

Article

The work engagement cycles of federal civil servants

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Civil servants have different levels of work engagement throughout their working lives. These variations are the work engagement cycles, which occur based on available resources and work environment demands. This study describes the work engagement cycles of federal civil servants based on their professional life histories, highlighting the demands and resources of the work environment in their professional trajectory. Using the job demands-resources (JD-R) model and the cognitive maps methodology, it was possible to identify a positive cycle of work engagement, a reinforcing cycle (related to opportunities and appreciation), and two disequilibrium cycles, one related to dysfunctional productivity and the other to administrative discontinuity. The analysis of the engagement cycles allowed the identification of work environment resources that interfere in the engagement of public servants in different ways. Finally, the concept of “coping cycle” was used as a subsidy of policies for disengaged servants.

Keywords: work engagement; engagement cycles; civil servants; cognitive maps.

Os ciclos de engajamento no trabalho de servidores públicos federais

Servidores públicos têm diferentes níveis de engajamento no trabalho ao longo da vida laboral. Essas variações, denominadas “ciclos de engajamento no trabalho”, ocorrem graças aos recursos disponíveis e às demandas do ambiente de trabalho. Diante disso, o presente artigo busca descrever os ciclos de engajamento no trabalho de servidores públicos federais com base em suas histórias de vida profissional, evidenciando demandas e recursos relevantes do ambiente ocupacional na trajetória dessas pessoas. Usando o modelo *job demands-resources* (JD-R) e a metodologia de mapas cognitivos, foi possível identificar um ciclo positivo do engajamento no trabalho, um ciclo reforçador – relacionado com oportunidades e valorização – e dois ciclos de desequilíbrio, um ligado à produtividade disfuncional e, outro, à descontinuidade administrativa. A análise dos ciclos de engajamento permitiu identificar recursos do ambiente de trabalho que interferem de diferentes maneiras no engajamento de servidores públicos. Por fim, foi utilizado o conceito de “ciclo de enfrentamento” como subsídio de políticas para servidores desengajados.

Palavras-chave: engajamento no trabalho; ciclos de engajamento; servidores públicos; mapas cognitivos.

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Los ciclos de compromiso laboral de los servidores públicos federales

Los servidores públicos tienen diferentes niveles de compromiso en el trabajo a lo largo de su vida laboral. Estas variaciones, llamadas ciclos de compromiso laboral, ocurren debido a los recursos disponibles y las demandas del entorno laboral. Frente a eso, el presente trabajo buscó describir los ciclos de compromiso en el trabajo de los servidores públicos federales a partir de sus historias de vida profesional, destacando demandas y recursos del ambiente laboral relevantes en la trayectoria laboral de esas personas. Utilizando el modelo *job demands-resources* (JD-R) y la metodología de mapas cognitivos, fue posible identificar un ciclo positivo de compromiso en el trabajo, un ciclo de refuerzo – relacionado con oportunidades y apreciación – y dos ciclos de desequilibrio, uno relacionado con la productividad disfuncional y el otro con la discontinuidad administrativa. El análisis de los ciclos de compromiso permitió identificar los recursos del ambiente de trabajo que interfieren de diferentes formas en el compromiso de los servidores públicos. Finalmente, se utilizó el concepto de “ciclo de afrontamiento” como base de las políticas para los servidores desinteresados.

Palabras clave: compromiso en el trabajo; ciclos de compromiso; servidores públicos; mapas cognitivos.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Work engagement can be defined as a positive and fulfilling mental state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). There is a consensus in the organizational behavior literature that engagement is one of the strongest predictors of performance and job satisfaction (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011), including in the public sector (Fletcher, Bailey, Alfes, & Madden, 2019). Scholars in this field argue, based on empirical studies, that job demands and resources play a significant role in determining the level of employee engagement, both in the public and private sectors, forming the foundation of the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker, 2015). These periods of higher or lower engagement are referred to as “engagement cycles” in this study. Despite the growing body of research worldwide, the literature on this topic is still scarce when it comes to the Brazilian context (Camões & Gomes, 2021).

This study addresses unanswered questions in the context of the Brazilian public sector. Why are public servants highly engaged at certain times in their professional lives and disengaged at others? Which demands and resources in the Brazilian public organizations’ environment affect the positive and negative cycles of engagement over time? What strategies do public servants use to maintain engagement or cope with disengagement?

Answering these questions is relevant for the development of policies aimed at increasing work engagement in the public sector, thereby improving service delivery and policies. As interventions in work environments, especially those focused on human resource management, aim to intentionally enhance performance, understanding the factors that determine positive and negative cycles of engagement is a crucial aspect to consider.

The lack of knowledge regarding how job demands and resources influence positive and negative cycles of work engagement poses a risk of inadequate or ineffective interventions that may waste

resources, such as time and budget, and may even have the opposite effect to what is expected in this specific context.

This study aims to contribute to reducing the gap in knowledge regarding the demands and resources related to engagement in the Brazilian public sector, based on an understanding of the positive and negative cycles of work participation. It proposes an investigation based on listening to public servants and aims to shed light on specific aspects not addressed in the existing literature. The objective is to describe the engagement cycles of federal public servants based on their professional life stories, demands, and relevant resources in the work environment.

This study is justified by expanding the understanding of organizational demands and resources for engagement in the specific context of the Brazilian federal public sector. Finding effective ways to engage public servants ultimately leads to improved service delivery and public policies, considering the predictive value of engagement for performance (Kruijen, Lako, & De Vries, 2019).

The research begins with a theoretical overview of the JD-R theory and its relation to employee commitment cycles, mediated by extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Next, the cognitive mapping method used for exploring and analyzing these engagement cycles among public servants in the federal executive branch in Brazil is presented. The results section presents the identified cycles, their relationships, as well as prominent resources and demands. The insights generated from the results are discussed considering the literature. Finally, some conclusions and hypotheses for future studies are raised.

2. JD-R THEORY AND WORK ENGAGEMENT CYCLES

The JD-R model has been one of the most important frameworks for studying work engagement, as organizational resources are the primary predictors of this commitment (Camões & Gomes, 2021; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). In other words, the JD-R model posits that organizational resources predict work engagement through a motivational process (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Resources play a role in both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. They promote personal development, learning, and growth in the work environment, while also supporting goal achievement and outcomes (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). On the other hand, job demands, if considered challenging, can have a positive relationship with engagement (Crawford, Lepine, & Rich, 2010). However, if perceived as hindrance demands, known as job hindrance demands, the relationship becomes negative (Ventura, Salanova, & Llorens, 2015).

There is evidence that organizational resources and hindrance demands can generate positive and negative cycles of engagement over time. A longitudinal study conducted by Llorens-Gumbau and Salanova-Soria (2014) demonstrated the role of work resources in positive engagement cycles among teachers. Guo, Kang, Shao, and Halvorsen (2019) argue that hindrance demands are equally or more important than resources in work engagement cycles, referring to them as “toxic organizational conditions for engagement.” According to Bakker (2015), these resources or hindrance demands determine the motivation of public servants and fuel positive and negative cycles.

In the public sector, public servants also experience periods of higher or lower engagement throughout their professional lives – the positive and negative cycles. An essential question arises: what acts as a resource or hindrance demand, generating positive and negative cycles of engagement in the lives of Brazilian public servants? The analysis of work engagement literature in the public sector highlights the importance of resources that activate intrinsic motivation, particularly those aligned with the principles of public service motivation. Conversely, interventions, especially those related to human resource management, are often based on reformist movements that treat extrinsic motivation as a source of resources to increase engagement, as discussed below.

3. INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Intrinsic motivation can be defined as “engaging in an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than some separable consequence” or “doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, pp. 55-56). In the public sector, intrinsic motivation is associated with the studies of Public Service Motivation (PSM). After an extensive literature analysis, Perry, Hondeghem, and Wise (2010) defined PSM as “a particular form of altruism or prosocial motivation that is animated by specific dispositions and values derived from public institutions and missions” (Perry et al., 2010, p. 682).

PSM posits that engagement in the public sector occurs to the extent that individuals are motivated to serve others and society (Perry & Wise, 1990). This perspective supports a public service value chain that connects engaged employees with customer or service user satisfaction (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2015).

Researchers have advocated for a positive relationship between PSM and work engagement among public servants (Bakker, 2015; Jin & McDonald, 2016; Vigoda-Gadot, Eldor, & Schohat, 2013). The literature on the political process, for example, argues that public servants – the so-called bureaucrats – are mobilized not only by rules and self-interest but also by political alignment and value convergence, which challenges the notion of purely technical public servants and positions them as political actors (Abers, 2021).

There is evidence that public sector environments characterized by an organizational climate focused on service and putting the needs of users/beneficiaries first tend to be more engaging (Abdelhadi & Drach-Zahavy, 2012). Some authors suggest that interventions to increase engagement should focus on strategies that enhance the meaning of work in the public sector (Mostafa & Abed El-Motalib, 2018). Considering that social norms and expectations regarding the provision of public services, as well as the motivations of public sector employees, tend to focus on serving society, the service, program, or public policy outcomes themselves are likely to be the most significant resource for engagement, although this relationship needs further exploration (Fletcher et al., 2019).

Despite the importance of intrinsic motivation, there is still an emphasis on generating organizational resources that mobilize extrinsic motivation among public servants, assuming that they primarily act with a focus on personal gains (Kim, 2018). Much grounded in a rational behavior logic, extrinsic motivators have guided public sector human resource management models worldwide. These models gained strength during the reformist movements of the New Public Management

(NPM) era (Esteve, Schuster, Albareda, & Losada, 2017), which aimed to improve performance and accountability by imposing result-oriented policies and adopting private sector management practices focused on incentives and clear performance-related rewards and punishments (Verbeeten & Spelke, 2015). These practices shaped various policies and practices in the field of “strategic human resource management in the public sector” (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000).

Analyses of reforms in different contexts around the world have indicated limitations in NPM-based experiences (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). In practice, these reforms influence the behavior of public servants but were designed without empirical evidence of bureaucratic behavior (Oliveros & Schuster, 2017). For example, a study conducted by Esteve et al. (2017) on the “do more with less” model, a mantra of NPM reforms, with public servants from 34 European countries demonstrated negative effects on satisfaction and motivation, concepts related to work engagement (Camões & Gomes, 2021). This austerity-oriented perspective, prevalent in NPM-related practices, can undermine experiences that effectively engage public servants (Esteve et al., 2017).

In the Brazilian context, practices derived from this NPM movement, referred to here as managerialism, primarily focused on performance appraisal and competency-based management (Camões, 2019). Similar to other countries, there is evidence that their implementation did not unfold as expected (Camões & Meneses, 2016; Elvira & Bruno-Faria, 2021). If these practices that mobilize organizational resources affecting extrinsic motivation are effective in the private sector, why have they not worked the same way in the public sector? Examining the JD-R studies reveals that the organizational resources that engage employees in the public and private sectors are different.

A literature review by Baarspul and Wilderom (2011) demonstrated significant differences in motivation between public and private sector workers. The former are more engaged in community service, prefer intrinsic rewards over extrinsic ones, and emphasize job security (Bakker, 2015).

Critics of the rational behavior model of public servants emphasize that this market-driven logic focused on individual performance minimizes the larger purpose of public service ethos: delivering results for society. They argue that, according to this rational actor perspective, public servants are reduced to rule followers who seek only their own well-being (Abers, 2021). Thus, their sole focus would be on maximizing utility through better salaries and less effort (Lane, 2005). PSM studies provide empirical input for these critiques.

The resources and demands that activate both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, as well as their relationship with positive and negative cycles of engagement, still need to be studied (Noesgaard & Hansen, 2017). Without further studies, there is a risk of incentivizing investments solely in people management practices focused on recruitment and promotion based on merit, as they improve policy outcomes even without evidence of their impact on employee behavior (Oliveros & Schuster, 2017).

On the other hand, PSM also needs to find its place in interventions, including people management practices, as mobilizers of engagement in public organizations, according to Ritz, Brewer, and Neumann (2013). In a systematic review conducted by the authors, they found some attempts in this direction, such as incorporating PSM measures in personnel selection processes, using appealing and fair reward

systems including non-monetary elements – e.g., healthcare packages – and employing management practices that support PSM, such as participatory leadership and fair treatment of employees. Bakker (2015) emphasizes the importance of generating meaning in daily work and argues that these actions should be the responsibility of immediate supervisors, although he recognizes that such practices are still in their infancy.

The literature review presented leads to the hypothesis that resources derived from intrinsic motivators are more strongly related to work engagement cycles compared to extrinsic motivators. Given the previously mentioned lack of studies in the Brazilian context, it is justifiable to conduct research to investigate whether this hypothesis holds true in the Brazilian federal public administration.

To understand which resources (or demands) drive positive and negative cycles of work engagement in the Brazilian context, this article proposes to investigate the professional life stories of federal public servants in Brazil and the contexts involved in periods of higher or lower engagement. The following section describes the methodology used in the empirical research.

4. METHOD

Cognitive mapping was chosen as the method, which aims to represent the cognition of organizational processes and products based on individual cognitions (Bastos, 2002). Cognitive maps enable the representation of possible relationships between concepts (Bougon, 1983). They consist of words and phrases that individuals use to express ideas or concepts in a given context, providing a systemic understanding of reality (Swan, 1997). Therefore, cognitive maps are useful tools for investigating organizational processes (Bastos, 2002), such as organizational resources and hindrance demands for work engagement cycles. Box 1 summarizes the methodological procedures adopted in this study.

BOX 1 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY PROCEDURES

Specific Aims	Aim 1: Describe the moments in the lives of public servants characterized by high levels of engagement, as well as the determining demands and resources. Aim 2: Describe the moments in the lives of public servants characterized by low levels of engagement, along with the determining demands and resources. Aim 3: Outline typical personas based on common variables among public servants. Aim 4: Develop systemic maps of engagement and disengagement among public servants.	
Research Design	Method	Cognitive Mapping
	Nature	Descriptive
	Design	Cross-sectional with longitudinal perspective
	Approach	Qualitative

Continue

	Sources of evidence	Civil servants
	Data collection procedures:	In-depth interviews
Procedures	Sampling	23 interviews
	Instrumentation	Semi-structured interview guide
	Analysis Procedure	Clustering, personas, and causal mapping

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with federal public servants. A total of 23 interviews were conducted between May 13 and 25, 2021. The selection of participants took into account the following criteria: (a) sector of activity within the Federal Executive Branch – economic, social, infrastructure, or central agencies; (b) field of work – operational or managerial within the organization; (c) career background; and (d) current position, including holding a managerial role. These criteria aimed to ensure diversity among the participants in terms of their profiles as federal public servants. Theoretical saturation was used as a parameter to determine the number of interviews, which were conducted using the Google Meet platform and recorded with the participants’ consent, after informing them about the confidentiality of the data.

Among the 23 interviewed participants, 10 were men and 13 were women, working in ten different areas of the federal government: Inmetro (4), Enap (4), MEC (3), CGU (3), SPU (1), Receita Federal (1), Cemaden (1), MME (1), MMA (1), and Ministry of Citizenship (1). Regarding their field of work, 15 worked in the operational areas of their organizations, and 4 had direct contact with citizens. The other 8 worked in support functions. Among the interviewees, 9 held managerial positions at the time of the interview, and 14 were not currently holding a position.

Data analysis followed Laukkanen’s (1998) guidelines for constructing causal maps. The first step was to identify anchor themes by grouping synonyms. For this purpose, each interview was categorized considering the following aspects: social and demographic characteristics, situations that led to higher engagement, situations that led to disengagement, strategies for coping with disengagement, and explanations for the engagement of other employees in similar contexts.

The next step involved clustering subjects based on the similarity of the concepts expressed. The interview accounts were grouped into three personas, with each representing a group of individuals who share common needs, characteristics, and goals using a fictional character (Cooper, 1999; Pruitt & Adlin, 2006). The three personas were defined based on similarities in events, behavior patterns, and mental models. The focus was to describe the inflection points in the (dis)engagement journeys of these personas and the possible causalities among the relevant events.

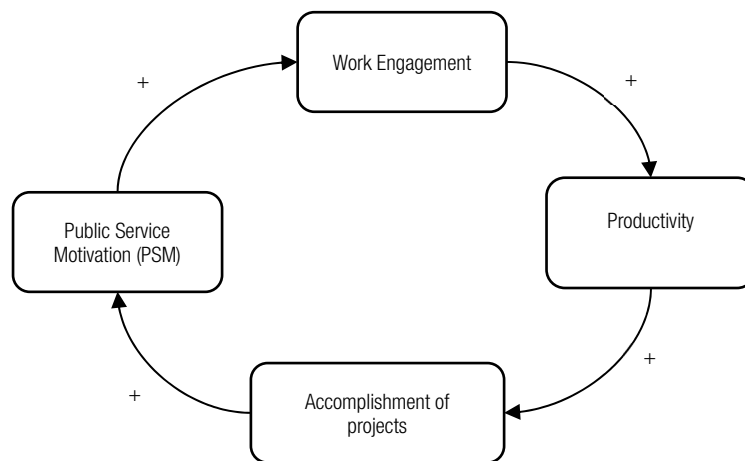
Subsequently, based on each of the created stories represented by the three personas, the most critical variables and their relationships were identified. Each variable formed a “node” of the system and was linked by arrows with positive and negative signs to describe the connections between them and graphically represent possible causal relationships. Causal links are those “individuals establish between actions and results over time, as well as the assumptions underlying judgments that an action will lead to an expected outcome” (Bastos, 2002, p. 71).

After constructing the three maps, one for each persona, the common variables were identified, and the maps were unified into a single cognitive map. Finally, the cognitive maps generated in the analysis were outlined, validated, and refined in two sessions with a group of eight other federal public servants, who were not part of the initial interview sample. This validation was important to ensure the accuracy of the analysis performed. The following section presents the results of the analyses.

5. RESULTS

The first question of the interview script referred to situations throughout life that were characterized as periods of high engagement. The analyses allowed for the structuring of what was called the “positive engagement cycle,” represented in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1 COGNITIVE MAP OF POSITIVE ENGAGEMENT CYCLE



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In general, the employees reported that during periods of high engagement at work, they felt highly productive and, as a result, perceived the accomplishment of projects that were relevant to society or their organization. According to the interviewees, accomplishment increases the perception of generating results – in programs, policies, or projects in which they were involved – along with a sense of motivation to continue working due to the perceived significance of the work. In summary, in the positive engagement cycle, the motivation to serve the public directly impacts one’s own engagement. The excerpts from the interviews below illustrate the idea of the positive engagement cycle:

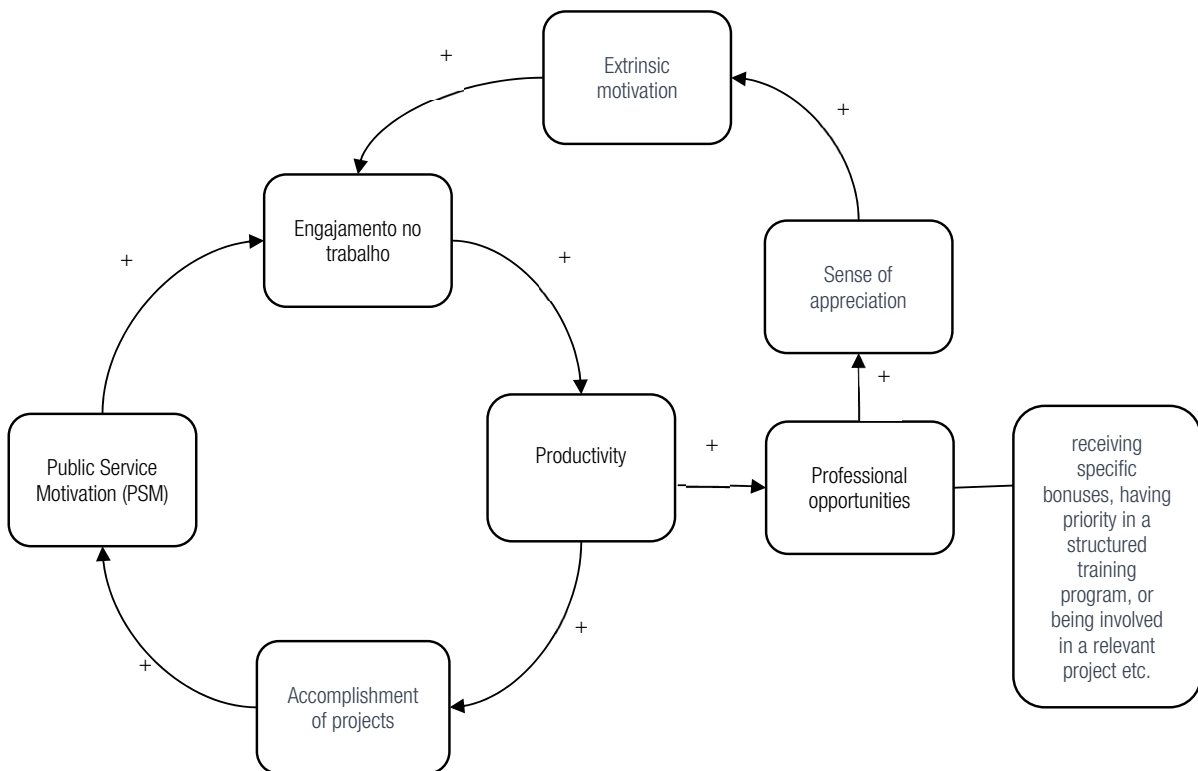
“I maintained engagement mainly because [...] I was truly driven by the idea of delivering results to society, of trying to do things differently” (E12).

“I had the feeling of building something collectively and that it would impact people’s lives” (E6).

“Every time I face a challenge that will impact people’s lives or an institution, I feel highly engaged” (E9).

In addition to the positive cycle, it was possible to identify a second engagement cycle, called the “reinforcement cycle,” presented in Figure 2. The most relevant resource in this cycle is professional opportunities. It is through these opportunities that the system mobilizes.

FIGURE 2 COGNITIVE MAP OF REINFORCEMENT CYCLE



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Productive employees who perceive that the results of their work directly impact the professional opportunities they receive feel more engaged. Examples of these opportunities include occupying a position or role, receiving specific bonuses, having priority in a structured training program, or being involved in a relevant project.

The receipt of these opportunities generates a sense of appreciation that activates extrinsic motivation and, consequently, engagement at work. On the other hand, the absence of opportunities can disrupt the positive cycle and serve as a hindrance demand to engagement. Some excerpts from the interviews illustrate the idea of the reinforcement cycle of engagement:

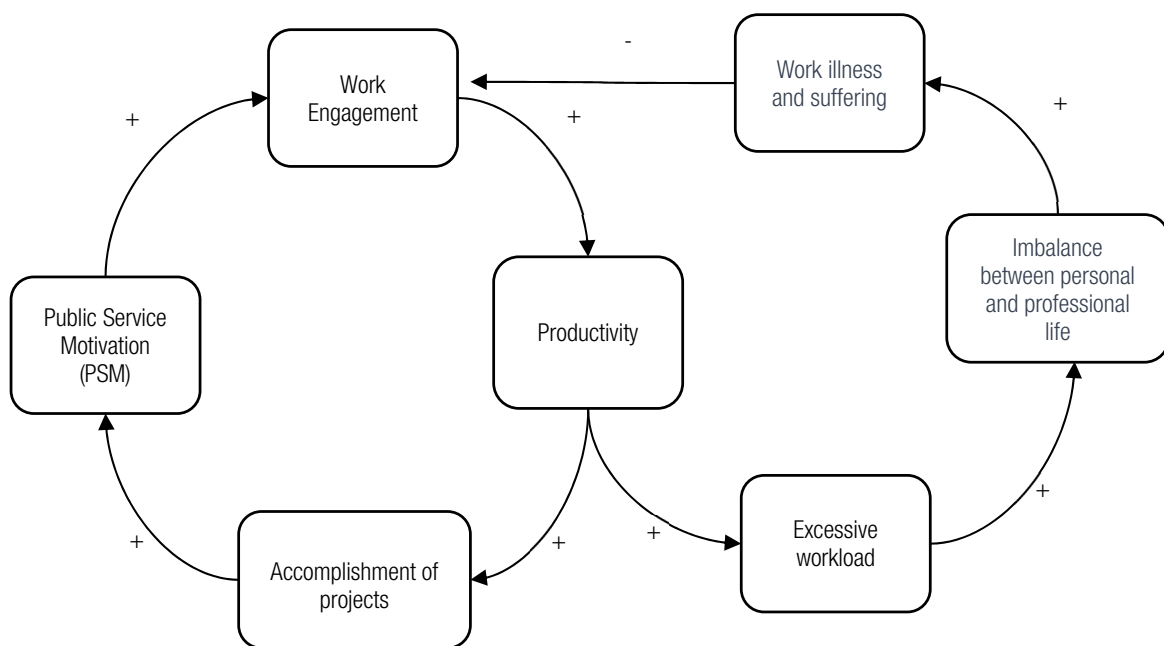
“When I was invited to a leadership position is when I became most engaged because I had autonomy, space to do [things] the way I believed” (E13).

“The team was demotivated because they saw no opportunity for growth, mainly due to the limited number of bonuses” (E5).

“Many young people, around 35/40 years old, have a desire to advance within the organization. This happens when there are opportunities to occupy those positions” (E1).

When asked about moments of disengagement, the responses allowed for the construction of other cognitive maps that directly affect the positive engagement cycle at work, interrupting or disrupting it. The first of these cognitive maps brings the concept of “dysfunctional productivity” and how it negatively influences the positive engagement cycle, as shown in Figure 3. The main hindrance demand presented in this cycle is excessive workload.

FIGURE 3 COGNITIVE MAP OF DYSFUNCTIONAL PRODUCTIVITY



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Highly productive employees end up receiving a workload that exceeds what can be accomplished during working hours, which creates an imbalance between personal and professional life, leading to increased illness and suffering. The interviewees’ accounts indicate that excessive workload is not sustainable in the long term. Some excerpts from the interviews clearly convey this idea.

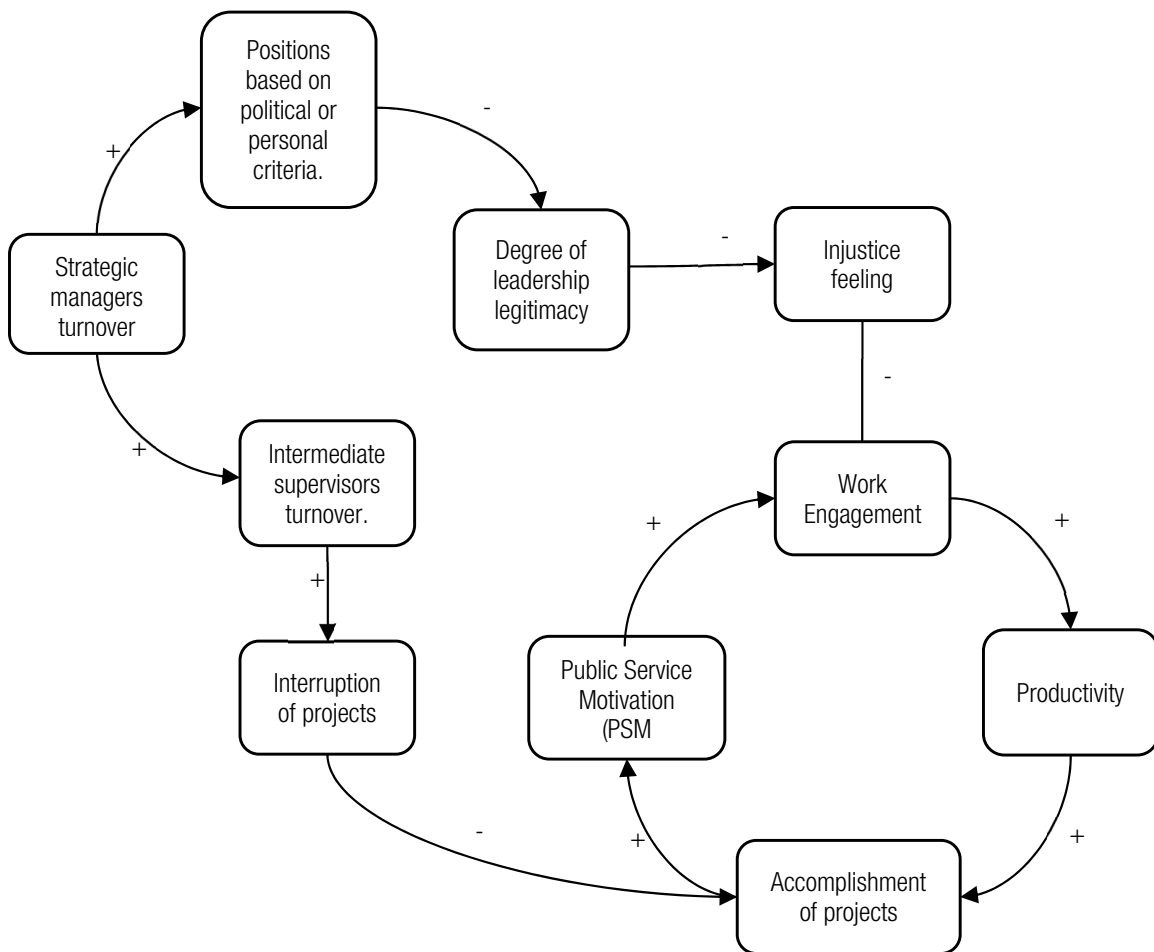
“When you experience a high-pressure situation at work and cannot see a way out, it leads to a process of illness, and that happened to me for the first time in my life. I got sick because of work” (E8).

“There is always this issue of personal and professional life. At that moment, I was highly engaged but also overwhelmed. It’s good when you’re engaged but with a balanced life” (E6).

Another mental map that can be drawn from the collected interview accounts relates to the relationship between two factors and the positive engagement cycle at work: administrative discontinuity and the appointment of supervisors, as shown in Figure 4.

Two major hindrance demands can be observed in this relationship: the interruption of projects that generate significant results and the appointment of unqualified individuals to leadership positions based on political or personal criteria.

FIGURE 4 COGNITIVE MAP OF ADMINISTRATIVE DISCONTINUITY AND THE SUPERVISOR’S APPOINTMENT



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The cycle presented in Figure 4 begins with the high turnover of strategic managers, which is very common in the Brazilian government. According to the interviewees, each change in management leads to a high turnover at various hierarchical levels within organizations. This turnover ends up increasing the number of intermediate supervisors appointed solely based on political or personal criteria, delegitimizing their positions. This is because often these individuals lack the minimum required competencies for the position they occupy, which leads to inappropriate behavior and amplifies the sense of injustice among employees.

Furthermore, employees perceive that professional advancement is not related to performance or accomplishments, increasing the sense of injustice and negatively affecting engagement. The turnover of supervisors also frequently leads to the interruption of strategic projects, which directly affects the perception of results and engagement. The excerpts below help illustrate this negative cycle:

“A time of great wear and tear was when a politician was appointed to a technical position, breaking a tradition of internal appointment. Changes in the ministerial level have a negative impact because they change the course of already mapped priorities” (E8).

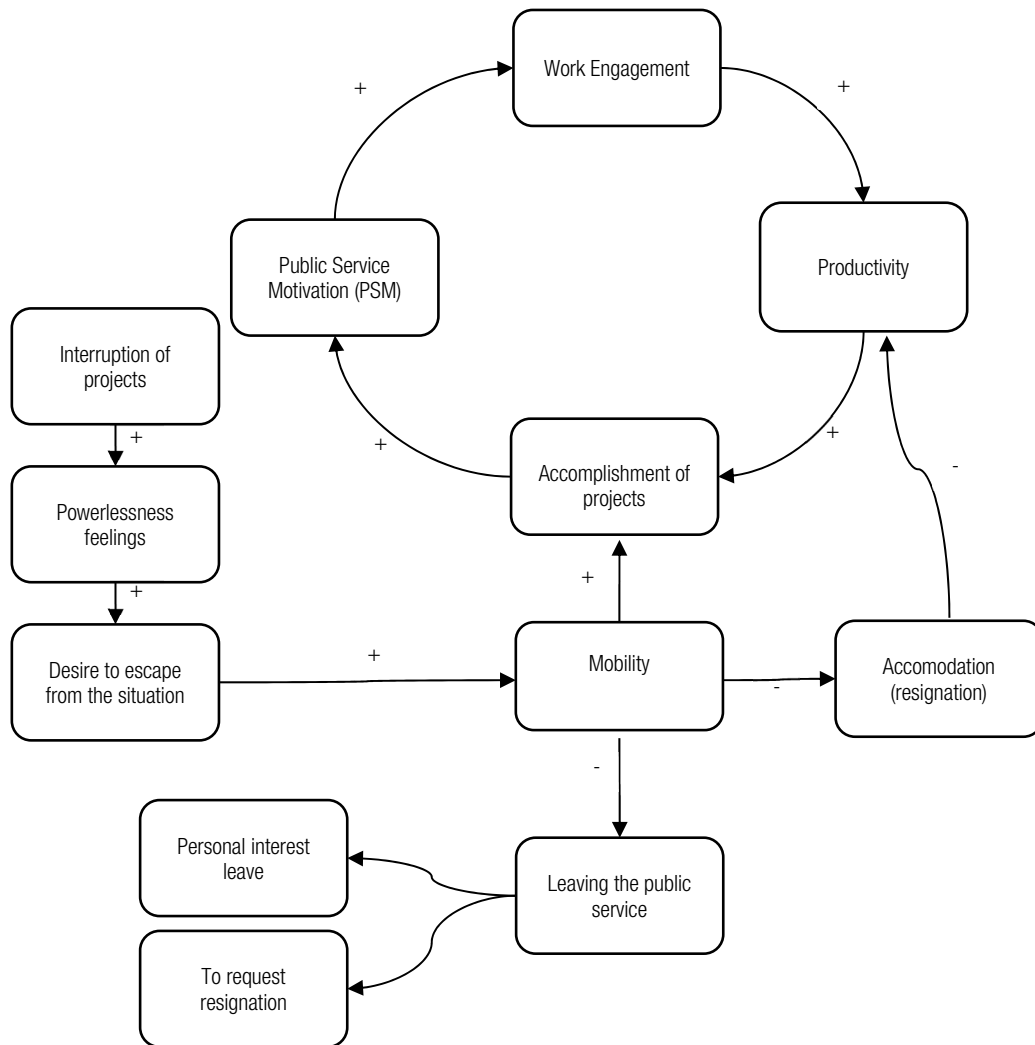
“Political changes are the worst. It is always an expectation that causes a great instability, and it creates a very difficult moment because the public machinery comes to a halt” (E7).

“Many times, the colleague did not receive adequate training to assume a certain position and comes in unprepared. Or even without the right profile, causing more problems than delivering solutions” (E7).

“When a person is promoted not because they are the best fit but because they are friends with someone [...], and that person is capable of sabotaging or interfering with my work, it jeopardizes the quality of my project [...] it made me sick” (E12).

When asked about strategies for dealing with disengagement, the most common responses were leaving the organization, quitting the sector, or leaving the public service. This disengagement cycle, as well as the coping strategies associated with it, is represented in Figure 5. In this cycle, mobility appears as the main resource, while the impossibility of mobility acts as the main hindrance demand.

FIGURE 5 COGNITIVE MAP OF DISENGAGEMENT CYCLE



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The strategic projects interruption generates powerlessness feelings and a desire to escape from the situation. Disengaged employees may move to another sector or organization and regain a sense of accomplishment in their work. On the other hand, if they cannot make that move, they end up accommodating themselves and resigning to the situation. In some cases, employees seek ways to disengage from the public service, either through a personal interest leave or through alternatives outside the public service. Some excerpts demonstrate this:

“The lack of internal mobility is a problem; the organization holds you back because the learning curve in my field is long. I joke that there is no freedom” (E4).

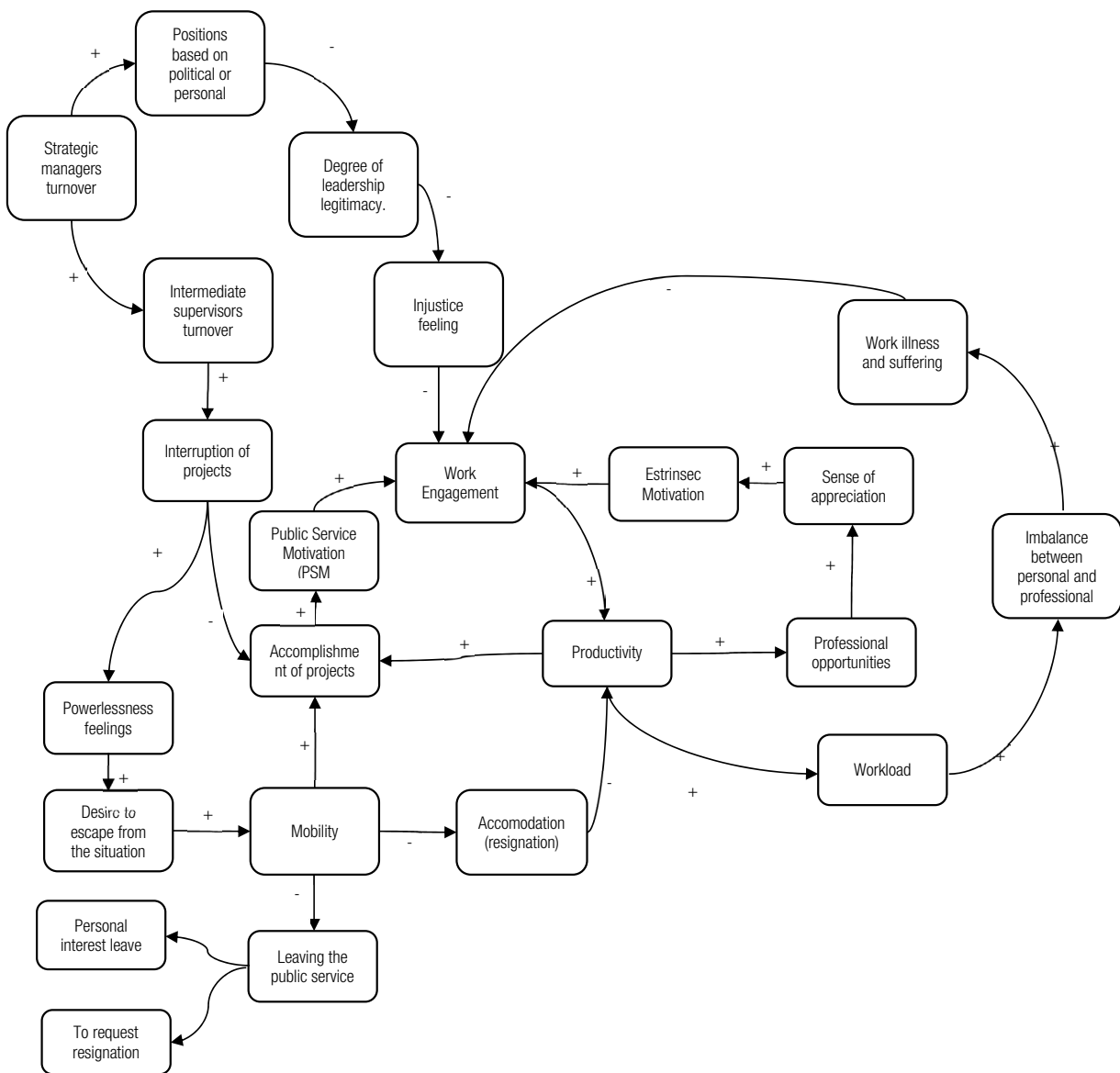
“The time off was necessary to emotionally and professionally detach” (E13).

“[...] I had no doubts that it was time to disconnect and clear my mind. I went to study abroad” (E9).

“I don’t see myself in the public service in 5 years because I want to do something with fewer pains and hindrance demands, something that doesn’t depend on others to achieve. I perceive a significant movement of employees in that direction” (E12).

Finally, Figure 6 presents an integration of all the cognitive maps presented earlier. This integration allows for a comprehensive overview of the resources and hindrance demands that influence engagement and disengagement in public administration work. This systemic visualization enables the identification of interventions in specific variables of the system, even if they are not directly linked to work engagement, which can lead to significant changes.

FIGURE 6 COGNITIVE MAP OF WORK ENGAGEMENT AND DISENGAGEMENT IN THE PUBLIC FEDERAL ADMINISTRATION



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

6. DISCUSSION

The results of this study generate insights on the topic within the context of the Brazilian Federal Public Administration (FPA). One result suggests that work engagement precedes productivity, but only when employees perceive the generation of results for the organization or society.

As indicated in the literature, work engagement has a positive relationship with productivity, which, in the public sector, is associated with improved service delivery or policies for the organization or society (Bailey, Madden, Alfes, & Fletcher, 2017; Borst, Kruyen, Lako, & De Vries, 2019). However, the perception of generating positive results for society or the organization needs to be present. If employees view their work as mere bureaucratic tasks defined by rules and procedures, known as red tape, the achieved results can become hindrance demands, hindering engagement (Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010).

Another significant finding suggests that engagement tends to increase productivity, but excessive workload can create an imbalance in personal life and subsequent disengagement. Although it did not appear as a central variable in studies on work engagement in the public sector in international literature, there is evidence of a relationship between work engagement and work-life balance in the broader literature. A review conducted by Wood, Oh, Park, and Kim (2020) found 37 studies correlating the two variables, although it was inconclusive in determining the direction of this relationship. In this study, this cyclical and not necessarily unidirectional relationship was also confirmed. Engaged individuals know how to recover from work-related efforts and become more effective over time compared to so-called workaholics (Gorgievski, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2010).

Another important finding suggests that the feeling of being undervalued can neutralize engagement. The highlight of this result is that people management practices, such as training opportunities, promotions through job positions, recognition through specific bonuses, are considered important resources in generating incentives, especially when they relate to achievements and results.

In the context of the Brazilian federal public administration, however, there is a lack of integration between these opportunities and the results achieved, resulting in an excess of pro forma procedures without positive consequences for employees (Camões & Fonseca, 2012). Distortions in promotion practices that are not linked to job performance also contribute to this issue (Corrêa, Camões, Meyer-Sahling, Mikkelsen, & Schuster, 2020). The result of this can be a feeling of devaluation at work, which can neutralize the positive engagement cycle.

Another effect concerns the criteria for appointing supervisors, especially unqualified individuals, which reduce work engagement. The relationship between leadership profile and work engagement is one of the most relevant topics emphasized in the literature, including in the public sector (Fletcher et al., 2019). In the Brazilian context, the culture of political appointments appears as a relevant model of filling positions (Lopez, Bugarin, & Bugarin, 2015). This study reinforces the negative effect of these inadequate appointments on the positive engagement cycle. All interviewed employees identified some aspect of this subsystem as a determinant of disengagement.

The study also reveals that relevant projects that generate significant results for society or the organization are being interrupted, leading to work disengagement. This finding lies at the core of public service motivation and its impact on work engagement. The moments of greatest engagement among Brazilian public servants are linked to the perception of results from significant projects, as

stated by Mostafa and Abed El-Motalib (2018). This appears to be the most relevant resource in generating engagement, as it impacts the meaning of work. Abers' studies (2021) on activism among Brazilian bureaucrats also indicated that, beyond personal gains, employees see themselves as relevant actors in delivering services and public policies to improve people's lives.

Another result of the study indicates that moving between sectors or organizations is a significant resource to increase employee engagement. Turnover, in general, is presented as a negative aspect in the public administration literature since it generates costs and requires recruiting and training new employees, which can have negative effects on organizational performance (Dharmawan, Affandi, MHubesi, & Rusdi, 2015). However, in the Brazilian context, intentional employee mobility between agencies seems to be a positive practice and a coping strategy to maintain engagement.

A study conducted by Equeter, Jepsen, and Hellemans (2017) demonstrated a positive effect of intentional mobility on work engagement. In the Brazilian case, the career model, which requires employees to pass another public service examination to move, impedes such mobility (Corrêa et al., 2020).

Lastly, another significant result of the study is that investing in professional opportunities throughout one's career and in leadership positions and the continuity of relevant projects seems to be the most promising option to avoid disengagement. Behavioral interventions in people management in Brazil are still treated as if there were a "one-size-fits-all" approach, following the logic of the rational model, to determine human behavior at work and, consequently, work engagement (Camões & Fonseca, 2012). Looking at the overall cognitive map presented in Figure 6, it can be observed that these rational actions – which in Brazil, generally revolve around individual performance evaluations (Elvira & Bruno-Faria, 2021) and managing individual competencies (Camões & Meneses, 2016) – aim to motivate employees who are accommodated or resigned, and thus, disengaged.

Following the narratives presented by employees, investing in professional opportunities throughout their career or investing in leadership positions and the continuity of relevant projects seems more promising for engagement.

7. FINAL REMARKS

This article aimed to describe the work engagement cycles of federal public servants based on their professional life stories and the context of their work. Returning to the questions posed at the beginning, the study leads to some relevant reflections. Employees do not have the same level of engagement throughout their professional lives. These discrepancies can vary depending on the moment the person is going through, but mainly relate to resources and hindrance demands present in the organizational context.

There are organizational resources that can cushion the negative and undesirable impact of hindrance demands by activating intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and consequently, work engagement. Professional opportunities, workload balance, fair and transparent processes for appointing executives and immediate supervisors, as well as intentional mobility, emerge as the most promising resources for engagement in the Brazilian public context. The interruption of relevant projects during administrative transitions emerges as the main hindrance demand. To address these

transition periods, what seems most promising is appointing adequately prepared executives and supervisors with interests linked to delivering results to society.

Extrinsic contextual factors are important but cannot be isolated from the intrinsic factors related to the perception of work results. In other words, interventions that combine individual gains and an increased sense of meaning in work seem most appropriate to keep people engaged. Thinking about more flexible work structures, such as cross-functional careers that can be allocated by projects, appears to be a more promising management intervention strategy than investing in ways to punish or reward individuals who are disengaged.

As every constructed model is a simplified synthesis of reality, this study did not aim to exhaust all the variables involved in work engagement in the Brazilian public sector. However, it sheds light on relevant points that can be explored in future studies, including experimental and quasi-experimental research. This text contributes by presenting a systemic view of work engagement in the public sector and opens up space for an extensive research agenda on employee engagement in the public sector.

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