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Employee engagement and motivation

Understand the concept of employee engagement 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. As part of our work in this area, we sponsor [Engage for Success](#), the voluntary UK movement promoting employee engagement.

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?

The idea of employee engagement focuses on mutual gains in employment relationships, seeking the good of employees (well-being, job satisfaction and so on) and the good of the organisation they work for (performance, commitment, and so on).

Employee engagement brings together and repackages older and more established concepts, in particular work motivation and organisational commitment. Other relevant concepts include job satisfaction, passion and enthusiasm, identifying with one's work, playing to one's strengths, absorption and energy in doing work, citizenship behaviour,

and shared purpose or alignment to strategy.

There's no common understanding or definition 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'.

Other 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.

A narrower, more specific view 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).

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:

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

- If using 'engagement' as a wider umbrella term, break it down into more specific areas that can be understood and acted upon more clearly.

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 citizenship behaviour:** going the extra mile and helping colleagues or the organisation beyond what the job requires.
- **Organisational commitment:** feeling attached to the organisation and intending to stay.
- **Job satisfaction:** how content workers are with various aspects of their work, employment and organisational life.

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 hand in hand with higher performance. More broadly, other research shows that positive relationships between aspects of employee engagement and various 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. That is to say, they may reflect that employee engagement contributes to performance, but it could equally be the other way round – people feel more engaged if they work in successful teams or organisations. However, there is some research that shows causal relationships, for example between short-term happiness and performance.

How engaged are UK employees?

Our annual survey of employees UK Working Lives measures various aspects of employee engagement. It shows that about two-thirds of workers are satisfied with their jobs overall. Our 2018 analysis showed that UK job satisfaction fluctuated over the previous decade, dropping in particular in 2010 and 2011 to a low of just over half, but the general picture is more positive than negative.

At the day-to-day level, just over half of UK workers usually feel enthusiastic about their jobs, one in three feel 'full of energy', and over half are willing to work harder than they have to. However, a fifth of workers feel they are 'under excessive pressure', a fifth feel 'exhausted', and a fifth say they are likely to quit their job in the next year. The Skills and Employment Survey shows that work has continually become more intense, higher pressure, over recent decades. This may be due to various factors including rising customer demands, technological change and economic recession.

Our UK Working Lives survey data shows no difference in enthusiasm between men and women, but we do see greater enthusiasm among senior managers and the highest paid, workers with postgraduate levels of qualifications and voluntary sector workers. Discretionary effort is greatest among managerial and professional employees, lower in administrative roles and lowest in manual and casual work. It is also greater in the voluntary sector than in the private and public sectors.

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.

Human capital metrics can be invaluable, but need to be reliable and give data that is clear and specific enough to be actionable. It is advisable to use engagement metrics that are well established and specific (for example the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale) or draw on a range of relevant metrics (for example, motivation, commitment and so on).

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.

Our UK Working Lives survey found that the quality of relationships and managerial support is consistently related to various aspects of engagement, including job satisfaction, enthusiasm, effort and intention to quit. However, different aspects of engagement are most closely related to different factors of job quality. For example, job complexity (how stimulating, interesting and novel one's work is) is most closely related to enthusiasm and effort. And terms of employment (for example, job security and development opportunities) are most closely related to overall job satisfaction and intention to quit.

The 2009 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](#), issue 88.

Visit the [CIPD and Kogan Page Bookshop](#) to see all our priced publications currently in print.

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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