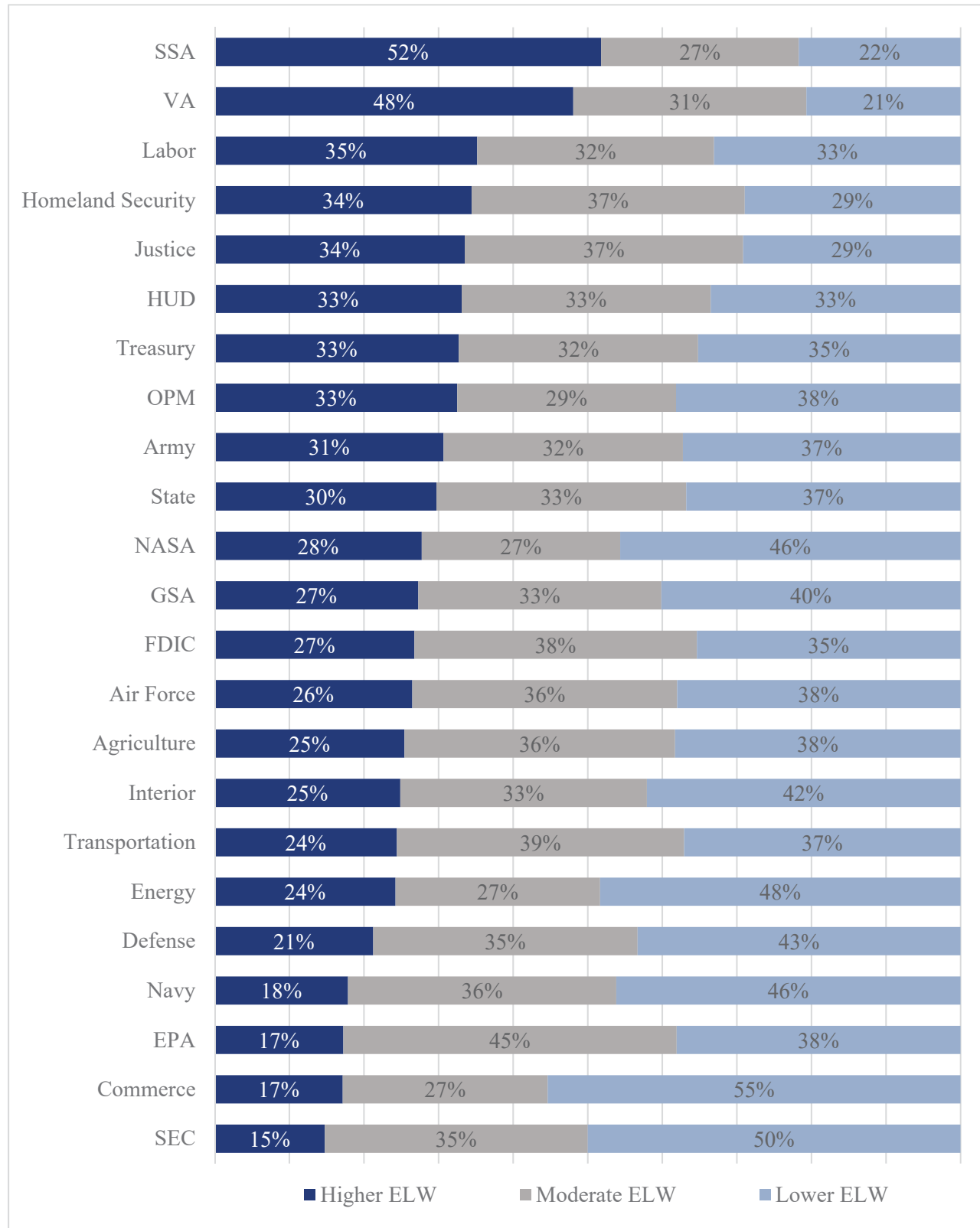


Figure C: Levels of Emotionally Laborious Work and Feelings Pretense in MPS Respondents

As shown in the chart, the higher the emotional component of the work, the greater the likelihood that the individual also reported a higher level of Feelings Pretense (FP).

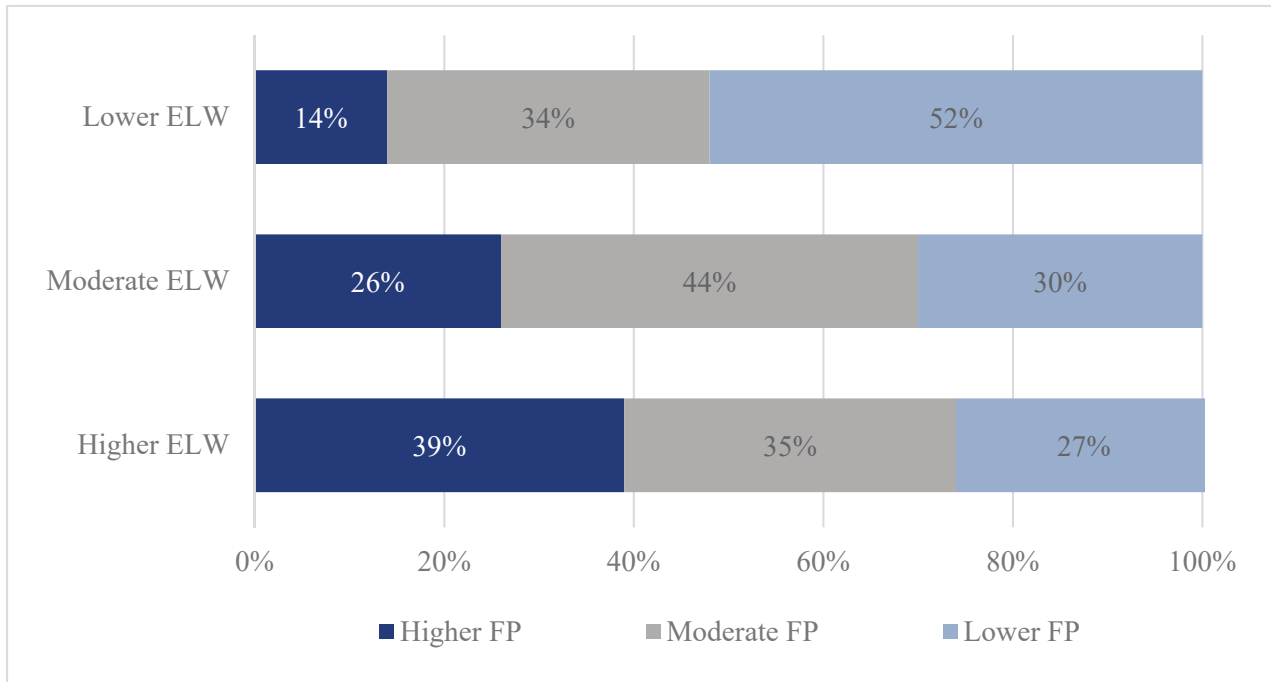


Figure D: Relationship between Emotionally Laborious Work, Feelings Pretense, and Emotional Fatigue

As shown in the table, as ELW decreases, the percentage of employees who are in the higher emotional fatigue category generally tends to decrease as well. But, decreasing Feelings Pretense has an even more dramatic effect on higher emotional fatigue than ELW, dropping more than 45 percentage points between higher and lower Feelings Pretense in each of the ELW levels.

		Higher Emotional Fatigue	Moderate Emotional Fatigue	Lower Emotional Fatigue
Higher ELW	Higher FP	76.6%	17.1%	6.3%
	Moderate FP	45.1%	36.2%	18.7%
	Lower FP	20.3%	26.9%	52.8%
Moderate ELW	Higher FP	65.0%	24.5%	10.5%
	Moderate FP	34.1%	45.7%	20.2%
	Lower FP	17.6%	34.8%	47.6%
Lower ELW	Higher FP	61.8%	25.0%	13.2%
	Moderate FP	34.7%	43.8%	21.4%
	Lower FP	13.1%	24.8%	62.1%

Row totals may not equal 100% due to rounding. All rows in this chart had an unweighted population of 556 or more respondents.

Figure E: Relationship between Emotionally Laborious Work, Feelings Pretense, and Desire to Move

As shown in the table, the differences based on ELW levels are relatively slight. In contrast, increasing from lower to higher Feelings Pretense within each level of ELW increases the potential that the person will have a stronger desire to move by 18-26 percentage points. Thus, it is likely that Feelings Pretense has a much greater effect on retention than ELW.

		Stronger Desire to Move	Moderate Desire to Move	Weaker Desire to Move
Higher ELW	Higher FP	49.3%	28.8%	22.0%
	Moderate FP	36.8%	40.2%	23.0%
	Lower FP	25.7%	40.8%	33.4%
Moderate ELW	Higher FP	52.3%	28.7%	19.0%
	Moderate FP	47.9%	31.7%	20.4%
	Lower FP	25.9%	45.1%	29.0%
Lower ELW	Higher FP	46.4%	36.4%	17.2%
	Moderate FP	42.2%	41.9%	16.0%
	Lower FP	28.8%	37.8%	33.4%

Row totals may not equal 100% due to rounding. All rows in this chart had an unweighted population of 470 or more respondents.

Figure F: Relationship between Emotionally Laborious Work, Work Meaning, and Feelings Pretense

As shown in the figure, as the employee’s sense of meaning in the work increased, the potential for Feelings Pretense decreased. Additionally, employees were more likely to see meaning in their work if the work was higher ELW. Thus, there may be an opportunity to reduce Feelings Pretense by keeping employees informed about the meaningful impact of their ELW. In other words, if employees believe that what they are doing is important, they will not need to pretend to their customers (or themselves) that they believe it is important.

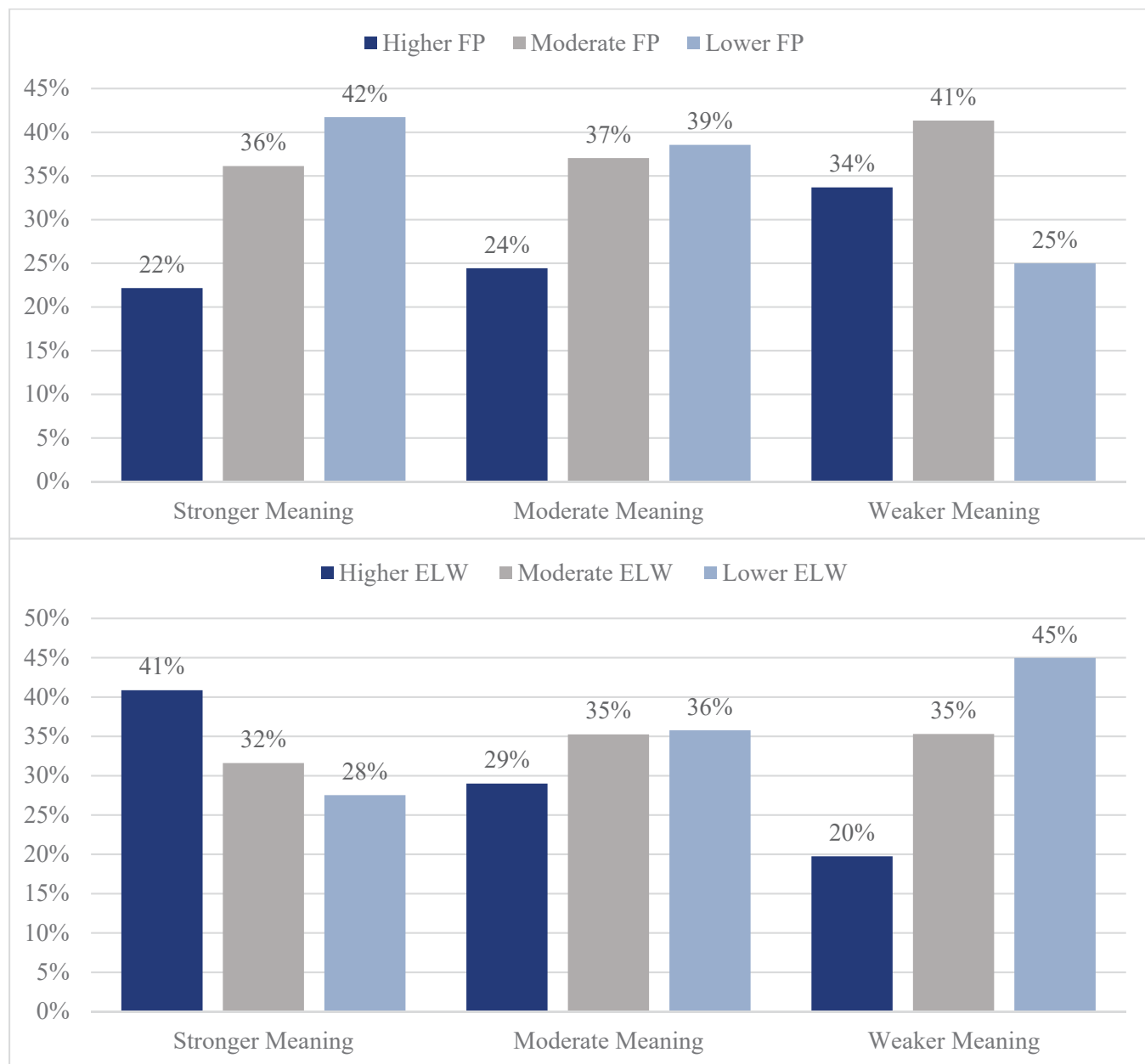


Figure G: Relationship between Emotionally Laborious Work, Feelings Pretense, and Discretionary Effort

As shown in the table, as ELW decreases, so does discretionary effort. However, Feelings Pretense interacts with discretionary effort differently at the varying levels of ELW. When ELW is higher, changing Feelings Pretense from higher to lower can increase higher discretionary effort by more than 20 percentage points. But, when ELW is lower, the Feelings Pretense level makes only a 10 percentage point difference. Thus, while Feelings Pretense matters for discretionary effort in all levels of ELW, it is employers with higher ELW positions that should pay particular concern to Feelings Pretense in order to encourage discretionary effort.

		Higher Discretionary Effort	Moderate Discretionary Effort	Lower Discretionary Effort
Higher ELW	Higher FP	44.5%	25.7%	29.8%
	Moderate FP	47.7%	25.2%	27.1%
	Lower FP	65.8%	19.1%	15.2%
Moderate ELW	Higher FP	30.7%	27.5%	41.8%
	Moderate FP	38.2%	26.4%	35.5%
	Lower FP	47.8%	28.0%	24.2%
Lower ELW	Higher FP	23.9%	28.7%	47.4%
	Moderate FP	26.1%	29.2%	44.6%
	Lower FP	33.5%	33.0%	33.5%

Row totals may not equal 100% due to rounding. All rows in this chart had an unweighted population of 555 or more respondents.

Figure H: Relationship between Emotionally Laborious Work, Feelings Pretense, and Engagement

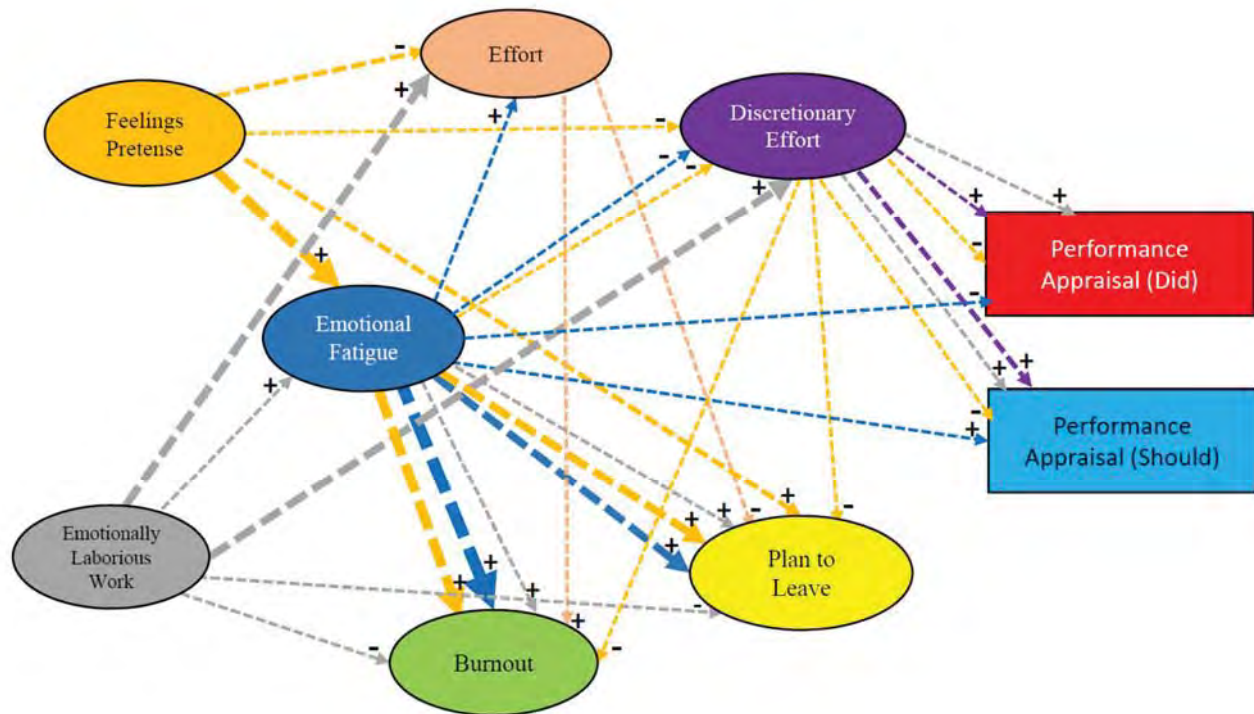
As shown in the table, within each ELW group, lower levels of Feelings Pretense resulted in higher levels of engagement, nearly doubling engagement in the higher ELW group, nearly tripling engagement in the moderate ELW group, and more than tripling engagement in the lower ELW group.

		Engaged	Somewhat Engaged	Not Engaged
Higher ELW	Higher FP	31.5%	42.9%	25.6%
	Moderate FP	42.0%	39.5%	18.5%
	Lower FP	61.8%	31.4%	6.9%
Moderate ELW	Higher FP	20.0%	42.6%	37.4%
	Moderate FP	34.2%	47.4%	18.4%
	Lower FP	57.8%	34.2%	8.0%
Lower ELW	Higher FP	14.2%	38.2%	47.6%
	Moderate FP	29.1%	45.4%	25.5%
	Lower FP	48.0%	39.6%	12.4%

Row totals may not equal 100% due to rounding. All rows in this chart had an unweighted population of 553 or more respondents. The structural equation modeling showed a coefficient of -0.925, which is a very strong negative relationship between engagement and Feelings Pretense.

Figure 1: Structural Equation Model

This model shows the positive and negative relationships between ELW, Feelings Pretense, and several of the other issues discussed in the earlier figures. The table provides more specific information. For most readers, it is not necessary to make sense of this model or the table that follows. However, this information has been included in the Data Appendix for those readers who have an interest in observing the statistical strength of any direct and indirect effects.



Strength of Relation for Direct Effects

Very Strong	██████████→	.71 +
Strong	██████████→	.51 to .70
Moderate	-----→	.21 to .50
Weak	-----→	.11 to .20
Very Weak	-----→	.05 to .10

Strength of Relation for Indirect (mediated) Effects

Strong	██████████→	.25 +
Moderate	-----→	.09 to .24
Weak	-----→	.01 to .08

Analysis of Direct Effects			Regression Weights				Standardized Estimate
			Unstandardized				
			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	
Discretionary_Effort	--->	PA_Should	0.163	0.015	10.556	***	0.115
Discretionary_Effort	--->	Burnout	0.033	0.01	3.21	0.001	0.024
Discretionary_Effort	--->	Plan_to_Leave	0.099	0.025	4.022	***	0.042
Discretionary_Effort	--->	PA_Did	0.138	0.017	8.225	***	0.089
Effort	--->	Burnout	0.555	0.041	13.518	***	0.102
Effort	--->	Plan_to_Leave	-0.461	0.098	-4.716	***	-0.049
Emotionally Laborious Work	--->	Emotional_Fatigue	0.088	0.01	9.095	***	0.081
Emotionally Laborious Work	--->	Discretionary_Effort	0.086	0.004	19.015	***	0.226
Emotionally Laborious Work	--->	Effort	0.022	0.001	19.434	***	0.231
Emotionally Laborious Work	--->	Plan_to_Leave	-0.052	0.011	-4.935	***	-0.058
Emotionally Laborious Work	--->	Burnout	-0.035	0.004	-8.232	***	-0.068
Emotional_Fatigue	--->	Discretionary_Effort	-0.021	0.005	-4.196	***	-0.06
Emotional_Fatigue	--->	Effort	0.008	0.001	6.752	***	0.096
Emotional_Fatigue	--->	Plan_to_Leave	0.227	0.011	20.206	***	0.273
Emotional_Fatigue	--->	Burnout	0.358	0.004	94.993	***	0.746
Emotional_Fatigue	--->	PA_Should	0.023	0.005	4.279	***	0.046
Emotional_Fatigue	--->	PA_Did	-0.027	0.006	-4.669	***	-0.051
Falce_Face	--->	Emotional_Fatigue	0.786	0.011	70.638	***	0.631
Falce_Face	--->	Discretionary_Effort	-0.028	0.006	-4.307	***	-0.064
Falce_Face	--->	Effort	-0.012	0.002	-7.646	***	-0.113
Falce_Face	--->	Plan_to_Leave	0.148	0.015	10.178	***	0.143

Analysis of Indirect Effects

	Standardized Estimate	95% CI		P
		Lower	Upper	
Two Level Mediation				
Emotionally Laborious Work --> Discretionary Effort --> PA Did	0.01	0.007	0.012	0
Emotionally Laborious Work --> Discretionary Effort --> PA Should	0.013	0.01	0.015	0
Emotionally Laborious Work --> Emotional Fatigue --> Burnout	0.031	0.026	0.038	0.001
Emotionally Laborious Work --> Emotional Fatigue --> Plan to Leave	0.02	0.016	0.025	0.001
Emotions Pretense --> Emotional Fatigue --> Burnout	0.281	0.273	0.29	0.001
Emotions Pretense --> Emotional Fatigue --> Discretionary Effort	-0.016	-0.023	-0.01	0.001
Emotions Pretense --> Emotional Fatigue --> PA_Should	0.019	0.012	0.026	0.001
Emotions Pretense --> Emotional Fatigue --> Plan to Leave	0.179	0.164	0.196	0.001
Three Level Mediation				
Emotions Pretense --> Emotional Fatigue --> Discretionary Effort --> PA Did	-0.002	-0.003	-0.001	0
Emotions Pretense --> Emotional Fatigue --> Discretionary Effort --> PA Should	-0.002	-0.004	-0.001	0.001
Emotions Pretense --> Emotional Fatigue --> Discretionary Effort --> Plan To Leave	-0.002	-0.003	-0.001	0.001
Emotions Pretense --> Emotional Fatigue --> Discretionary Effort --> Burnout	-0.001	-0.001	0	0.001