

## The Impact of Unemployment Threat on Work Engagement: The Mediation of Emotional Blackmail

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### Abstract

With the repeated outbreaks of the new crown epidemic starting in 2020, many small and micro enterprises have suffered a decline in business volume, or even closed down, which eventually led to employees being forced to leave. Unstable enterprises will also cause employees to feel a greater threat of unemployment. To reduce the probability of being forced to lose their work, they will be involute at work and devote more energy to work, which is to increase work Engagement. This paper constructs a model of unemployment threat on work Engagement to verify the actual work status of employees in the current Chinese environment.

This paper adopts a literature review method and questionnaire survey method to conduct research. A total of 554 valid questionnaires were collected. After passing the reliability and validity test, the results of the study found that: unemployment threat has a significant positive relationship with work engagement; unemployment threat has a significant positive relationship with emotional blackmail (negative harm and excessive praise); emotional blackmail (negative harm and excessive praise) have a significant negative relationship with work engagement; emotional blackmail (negative harm and excessive praise) has a mediating effect between unemployment threat and work engagement.

It is recommended to improve the awareness of emotional blackmail among employees in the organization, to avoid the situation of emotional blackmail by oneself or others.

**Keywords:** Work Engagement, Unemployment Threat, Emotional Blackmail

### Introduction

In 2020, the surveyed urban unemployment rate of China's 16-24-year-old population reached 18.2%, a new high since the regular release of this data in January 2018 (Xiang & Cai, 2020). In the past four years, the youth unemployment rate has shown an inverted "V"-shaped growth every year, reaching the highest point of the year in July and August. Judging by the seasonal trend, the youth unemployment rate may still be in the climbing stage (Ren & Li, 2021). The key to the high youth unemployment rate is that macro growth has not met expectations, resulting in insufficient labor demand.

Everyone hopes to have a good development in income or career, but in reality, what they often have to face is an increase of pressure and the reduction of benefits, which often affects the

morale of employees in the workplace. Usually in terms of work attitude and performance. When the business volume of the company declines or closes, the employees are locked in the community and cannot go out to work. The next step is to face unemployment and resignation. Saying nothing is not a good thing (Wang, 2020). The threat of unemployment will not only affect the family, life, emotions, etc. of workers in the workplace, but also affect the attitude of work, and even affect the stability of society and the physical and mental safety of workers, resulting in the loss of talent resources (such as leaving big cities) and waste (such as high Those with an academic degree are engaged in simple works), and the loss to society, economy and education are immeasurable. Therefore, to understand the status quo of unemployment threats

and the impact of unemployment threats on employees' perceived emotional blackmail (negative perception) and work engagement (positive behavior), from two opposing levels, targeted proposals are made to effectively alleviate employee unemployment. Threats and countermeasures for the tension level of work-family conflict have important practical significance.

Unemployment Threat refers to the probability that workers face involuntary loss of their workplace and bear the costs related to unemployment alone (Hakanen et al., 2021). The business volume of the service industry and the entity industry has been greatly reduced, and many small and micro enterprises have closed down or merged. As a result, employees of the merged company will be dismissed or laid off from time to time. Even if they stay and face The management type, corporate culture, and office environment of the new company may not be accustomed to the former employees. Many companies have been pursuing cost reduction, and it is normal to not make up when there is a shortage. In the face of competition among peers and even colleagues, no one is sure to be able to sit in this position for a long time. The difference is that good performance has fewer threats of unemployment. In China, many employees are over 40 years old. Once unemployed, it is more difficult to find suitable and satisfactory work with the current work-seeking conditions in China (Wu, 2021).

Work engagement is often defined as the degree of participation and identification with work (Kim, 2017). Work engagement refers to a way that employees recognize the process of work and can show a willingness to do it. It is a positive and positive sense of happiness and satisfaction at work. This paper adopts Britt et al. (2001) and other scholars to define Work Engagement as a positive and work-related sense of achievement, mainly including responsibility, commitment, and performance impact perception. Performance. Hakanen et al. (2021) pointed out that workers face the probability of involuntary resignation. Once unemployed workers have to bear the costs related to unemployment, employees will try to increase their self-employment to reduce the costs related to unemployment. Contributions and abilities at work to increase their importance within the company and reduce the probability of being forced to leave. A serious economic problem is that individuals have no work and no income. Losing work means a decline in living standards and an increase in psychological anxiety. Unemployment has a critical impact on workers. Regardless of the size or type of business, employees are a necessary condition for forming a business. With the repeated outbreaks of the COVID-19 starting in 2020, and the frequent city closures of corresponding cities to fight the epidemic, many small and micro enterprises have been suspended due to city closures, express logistics suspension, store closures, etc., This leads to a decline in the business volume of the enterprise, or even bankruptcy, and eventually leads to the forced resignation of employees. Unstable enterprises will also cause employees to feel a greater threat of unemployment. To reduce the probability of being forced to lose their work, they will be involute at work and increase their contribution and ability at work.

Yuan (1997) first proposed the concept of emotional blackmail, because individuals (blackmailers) want to be cared for and

recognized, so they want to control and deprive others of their autonomy; it has six characteristics, including demanding, Resistance, Pressure, Threat, Compliance, Repetition, and other main establishment conditions. Since the urgent real problem of unemployment threat will bring about involution in the industry and indirectly increase workplace violence in the enterprise, that is, increase the probability of emotional blackmail. Therefore, the unemployment threat may enhance the perception of employees in the workplace. emotional blackmail. Studies have confirmed that emotional blackmail is significantly related to work stress and work burnout. For example, Lin (2014) conducted a study of 571 primary school teachers and found that workplace emotional blackmail is positively related to work stress. Lin (2018) researched ordinary employees of enterprises and pointed out that the emotional relationship threat of emotional blackmail has a significant impact on work stress.

Zhao (2019) research on corporate employees pointed out that the phenomenon of emotional blackmail by the boss increases, and the work pressure on employees increases. Liu (2019) conducted a study on working students and found that emotional blackmail is significantly related to work stress. Liu and Zhou (2016) studied public security officers and found that emotional blackmail and work burnout have positive effects. Cheng (2020) research on submarine cable carriers showed that emotional blackmail is significantly correlated with work stress and work burnout.

Since the urgent reality of unemployment threat will bring involution in the industry, increase employee work engagement, and may further increase emotional blackmail, unemployment threat may enhance workplace engagement and emotional blackmail. According to the reciprocity principle of social exchange theory, when employees in the workplace perceive a greater threat of unemployment, they are forced to leave their work or cannot find suitable work, and employees often choose to repay the organization positively. The work pressure caused by workplace violence, mental stress will reduce employee work engagement.

Given the current repeated recurrence of the COVID-19 and the economic downturn, the threat of unemployment and work commitment of employees is of great significance in enterprise management. This paper focuses on the impact of the threat of unemployment on the work commitment of employees and expands the impact of the threat of unemployment on the work commitment of employees. The research object enriches the relevant conclusions on the relationship between unemployment threat and employee work engagement. Based on the perspective of negative rating theory, this paper proposes the mediating effect of emotional blackmail (negative harm and excessive praise) on unemployment threat and work engagement, verifies the interference scenarios of work-family conflict felt by workplace personnel, and enriches unemployment threat and emotional blackmail (negative harm). and excessive praise) have to study the situation.

**Methods**

**Objects**

This study takes Chinese workplace employees as the research object and does not consider the characteristics of the enterprise when selecting the sample, such as the industry to which the enterprise belongs, ownership type, size, etc. At the same time, the number of employees cannot be determined, and the number of research mothers is unknown.

Convenience sampling was used to conduct the survey. Considering the severity of the COVID-19, this paper contacted the managers in the enterprise and distributed electronic questionnaires to employees. The employees filled in anonymously, and finally, a total of 554 valid data were obtained.

**Instruments**

Work engagement variables were measured using the work engagement scale developed by Britt et al. (2001). The validation of its construct validity in different population background types has good construct validity. There are three dimensions, with 9 items, and are measured by the Likert 5-point scoring method. The higher the score, the higher the preference for the aspect.

Use Zhang (2021) Unemployment Threat Scale to measure the unemployment threat. This scale is a one-dimensional measurement tool. This scale has 6 questions and is measured by the Likert 5-point scoring method. The higher the score, the higher the employee. The higher the perceived threat of unemployment.

According to the questionnaire scale of Sun (2020) to measure emotional blackmail, the scale is divided into two aspects: Negative harm and excessive praise, with 12 items. As measured by the Likert 5-point scale, the higher the score, the higher the degree of emotional blackmail that employees feel.

**Results**

**Common method bias test**

The questionnaire survey method may have a common method bias. The error in psychometric measurement includes systematic error and random error. Common method variation is a kind of systematic error. For common method bias, there are generally two methods. One is to use principal component analysis to compare the size of the first principal component to judge whether there is a serious common method bias, and the other is to use confirmatory factor analysis. model to determine which model is the best. This study used AMOS 24.0 software and used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The single factor model in Table 1 was not fitted well, which also indicated that the problem of common method bias in this study was not serious.

**Table 1 Confirmatory factor analysis results**

Mo del	$\chi^2/df$	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	NFI	CFI
1	2.39	.05	.90	.87	.90	.98
2	2.55	.06	.86	.83	.88	.88
3	3.71	.11	.81	.77	.81	.79

4	3.68	.08	.73	.71	.86	.76
5	6.51	.06	.67	.63	.89	.71

Note: X=Unemployment Threat; Y=Work Engagement; M=Emotional Blackmail

Mode1=Four-factor: X, Y, M1, M2

Mode2=Three factor: X+M1, M2, Y

Mode3=Three factors: X, M1+M2, Y

Mode4=Two factors: X+Y, M1+M2

Mode5=Single factorX+Y+M1+M2

**Descriptive statistics**

This study used SPSS 24.0 software to conduct a descriptive statistical analysis of population background variables. In terms of gender, males accounted for 53.8% and females accounted for 46.2%; in terms of age, they were mainly concentrated in 20-30 years old and 31-40 years old, accounting for 36.6% and 30.0% respectively; the largest number of people with a college degree or below, accounting for 59.2%, followed by bachelor degree, accounting for 31.0%; the main positions are ordinary employees, accounting for 67.0%, followed by grassroots management personnel, accounting for 18.6%, and middle management personnel accounting for 13.5%; work in the company In terms of service life, 40.6% of the respondents were less than 1 year, and 37.4% were 2-4 years old, which is similar to the working years in reality. Among the types of organizations, 61.6% of the subjects were from private enterprises. The stability is weaker than that of state-owned enterprises, foreign enterprises, and joint ventures, so the threat of unemployment felt by personnel is relatively large; the size of the organization is mainly small companies with less than 100 employees, accounting for 77.8%; the industry is mainly service industry, accounting for 34.5%; to sum up, the population distribution of the 554 valid samples investigated in this paper is consistent with the actual situation, indicating that the samples investigated in this paper are representative.

**Correlation analysis**

Correlation analysis is a linear relationship between variables. Table 2 shows that there is a significant correlation between each variable, which preliminarily verifies the hypothesis in this paper. At the same time, to test the discriminant validity, the square root of AVE is compared with the correlation coefficient. If the square root of AVE is greater than the correlation coefficient between variables, it means that it has discriminant validity. The correlation coefficient shows that the variables have good discriminant validity.

**Table 2 Correlation analysis**

Variable	M	SD	Y	X	M
Y	3.72	.78	.70		
X	4.19	.70	.31**	.79	
M	3.72	.83	-.24**	.33**	.74

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; The diagonal value is the square root of AVE; X=Unemployment Threat; Y=Work Engagement; M=Emotional Blackmail

**Test of mediating effect**

The threat of unemployment is the independent variable, the negative harm and excessive praise of emotional blackmail are the mediating variables, and work engagement is the dependent variable, and a structural equation is constructed. The fitting index of the model shows that  $\chi^2/df=2.26$ ,  $GFI=0.94$ ,  $AGFI=0.88$ ,  $CFI=0.93$ ,  $RMSEA=0.06$ ,  $PCFI=0.69$ , the conclusion indicates that the fitting index of the structural equation model is good.

As shown in Table 3, after fitting the structural equation, the result shows that the path of unemployment threat→work engagement shows a positive relationship ( $\beta=0.34$ ,  $p<0.05$ ); the path of unemployment threat→negative injury shows a positive relationship ( $\beta=0.38$ ,  $p<0.05$ ); the path of unemployment threat→excessive praise showed a positive relationship ( $\beta=0.40$ ,  $p<0.05$ ); the path of negative injury→work engagement showed a negative relationship ( $\beta=-0.42$ ,  $p<0.05$ ); the path of excessive praise→work engagement showed a negative relationship ( $\beta=-0.25$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

**Table 3 Path Analysis Table**

Path	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
X→Y	.34	.05	3.74	***
X→M1	.38	.05	3.89	***
X→M2	.40	.05	4.52	***
M1→Y	-.42	.05	-3.49	***
M2→Y	-.25	.06	-3.25	***

Note: \*\*\* $p<0.001$ ; X= Unemployment Threat; Y= Work Engagement; M1= negative harm; M2= excessive praise

As shown in Table 4, 5000 sampling bootstrap and 95% confidence interval are set for the structural equation to observe the indirect effect to judge whether the mediation effect is established. As shown in Table 6, the indirect effect of unemployment threat→negative injury→work engagement is -0.16, reaching a significant level; The indirect effect of unemployment threat→excessive praise→work engagement is -0.01, reaching a significant level.

**Table 4 Mediation Analysis Form**

Path	Indirect Effect	95% CI	
		Lower	Upper
X→M1→Y	-.16	-.05	-.02
X→M2→Y	-.01	-.03	-.01

Note: X=Unemployment Threat; Y=Work Engagement; M1= negative harm; M2= excessive praise

**Discussion and Conclusion**

**Discussion**

Through empirical analysis, within the 95% confidence interval, the threat of unemployment has a positive relationship with work engagement ( $\beta=0.343$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). The higher the threat of unemployment, the higher the degree of employee work engagement. Similar to the conclusion of Hakanen et al. (2021),

with the repeated outbreaks of the COVID-19 starting in 2020 and the frequent city closures in corresponding cities to fight the epidemic, more small and micro enterprises have been closed due to city closures. The suspension of express logistics, the closure of stores, etc., lead to a decline in the business volume of the company, or even bankruptcy, which eventually leads to the forced resignation of employees. Unstable enterprises will also cause employees to feel a greater threat of unemployment. To reduce the probability of being forced to lose their work, they will be involute at work and increase their contribution and ability at work.

Through empirical analysis, within the 95% confidence interval, the threat of unemployment has a positive relationship with emotional blackmail ( $\beta=0.418$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). The higher the threat of unemployment, the higher the degree of emotional blackmail that employees perceive.

Through empirical analysis, the research shows that within the 95% confidence interval, emotional blackmail has a negative relationship with work engagement ( $\beta=-0.37$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), that is, the higher the emotional blackmail, the lower the employee's work engagement. Similar to the conclusions of Cheng (2020) and other scholars; emotional blackmail can cause higher work stress and work burnout, while work engagement is the opposite variable to work stress and work burnout, and it is a positive variable, so emotional blackmail can cause higher work stress and work burnout. Work stress and work burnout reduce employees' work engagement.

Through empirical analysis, the research shows that, within the 95% confidence interval, emotional blackmail has a mediating effect between unemployment threat and work engagement. Unemployment threat not only directly affects employees' work engagement but also indirectly affects employees' work engagement through emotional blackmail. According to the reciprocity principle of social exchange theory, when employees in the workplace perceive a greater threat of unemployment, they are forced to leave their work or cannot find suitable work. Employees often choose to repay the organization positively, while workplace violence causes work pressure. Mental stress will weaken employees' work engagement.

**Conclusion**

Based on 554 valid questionnaires, this paper conducts descriptive statistical analysis, correlation analysis, mediation effect test, etc., and draws the main conclusions: unemployment threat positively affects work engagement; unemployment threat positively affects emotional blackmail; emotional blackmail negatively affects work engagement; Emotional blackmail has a mediating effect between unemployment threat and work engagement.

**Suggestion**

For employees, the epidemic from March to May 2022 caused too much loss, unable to work, no income, and more living costs every month. Therefore, this article suggests that employees should improve their professional skills. Highlight your uniqueness and irreplaceability in the company to ensure that you cannot be replaced, which will reduce the perceived threat of unemployment



and provide a better work resume for future work or work-hopping; The industry you are in belongs to the sunset industry, you can quickly change careers and enter the sunrise industry, or the industry that capital values more. For the industry that capital values, there will be many companies and more work opportunities. Therefore, if employees perceive the threat of unemployment, they should not be in their comfort zone and should open their eyes. Maybe this threat of unemployment will promote you to upgrade new skills or enter a new industry, which is also a good opportunity.

To improve the awareness of emotional blackmail among employees in the organization, to avoid the occurrence of emotional blackmail by oneself or others

According to the results of this study, it is found that the threat of unemployment will positively affect emotional blackmail, while emotional blackmail will negatively affect work engagement. The possible reasons are: from the supervisor's point of view, the supervisor's requirement for subordinates is to expect subordinates to improve themselves. ability to improve the efficiency and work performance in follow-up work, but subordinates, they think this requirement is unreasonable, which leads to the perception of being emotionally blackmailed; from the point of view of colleagues, colleagues deliver work to others and deliver In the process, asking the other party to agree to this request in a pleasing or good-for-you tone (for example, doing more will make you more familiar with the business) may be a kind of goodwill for colleagues, but it is a kind of request for the person being asked. Emotional blackmail from the workplace. Since each person plays a different role in the organization, the perception of emotional blackmail is also different, so enterprises should focus on formulating corresponding policies to avoid such situations. At the same time, when employees perceive a higher threat of unemployment, they may look at their bosses and colleagues through colored glasses. Therefore, you can hold lectures on topics related to emotional control for employees within the organization. Since everyone has different perceptions of emotional blackmail, the first step for improvement should start with awareness, and let employees reflect on the content of the lecture. Whether there is emotional blackmail in past behavior, and let them have a better understanding of this situation to reduce themselves or prevent others from unconsciously engaging in emotional blackmail in the workplace.

For enterprises, the management should be trained in the correct way of interpersonal communication and management of employees, try to reduce negative communication behaviors with employees, reduce possible emotional blackmail behaviors, and motivate and language from a people-oriented and positive work attitude. Encourage and improve the organizational identity and the identity of insiders perceived by employees in their busy work, enhance the positive attitude of employees at work, and improve the harmonious working atmosphere within the organization.

Based on the above research results, it can be further deduced that the types of emotional blackmail in the workplace have some common properties, such as relationships, attitudes, words and body language, etc., but different points of difference exist in

various work characteristics, such as work stress. , group relationship, autonomous characteristics, etc., so under the interactive influence of recessive characteristics and dominant characteristics, various types of emotional blackmail occur. Such a delicate workplace relationship is worth further in-depth study of the changes and differences among various types and the degree of their mutual influence.

Reduce work-family conflict for employees

At present, the biggest trouble faced by employees is the conflict between work and family. Although labor laws restrict daily working hours and overtime hours, there are still a considerable number of employees who do not receive overtime pay. This is undoubtedly a big blow to overtime employees. Work-family conflict has a positive correlation between negative harm and excessive praise or emotional blackmail, and work-family conflict also enhances the negative relationship between unemployment threat and emotional blackmail negative harm and excessive praise; In cultural organizations, when work affects family life, individuals will feel dissatisfaction, pressure, and depression in the workplace. If they feel the threat of unemployment at this time, it will relatively cause workers to feel uneasy, which will affect workplace emotions. extortion, and therefore less working hours and happier workers, is not surprising.

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