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Employee engagement and motivation

Understand the concept of employee engagement, how it can be measured and learn how to build an engaged and motivated workforce

Introduction

Employees who have good quality jobs and are managed well, will not only be happier, healthier and more fulfilled, but are also more likely to drive productivity, better products or services, and innovation. This mutual gains view of motivation and people management lies at the heart of employee engagement, a concept that's become increasingly mainstream in management thinking over the last decade.

This factsheet examines the nature of employee engagement, its relationship to motivation, well-being and other aspects of working life, and how employers can increase it. It advises on building a motivated, engaged workforce by understanding the principles learnt from research, ways of measuring engagement, getting the support of senior leaders and line managers, and making employee engagement efforts organisation-specific.

What is employee engagement?

There's no common understanding of employee engagement. For example, the 2009 MacLeod Review found over 50 definitions! One of the earliest is Kahn's which focuses on how people 'express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally' as they interact with their jobs. This describes an internal state of being but one which relates closely to behaviour, such as discretionary effort or 'going the extra mile'.

One thing that's clear in academic literature is that employee engagement is seen as a psychological state experienced by employees. It should be seen as different from job quality, employee behaviour or management action.

However, some definitions are closer to job satisfaction. These relate to a number of aspects of organisational life and are typically used by consultancies. For example, Gallup's Q12 questionnaire covers job clarity, job resources, work that plays to one's strengths, recognition, social support and cohesion, personal development, employee voice, meaningfulness of work, and colleagues' motivation. These measures may cause confusion as it becomes difficult to distinguish engagement from the other concepts.

A narrower, more specific view that we recommend is that of the Utrecht University group of occupational psychologists which defines 'work engagement' as a state of mind in which, rather than being burnt out, employees show:

- **Vigour** (energy, resilience and effort).
- **Dedication** (for example, enthusiasm, inspiration and pride).
- **Absorption** (concentration and being engrossed in one's work).

While this approach is narrow, it aligns with the best research on engagement, so is likely to lead to effective decision making.

Read more in our latest research Employee engagement: an evidence review which draws on the best available evidence to answer practical questions to help people professionals understand employee engagement. It examines in more detail what employee engagement is, how to measure it, its outcomes and drivers.

Is employee engagement a useful concept?

A sustained focus on employee engagement over the last decade or so has been key in getting progressive people management practices firmly onto employers' agendas. It's become part of management practice to an extent that other concepts, such as high-performance working, have not.

However, it's also faced considerable criticism, not least because of the lack of agreement on what it is. Some HR practitioners seem content with this situation. In being a 'broad church', engagement is an umbrella term to describe a multifaceted focus of people management. Employers can shape their view of engagement to suit their context or strategy.

But the lack of consensus on what engagement is has led to many different ways to gauge it and inconsistent advice on how to achieve it. Vague or overly broad definitions hamper effective action, as it's unclear what the problem or opportunity is, or what should be done.

We recommend that employers take one of two approaches:

- Treat employee engagement as a psychological state and an umbrella term to describe a broad area of people strategy, and refer to narrower concepts – such as work engagement or organisational commitment – to be more specific when needed. This allows a broad strategic focus, alongside precision on priority concerns.

- Focus on specific and well-established definitions, such as the Utrecht work on engagement (see above).

A broad employee engagement strategy might focus on:

- **Motivation**: how workers guide their efforts to achieve goals, including intrinsic motivation (enjoying work for its own sake) and extrinsic motivation (working to get a reward).

- **Organisational identification**: the alignment between how an employee sees themself and how they see their organisation.

- **Organisational commitment**: feeling attached to the organisation and dedicated to their work.

What are the benefits of employee engagement?

Feeling engaged is evidently good for workers. Most definitions of engagement describe employees who are healthier, happier, more fulfilled or more motivated. For organisations, research has repeatedly shown that measures of engagement go together with higher performance. More broadly, other studies show that positive relationships between aspects of employee engagement and other business metrics, including customer satisfaction, productivity, innovation, staff retention, efficiency and health and safety performance.

This research has its problems though. The great majority of studies show correlation but not causation. However, some research does show a causal relationship, with work engagement predicting both task performance and contextual performance, or contributing to the organisation beyond one's core job. Unfortunately, these relationships are weak: the performance differences are too small to be able to observe in day-to-day activity and would need to be measured to be detected.

To some extent there's a two-way relationship, with work engagement and performance

influencing each other. So more engaged workers will go on to perform better, but an improvement in performance will also lead to more engaged workers.

Assessing and measuring employee engagement

Gathering employees' views

What drives, or hinders, commitment or motivation can be different in one organisation from another. So it's important that employers give employees effective channels for voice and listen carefully to their concerns and aspirations.

Many medium-sized and large employers conduct regular employee attitude surveys, often alongside qualitative methods such as focus groups. A mixed approach is best as different methods have different strengths. Employee surveys give a representative view of experiences across the organisation. On the other hand, qualitative methods provide a richer understanding of employee experiences in their own words and can give deeper insight into why people are happy or unhappy.

Measuring employee engagement

Once an organisation reaches a certain size, people analytics become an important way to understand the strengths and weaknesses of an organisation. Measuring aspects of employee engagement is an important part of this. The adage that 'what gets measured gets attention' holds true, and measurement can identify how different parts of the organisation compare, how motivation is changing over time and what the main factors are that motivate or demotivate people.

However, the measures used can be problematic. Composite measures that draw together survey questions to give a broad overall engagement score can oversimplify matters dramatically. The multi-faceted nature of employee engagement means that it's easy for measures to bundle together quite distinct factors and, as such, be very hard to action.

While people analytics can be invaluable, they need to be reliable and give data that is clear and specific enough to be actionable. It's advisable to use engagement metrics that are well established and specific, such as the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (see above). The recent three-item version appears to be a reliable and valid indicator. It includes the items:

- 'At my work, I feel bursting with energy' (vigour).
- 'I am enthusiastic about my job' (dedication).
- 'I am immersed in my job' (absorption).

If viewing engagement as an umbrella term for various other concepts, we suggest measuring those themselves – notably organisational commitment, identification and motivation. There are commonly used and well-evidenced measures for all of these – there's more information in our evidence review.

How to build an engaged and motivated workforce

Drivers of and barriers to employee engagement

Research suggests that various dimensions of working life lead to employee engagement, including personality (for example, self-confidence and resilience), job design (for example, job demands and resources), leadership and management, organisational climate or culture (for example, psychological safety and the emphasis on service quality) and management practices (from mindfulness interventions to training courses). One of the most established influences on motivation is autonomy or self-determination – that is, being empowered to shape one's job makes it more meaningful and enjoyable.

The 2009 UK MacLeod Review summarised four key 'enablers' of employee engagement:

- **Leadership** that gives a 'strong strategic narrative about the organisation'.
- **Line managers** who motivate, empower and support their employees.
- **Employee voice** throughout the organisation, to involve employees in decision making.
- **Organisational integrity** that stated values are reflected in the actual organisational culture; what we say is what we do.

It's important to remember that people management and HR systems can get in the way of employee engagement as much as drive it. Employers should be careful not to assume that workers are inherently demotivated and the solution is for management to lead and direct them in an inspiring way. People are naturally motivated to do a good job and become demotivated when they feel overworked, unsupported or frustrated.

Employee engagement strategies

Successful employee engagement strategies will make use of a range of good people

management and learning and development practices. They should be holistic, for example by focusing on employee motivation and well-being, and helping employees understand their contribution to the organisation's purpose, objectives and culture.

Strategies should also be multi-pronged, aligning communications, HR policies and systems, learning and development and cross-organisational events. As such, they require the active buy-in and support of senior leaders and line managers throughout the organisation

Our report Developing managers for engagement and well-being gives guidance on how to develop managers who support employee engagement, health and well-being.

Some employees will naturally be more engaged than others and person-job fit will also heavily influence engagement. This means that recruitment practices and performance management are also important tools for building an engaged motivated workforce.

Further reading

Books and reports

BRIDGER, E. (2018) *Employee engagement: a practical introduction*. 2nd ed. HR Fundamentals. London: CIPD and Kogan Page.

HOLBECHE, L. and MATTHEWS, G. (2012) *Engaged: unleashing your organization's potential through employee engagement*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

PASS, S. et al. (2018) *'All for one and one for all': Line manager's might be the catalyst but 'everyone's responsible' for employee engagement*. CIPD Applied Research Conference Paper. Reviewed in *In a Nutshell*.

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Journal articles

GYTON, G. (2017) How to move beyond the rhetoric on employee engagement. *People Management* (online). 31 January.

MEYER, J.P. (2017) Has engagement had its day: what's next and does it matter? *Organizational Dynamics*. Vol 46, No 2, pp87-95.

SHARP, R. (2019) Is engagement fact or fiction?*Human Resources (HR)*. June. pp20-25.

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