Engage for Success Peer-Reviewed

Thought Leadership Series

The Future of Engagement Thought Piece Collection

Editors: Dilys Robinson and Jonny Gifford

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Introduction to this Collection

Welcome to our collection of thought pieces on the future of employee engagement. Engagement has been a live issue in the management and HR world for around ten years now. It has definitely gone beyond 'fad' status to become embedded in many organisations' approaches and in people management research. But equally, it has not developed in a single direction and we are no closer to an agreed definition of employee engagement. So it seems a good point at which to take stock. Where have we got to with employee engagement? And more importantly, where will we take it in the future, both as a concept and area of practice?

The authors of our thought pieces offer different perspectives, based on their area of activity: HR practice (in both private and public sectors), consultancy and research (both academic and practical). What they all have in common is that they are experts in their field, and have engagement as a focus of their work. Their varied contributions illustrate the breadth and complexity of 'employee engagement' – a term that is easy to understand strategically, yet slippery when it comes to the detail of analysis and implementation.

In presenting this collection, we want to stimulate thought and debate to help develop the field of employee engagement. The authors reflect a number of current discussions that take place in relation to employee engagement, including some of the more challenging perspectives that can easily be sidelined in the drive to promote the agenda. Employee engagement has probably done more to advance good people management practices than any other management concept, but we need to take a considered, honest look at the state of practice and research in this area if it is to maintain its relevance.

The thought pieces are arranged under the broad headings of overview (setting the scene), employee voice, a critical perspective, and engagement research, and each section has a brief introduction by the editors. It should be noted that the views of the authors do not necessarily represent those of the editors or of the Engage for Success movement.

This publication is one of two outputs from a special interest group (SIG) focusing on 'the future of employee engagement', set up under the auspices of the Engage for Success Guru Group. A white paper on the future of engagement, which will draw on insights from these thought pieces, will follow this publication.

We are indebted to our authors, who have given their time free of charge, in line with the pro bono nature of the Engage for Success movement. We would also like to thank the SIG members who have contributed both to this publication and to the white paper.

The editors

Jonny Gifford and Dilys Robinson are the co-facilitators of the Future of Engagement SIG.

Jonny Gifford is a research adviser at the CIPD, having previously worked at Roffey Park Institute and the Institute for Employment Studies. His work spans various aspects of people management, employee relations and organisational culture, and he leads the CIPD's research on employee engagement. Other interests include behavioural science, employee voice, dispute resolution and social technology.

Dilys Robinson is a principal research fellow at the Institute for Employment Studies (IES), where she has led IES's research into employee engagement since 2002. This focused firstly on defining and measuring engagement and assessing its drivers, and secondly on identifying engaging managerial behaviours. Dilys has been active in the Engage for Success movement since the very earliest days of the MacLeod Review.

1 Overview

Our authors

David Smith is the Institute for Employment's Chair. David has 34 years of corporate experience in change management, the last 15 of which were spent in the turnaround of the Asda Retail Business. David was People, IT and Loss Prevention Director at Asda, and was on Asda's Executive Board for ten years. He is now an author, business speaker and consultant.

In this thought piece, David argues that employee engagement brings big benefits to organisations. It is an excellent vehicle for driving culture change, and is good for employees, too. However, employee engagement is hard work and requires more than a one-off 'initiative'; sustained effort is needed over a long period of time, and there are no 'quick fixes'.

Peter Cheese is Chief Executive at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). Before joining CIPD in July 2012, he spent 30 years working at Accenture, culminating in a seven-year spell as Global Managing Director leading the

firm's Talent and Organisation Performance Consulting Practice. After leaving Accenture in 2009, Peter held a portfolio of consulting and non-executive roles, including chairing the Institute of Leadership and Management.

In this thought piece, Peter sets engagement in context, asks some searching questions and offers his views on what really matters and what needs to be done in future. He considers changes in employment context and argues for a focus on measurement and the key factors that drive and maintain engagement. Equally, he contends that employee engagement should not be seen transactionally, but is inextricably bound up in its theoretical roots and a very certain philosophy of people management.

Richard Crouch is Director of HR, Organisational Development and Communications at Somerset County Council, and is the President of the Public Sector People Managers' Association (PPMA) for 2013/2014.

In this thought piece, Richard looks at the challenges the public sector currently faces – reduced budgets, smaller workforces and increasing demand – and the need for a new approach to people management and leadership. He argues that an employee engagement lens brings much to this, starting with the notion of meaningful, purposeful work, and developing into a more strongly community-based model of public services in which employees and HR widen their remits in line with customer needs.

The route to employee engagement is a worthwhile slog

David Smith

Culture always trumps strategy

Firstly, I must state my position as a believer in the whole debate about the importance of engagement and business performance. To me, it has always seemed obvious that the way a workforce feels about their place of work will materially affect the performance of that organisation. This is particularly relevant in service organisations, where customers are at the receiving end of good or bad attitudes. But, it is also relevant where businesses make things, or exist for other purposes. One only has to look at such past examples as British Leyland, where a disillusioned workforce were sleeping on the night shift, to realise that such a disastrous culture will lead to massive underperformance and terminal decline. Culture always trumps strategy, in my view, and there are sufficient case studies around to prove that point.

Findings from the Asda case study

My 15 years at Asda Stores, with ten of those as an Executive Board Director leading the People and IT functions, provided me with a perfect case study of cultural change using the concept of engagement. That business had been pretty close to bankruptcy, and the burning platform of financial crisis afforded the opportunity to change many things in the business. My book 'Asda Magic' charted the most influential elements of turning the culture from disaster to excellence over a 15 year period. Great engagement certainly made a difference at Asda, and was material in Asda becoming No1 best place to work in the Sunday Times survey in 2002. It also contributed materially to the commercial success of the business.

The views of CEOs: A short term opportunity

From my current position as author, business speaker, consultant and board mentor, I regularly experience the views of CEOs around the subject of engagement. Many of

these individuals have gone through a period of testing, which may or may not involve redundancies, but will invariably have encompassed austerity measures of some kind. Morale in these businesses has taken a hit, as shown in recent CIPD and other surveys, and CEOs are looking at ways to pick up morale and motivation amongst their people. This has resulted in a scenario where interest in the concept of engagement, and subsequent business performance, has reached an all-time high. Generally, when attention amongst the CEO community is high, this produces a crucible for real progress, and it is possible for the engagement 'movement' to make real progress if handled well. The next two to three years present a real and tangible opportunity for driving engagement to achieve high performance.

Ineffective market entrants peddling dubious advice

However, every opportunity involves risk. CEOs tend to be intolerant of waffle, and especially intolerant of weasel words. I see a lot of clap trap being paraded by various consultants and companies about the engagement concept. Everyone is aware of the interest and opportunity, and therefore many have waded into this lucrative market, waving solutions around like latter day Messiahs. This is unfortunate. I suppose it is inevitable that market attention leads suppliers to enter who are ill qualified. My earnest hope is that those wishing to embark on a change programme for enhanced engagement with their workforce will use providers or advice from people who have real track records of past achievement in this arena.

Engagement is a long term slog

Many commentators are saying that increasing employee engagement is easy. This, in my view, is complete rubbish. Certainly the concepts are relatively simple. Most people who read my book tell me that the change programme described was clear and simple. Most effective change agendas need to be simple and clearly understood. The thing people miss is the fact that embedding change is hard and takes considerable time. Cynicism has to be overcome. Management egos have to be dealt with. The sheer slog of doing the right things with your people every day, when you have a million things taking you away from this (all of which will be very urgent and important), presents the real challenge to engagement. Cultural change is a long haul. It is not complex, but it takes years. It takes time and real commitment to gain momentum. Most executives tend to get bored if they do not see immediate results, and their personal agenda moves on. The desire to change a culture and drive engagement cannot be a short term ambition.

A wasted opportunity?

So as I look forward, I have some trepidation that we are going to have wasted the opportunity of the recession. A crisis always presents a tremendous opportunity for change. The near bankruptcy of Asda provided a platform for change which cannot be underestimated. The continuing financial crisis in the UK and around the Western world is a more widespread burning platform. The real question is whether the engagement movement will be able to step up to the plate. The banks are making some very bold statements around their need for major cultural change, and yet their behaviour around both lending and bonus payments would suggest it may only be posturing.

Will the next decade see engagement fade?

If the concept of engagement becomes just lip service (as with the idea of empowerment before it) then the opportunity to make progress will be lost. My ability to predict the outcome is limited. I am certainly not a prophet in these matters, but I do believe the danger signs are there for us to see. Wise CEOs should question their change providers carefully, and ensure that what they build into change programmes around engagement is well founded and sustainable in the long term.

Employee engagement: How is it changing and what drives it?

Peter Cheese

Employee engagement is now a topic that many people across business and even in the political sphere are talking about as a genuine business issue and a key ingredient of performance. The MacLeod report and the Engage for Success movement has further raised the visibility, particularly amongst business leaders, as the launch of the report demonstrated - with a bevy of top business leaders (if that is the right collective noun) and heads of TUC, CBI and others all saying how important engagement was.

That is clearly a positive progression of modern management thinking and something the HR profession should rejoice at, having for a long time been trying to measure it and understand how to improve it in their workforces.

However, many questions remain and there often still seems to be too much debate on what really drives engagement and how and even whether it is open to robust measurement. What is certainly true is that the motivation and alignment of people to a common cause, to contribute more of themselves, to support each other, are important principles of any successful endeavour and as old as the hills - from rousing Shakespearean speeches on the battlefield, to the ancient pursuit of team sports. People feel better when they are engaged, work better, and live better.

Why now then are we considering it as more of an issue, what is changing, and do we have real new thinking to bring that will make a difference?

Some background to engagement thinking

The language of employee engagement may be relatively new, but really it is a time-old tension: transactional and controlling Taylorist management versus leadership that emphasises purpose and values, and supports employees to perform. Motivational theory and behavioural studies have been around a long time, and many still refer to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs from the 1950s as the model through which to

understand engagement. Even Douglas McGregor with his Theory X and Theory Y 50 years ago was highlighting motivational drivers of performance.

Dan Pink's seminal book, 'Drive, or the surprising truth about what motivates us', was really summarising all the studies and work that has been done over the last decades and pointing out that we have known for a long time what really motivates or demotivates people. He brings together much of the behavioural research and concludes that the main drivers are alignment of purpose, autonomy (or giving employees more space and responsibility to work), and mastery, which is the notion that everyone wants to improve and our job as managers or organisations is to help our employees improve.

So it has become ever clearer that engagement is not, as is often implied, something that managers or organisations 'do' to their people; rather, it is a mental, emotional and physical state and something that employees *give*. But even though managers and leaders cannot directly control the engagement of others, how they behave, the work environment they create, the support and encouragement they give to their teams, and the trust they engender are clearly all critical.

Whilst much of these principles have been long understood, the trouble is that we have not always been doing a good job of applying this knowledge. And understanding and building engagement, alignment, wellbeing and trust is getting harder with a changing context that sets the bar higher and higher. The nature of work, and what most of us do, has profoundly changed since the early days of motivation thinking. We have economies that are increasingly reliant on employees using their tacit knowledge and skills, so more is to be gained from discretionary effort and motivation.

A changing context and environment

The UK was the first nation to industrialise and was also the first nation to undergo a process of de-industrialisation, whereby output and employment became increasingly concentrated in services rather than manufacturing. Since the mid-20th century, we have seen a decline in manufacturing employment, so that by 2011 less than one tenth of people in employment in England and Wales were employed in this sector, compared to over four fifths in services.

These trends are reflected in the nature of corporate value. Over the last 20 years, the total value of an enterprise has shifted from the so-called tangible (*ie* easily measurable) assets of a business (plant, machinery etc) to the intangible, particularly human and knowledge capital. On average around 70 per cent of value is in this intangible domain as opposed to 20 to 30 per cent 20 years ago.

If this is a macro view of the changing nature of work it points to the increasing human element of the work interaction, opportunity for self-determination in how a job gets done and at what pace, and the real difference an individual's emotional and intellectual energy can have in impacting the outcome. When combined with the increasingly diverse nature of the workforce, with the wide range of expectations, aspirations, and emotional styles involved, understanding how to engage and motivate employees becomes ever more challenging.

How do we measure and understand levels of engagement?

Perhaps then, given its importance, one of the first questions has to be how do we assess or measure engagement.

Measuring engagement has always been more of an art than a science. There are many different tools that organisations use, from the very simple 'mood monitor' that regularly asks whether you feel happy, ok, or unhappy, to long and involved surveys (which of themselves are hardly engaging!) and focus groups. Increasingly, social media is also being used, both to generate discussion and, with the use of language sentiment analysis, to measure employee opinions.

The more extensive employee research typically aims to uncover more than pure 'engagement' but also to shed light on cultural dynamics, the understanding and alignment to the organisations goals and strategy, perception of communications and of leadership, and reaction to changes that might be happening.

This is helpful, as there is a real danger of oversimplifying employee engagement, by pigeonholing employees into groups like 'say, stay and strive'. Or by implying that truly active engagement is only present if we answer 100 per cent positively to all questions asked – something I have always struggled with as most people, particularly the more cynically inclined Brits, would never answer 100 per cent satisfaction to any questions asked of them.

The measurement challenge was illustrated to me recently when talking with a senior business executive about engagement in his organisation. He said he was pleased that it had recently significantly improved. When asked how he had achieved this he simply replied that he had changed the measurement system!

The most important point is that we should have some pragmatic, reliable and regular means of understanding the key issues with engagement and the trend of engagement sentiment within our organisations. We need to be able to provide usable information back to the managers and their teams so they can better understand it and gain insight

to the actions that can improve engagement in their teams. And if we can make the means of gathering employee insight more engaging, all the better.

What then have we learned from all this measurement about what really drives engagement?

What really matters in improving engagement

With all this debate, it seems that we still have a lack of strategic focus on engagement versus looking at it in terms of transactional short term fixes. Many organisations still struggle to make sense of their engagement surveys, and are not well positioned to make a real seismic shift on engagement of their employees. In thinking how to move beyond this, I see several key things that often need to be addressed.

First

As Dan Pink identified, we need to recognise shared purpose as the first major driver of engagement. Is the purpose of the enterprise clear and itself engaging, and is it understood by the employees and clear how it links to their jobs and roles? Without understanding of and belief in the organisation's purpose, engagement lacks an anchor. Purpose should be clearly translated into objectives from the top down, so that employees have a line of sight to their role in achieving the overall vision. This was well demonstrated in the classic story of the floor sweeper at NASA who, when asked from a Presidential visit in the 1960s about his job, replied 'to help put a man on the moon'.

Following on from purpose, values should call out what the enterprise sees as its behavioural norms, its definition of the culture it espouses. Both purpose and values need to pervade performance management systems and processes, learning and development and communications, and be tangible in the behaviours of leaders and managers at all levels.

Second

Designing roles and our organisations around the notion of providing more autonomy to employees is a strategic shift in thinking and a conscious move from command and control management.

An interesting analogy to draw is with the military. It has become accepted doctrine within the military world that to respond to the very different threats that modern armies face from the era of the Cold War, requires a much more agile response. Fighting insurgents in urban environments where the threat can change in minutes is a bit different from global superpowers threatening each other. The result has been to create

much more autonomous teams with a mix of capabilities, capable of making decisions and responding to the immediate situation, whilst operating within broad mission parameters.

This should be how we think about much of the work we do in the modern business world. Focus on the wider outcomes and objectives we want teams to achieve, make sure they have the capabilities and resource they need, then let them determine more about how best to get there. I still see too many examples of micromanagement which is very disengaging. Process re-engineering and clever work scheduling systems can often lead to an outcome not far removed from the old principles of scientific management. We determine what work needs to be done by whom and by when, by breaking down tasks, assigning standard times and metrics, and then using clever algorithms to determine how the work gets scheduled. It may look efficient in how best to use our resources, but it is rarely engaging to the people on the receiving end.

We must also make sure that we are supporting the employees in the work they do. Training them properly, providing the resources they need to perform effectively, and providing regular feedback so they know what they need to do and how to improve – never more necessary than with Gen Y, the new generation entering the workforce. This is the role of every manager, supported and enabled by efficient HR processes of performance management, training and learning, and reward to encourage the sustaining of good practice.

Third

We need to acknowledge the importance of feeling that you have a voice. Employee voice is the means by which employees are able to communicate, consult, and influence decision making, as well as raise concerns and to challenge. Social media is providing more opportunity than even before for employees to be heard and it can be seen as a democratising force. Through it, employees can converse with colleagues and management at the same time – voice is multidirectional (Silverman et al, 2013).

The CIPD sponsored a two-year research project on employee engagement that looked at these voice issues more in depth (Alfes et al, 2010). This work found evidence that:

- Employee voice within the team is clearly associated with greater employee engagement.
- This relationship is partially explained by the fact that employee voice leads to higher trust in senior leaders and to better relationships with line managers, both of which are also related to employee engagement.

The research highlights that it is 'high-quality social exchange' that influences employees' perceptions of voice and is of central importance for employee engagement. But it is not just a question of line manager relationships and trust in leaders. Independent of these, there is still a direct relationship: in and of itself, employee voice is, as the MacLeod Review put it, a key enabler of employee engagement.

So, while any form of employee voice helps, we need to continue to find more genuine, responsive and open ways of engaging with employees and listening to them. It can and should be done through a variety of channels, and particularly now with social media we have many different means and opportunities.

Fourth

We need to make sure that we are managing for *sustainable* employee engagement, which means also paying attention to employees' physical and mental well-being. CIPD's research (CIPD 2012a) shows how employee engagement and well-being combine to provide productive and happy employees, who are likely to stay and committed to the organisation's purpose, yet not burnt out.

It is clearly not enough to focus on maximising employees' effort and buy-in to organisational purpose with no regard to their well-being. There may be short-term benefits, but no one can work at 110 per cent indefinitely. As part of the same research, CIPD identified that workplace stress has become the greatest source of absenteeism and sickness. We have to make sure we are addressing this by understanding the issues and supporting employees, particularly at times as we are presently, where uncertainty and economic challenges are affecting so many.

Fifth

There remains one absolutely crucial and pervasive element of engagement, and that is trust. Without trust, it is hard to get much done. It is hard to get people to follow you, work hard for your cause, accept decisions that are hard to stomach, contribute ideas for your vision, or make change happen.

Many surveys have indicated falling levels of trust. The Edelmann trust barometer, one of the best respected measures, shows a marked decline in trust in business leaders, regulators and politicians, and a move towards a reliance on people like us – a localisation of trust, if you will.

Kenexa's Worktrends report last year pointed to the most important lever of trust being integrity, above benevolence or competence. Integrity is in many ways synonymous with trust – doing what you say, ethically and morally bound, doing unto others as you would wish done unto yourself. It could be regarded as something that should pervade

all business – an almost unspoken code of conduct – but clearly it is not pervasive enough (CIPD 2012b). Interesting that many corporations call out integrity as a core value, particularly the banks who themselves in the past fell far short of this value.

So the context for any organisation is one of a trend for employees to be less trusting and more sceptical of their leaders. This trend has to be reversed if we are to sustainably improve employee engagement. And trust works both ways. To empower employees and give them more autonomy, leaders and managers have to trust their teams to do the right thing, and to work within a broader set of parameters.

In conclusion

What easily gets lost in amongst the business case arguments and metrics (both of which are very important) is that employee engagement is about embracing a particular philosophy and culture of people management.

We have not fully resolved the time-old Theory X versus Theory Y tension, though many talk as if we have. For all the rhetoric of engagement, there is plenty of draconian people management, frustration and burnout.

We need a renewed determination to develop 'engaging managers' who make employees feel respected, supported, empowered, inspired and valued. Of course that also means that those managers in turn are treated in this way themselves and on up to the top of the organisation. We can no longer leave this all to chance, given the increasing complexity of the work we do and how we work, and the diverse nature of the workforce. Organisations of all shapes and sizes need to become much better at developing the people management skills of managers at all levels, from first line supervisors on. Too often the focus has been on the technical skills that might lead to the initial promotion, but then not supporting on the 'soft' skills, which actually are the harder skills to develop and acquire and the most important in driving long term engagement and organisational success.

We also need to put our money where our mouth is in giving employees a voice; in having the courage to open up all the channels of communication and being more prepared to listen. This is vital in engagement and building trust, but also in better managing behavioural and other risk in the business.

It is vital therefore that we wake up to the importance of collaboration and networks. Organisations that encourage collaboration and sharing across the business, rather than just up and down the organisational hierarchies and silos, will always get more from their employees: the sharing of experience and tacit knowledge, combined around a

common purpose and understanding. And the more we engage our employees, the more engaged they will feel and the more they will want to contribute.

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The past, present and future role of engagement in modern society: A public service perspective

Richard Crouch

If we were to wind the clock back to the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, there probably was not much mention back then of the need to 'engage' with the burgeoning workforce to improve its industrial output. Labour of the 19th century was motivated purely by the fact that work, and the wage it delivered, permitted the bare necessities to the working classes – which was food and water on the table and a home to live in rather than anything more intrinsic – and that in itself was motivational enough. In the early 19th century, the motivation of labour (as it was called then) was more along the lines of work as a means to survive and not much else. This was bolstered by there being no real social welfare system to fall on if times were hard, apart from the dreaded Work House, which incentivised people to work harder to avoid being one of its inhabitants! In our early industrial history, there was no need to 'engage' as the balance of labour and work was such that the supply of labour was more than the demand placed upon it and work itself was motivational enough. This worsening social situation of supply and demand was fuelled further later in the 19th century with the onset of mechanisation when, in spite of continued industrial growth, the dependence on labour started to recede and competition for work increased. This, you might think, simply led to the labour at the time being so incentivised by finding work that no other motivational dependencies were required – but of course something happened…

What happened was human nature taking hold which, unlike that of the rest of the animal kingdom, has an inherent desire to do more than simply survive, but to grow and prosper as well. The 19th century was an important period in that the benefits of work and output were there for all to see, with companies making profits and industrialists becoming wealthy. The developing view of the labour force was that its contribution to wealth was falling into the hands of the minority and this was de-motivating for it. They wanted more. Enlightened industrialists at the time recognised this and for the first time put in measures to counteract growing workforce unrest and some of the best known are the social welfare programmes put in place by the likes of

Rowntree. Such schemes were of course linked to the social consciousness being felt by industrialists and their wish to give something back to their hard working workforces but, nevertheless, it does show a turning point in the need to motivate and 'engage' with the labour of the time.

Moving on to the present day, there are interesting analogies with our 19th century past in terms of engagement and motivation. For one, we know that in spite of an appalling level of unemployment in the younger population, work alone is not enough for many of them. Although supply far outstrips demand, many employers still find they have to work to do their best to attract young talent and incentivise them to get them to work. In short, for many people, work nowadays has to offer far more than work itself.

For many people, work is not just about money, but being motivated by such things as the working environment, the people within it, the product or service delivered and even the brand. One of our best known industrial successes in the UK is probably Jaguar Landrover who, not that long ago, went to the market place for an additional thousand plus employees to work on their new Range Rover and received applicants many, many time over. The reason for this was not predominately due to there being hundreds of out-of-work car manufacturing people looking for work, but more the attraction of the company and its products which are seen to be some of the best in the world. The example provided by Jaguar Landrover, and other well respected brands like it, demonstrates that one of the most powerful engagement agents is one where employees can derive most meaning from work.

Turning to the public sector, 'Meaning at Work' forms one of the most significant engagement agents in the sector, which relies on it heavily both to motivate employees and to provide the best services possible. The public sector delivers services for people, by people, and many employees consider their reward to be linked to helping and supporting people in their communities who might find themselves disadvantaged in some shape or form. Employees involved in delivering children and adult social care services are particularly motivated by their customer bases and see work more as a vocation than simply employment.

There is no doubt at all that the economic recession and the Government's public sector comprehensive spending reviews and reductions have hit the public sector very hard. Demand for services continues to increase and, to balance the budgets, employee numbers have sharply decreased. Whilst efficiencies have been made, the levels of cuts are such that employees are feeling the strain and this is impacting on the level of engagement generally in the public sector. To counteract that, health and wellbeing is beginning to be seen to be a useful engagement tool for the public sector workforce with the belief that employees who are looked after by their employer will be better positioned to look after their service users. If the current long range forecast of the

economy is to be believed, there is no doubt that engagement needs to be seen as the 'new normal' and not some fleeting, woolly initiative just for the enlightened few.

It is therefore, pleasing that the very successful Engage for Success movement is now shifting its thoughts from what it refers to as 'transactional' engagement to one which is more 'transformational'. By this it means that engagement should be more whole organisational and elevated to be on a firm and integral strategic footing. This has to be the right way to go, and doing so will no doubt generate a further head of steam to generate even more traction in helping to get the best out of the employee for the benefit of the service user.

However, even the move to a more transformational form of engagement, as it is presently interpreted, has its limitations in relation to public services. The direction of travel in the delivery of public services is now moving along the lines of being community focused and community driven, rather than organisationally led. This concept is not new, as public sector reform has been on the political agenda since Margaret Thatcher's government and it is only now, under the Coalition and driven by austerity, that things are beginning to take hold.

The new way forward in the delivery of public services will not be so much about services being delivered by the public sector *per se*, but by all sectors in our communities, which will also include the voluntary and private sectors as well as individuals and groups within the communities themselves. This calls on a different approach in terms of engagement, as fundamentally the model of employment is likely to change from being one which has been hitherto organisationally centred to one that will be more community centred. As such, roles are likely to become far broader than they are now and employee engagement, in the future model of public service delivery, will not be just about employees delivering a specific link in the supply chain, but maybe the supply chain itself!

The public service employee of the future is likely to continue to be wedded to the core beliefs currently upheld in the public sector and these are likely to develop still further as the social model of employment takes a stronger hold. The coalescing of the public system (and its budgets), and employees becoming more integrated with communities, is likely to change employees' employment perspective, their common purpose and their motivations. For example, it may well be that one of the key motivators in the future will not be so much on service delivery *per se*, but instead, a social belief of there needing to be work for all rather than work for a few, based on this perhaps having a greater benefit, financial and otherwise, in the social system – a phenomenon perhaps we might recognise from the previous century? Such a social model of work has the benefit of providing a far more resilient workforce and, with that, more resilient communities which will be stronger and thriving to support economic prosperity.

This future model of public service employment will require support from a very different type of HR function. HR will need to put itself in the spotlight to develop community led employment solutions, a new community led employment infrastructure and transition away from organisationally engineered workforce models. It will need to change its mind-set of maximising the productivity of the individual to one of maximising the productivity of the working community. HR will also need to maximise the opportunity of current reforms so that they support the wider workforce: the local Government Pension Scheme reform being one example.

The public service workforce needs to be re-modelled to ensure its makeup mirrors that of the local economic community. HR needs to act as a role model to achieve this, and to achieve its working as one across public services.

For HR, this is a vital opportunity to lead the way and overcome the myth that HR does not practise what it preaches. HR will need to engage with the rest of the organisation to encourage it to follow its example. Most importantly, HR will need to re-position itself, away from the aspiration of being on the so called 'top table', to one which is centred on the customer, and in public services that means the community.

What is very clear is that public service HR must recognise and understood such changes and that engagement will play a more important front line, community led role in the future. The big question is, '*is HR up for it*'?

2 Employee Voice

Our authors

John Purcell is a retired, yet still very active, academic and practitioner. He is now a Visiting Professor at the Bath University School of Management where he had previously been the Professor of Human Resource Management. He has previously held academic positions at Manchester, Oxford and Warwick universities. His prime interests are in strategy and human resource management, employee voice, engagement and participation, and precarious employment. He is a Deputy Chairman of the Central Arbitration Committee and an Acas arbitrator.

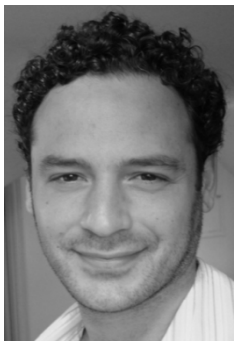
In this thought piece, John begins by saying that employee voice is a key driver of engagement, but is currently being neglected. He lays out the case for the importance of voice is so important, and why it should be the future focus of employee engagement. This is not without its challenges, however, as managers often find it hard to genuinely listen to their employees.

Martin Reddington is a management consultant and academic researcher at Martin Reddington Associates. Formerly Global Programme Director, HR Transformation, at Cable & Wireless PLC, he is an Academic Fellow of the CIPD, an expert adviser on HR Transformation to the Public Sector People Managers' Association (PPMA) and a member of the Guru Group supporting the UK government supported Engage for Success movement.

In this thought piece, Martin argues persuasively that, in line with the notion of transformational employee engagement practices, it is time for the *process* of capturing employees' views to be in itself engaging and interesting. New technologies will enable both this social process and the mining of data collected to produce insight, but at heart it will only be achievable via a focus on good quality 'conversational practice'.

Gary Cattermole (gary.cattermole@surveyinitiative.co.uk) is a co-founder and director of The Survey Initiative. With over 15 years' experience in employee research he has managed numerous research projects for a variety of organisations from The Telegraph Media Group, Scania (Great Britain) Ltd and GAME through to the Natural History Museum, Accor and the Royal Society of Chemistry.

In this thought piece, Gary comes to the defence of the employee survey. It has become somewhat fashionable to criticise or even dismiss the employee survey as 'transactional'. This is perhaps because some organisations behave as if the survey is an end in itself. Gary argues that, if used effectively, the survey has a bright future as an essential tool to help organisations understand engagement.



Michael Silverman is Managing Director of Silverman Research, a company specialising in applying social media principles to social research. A psychologist and research specialist, Michael has a background in research having worked with Ipsos MORI, then moving to Unilever as Head of Employee Insight.

In this thought piece, Michael's focus is on the future use of social media within organisations to facilitate dialogue and enable open conversations. He reflects on crowd-sourced responses from business leaders and professionals to the question, 'How will employee research change over the next 15 years?' and gives insight into how major technological advances are taking hold and shaping research into employee views.

Time to focus on employee voice as a prime antecedent of engagement: Rediscovering the black box

John Purcell

The four pillars enabling employee engagement, suggested by David MacLeod and Nita Clarke in their original report in 2009, included **employee voice**. Over the years since then, 'voice' has been largely eclipsed or even ignored. My argument here is that this limits the prospects for generating engagement in the attitudes and behaviours of employees since it is the experience of being able to voice opinions, concerns and ideas, and be listened to, which triggers engagement. It does so more effectively than the more nebulous ideas of 'leadership' and 'integrity', two of the other pillars. When we look at 'engaging managers', the final pillar, we find that a great deal of what the good manager does is linked to employee voice through discussion and collaborative working: voice in action.

Explanations for this neglect of voice only really emerge once we are clear what 'voice' is and what it is not. MacLeod and Clarke defined it like this:

> *'An effective and empowered employee voice – employees' views are sought out; they are listened to and see that their opinions count and make a difference. They speak out and challenge when appropriate. A strong sense of listening and of responsiveness permeates the organisation, enabling effective communication.'*

Here management actively seek employee views which can make a difference to plans and decisions. Even when not asked for their views, employees are empowered to challenge and speak out. This is not just getting employee views through an engagement questionnaire, nor is it the regular briefing group meeting, run by a front line manager for 15 to 30 minutes or so which devotes a little time for questions. It is something more profound about building a culture of participation and involvement. More recently Elaine Farndale and her colleagues (2011) explored the connection between employee voice and organisational commitment, which is closely related to organisational engagement. To them '*the root of employee voice lies in influence being shared*

among individuals who are hierarchically unequal. In essence voice relates to employees' ability to influence the outcome of organisational decisions by having the opportunity to advance their ideas and have them considered'. This adds a slight extra twist to the MacLeod and Clarke description of the voice-rich organisation since it specifies 'organisational decisions' of the sort taken by senior managers and executives, often in places remote from the day-to-day work carried out by employees. This means that any effective voice systems have to include senior managers as well as front line managers, while HR staff runs the annual employee survey.

This type of top-level voice comes quite close to the definition of consultation in German works councils where, according to Budd and Zagelmeyer (2010), labour law established '*a right for employees to be informed of planned measures in advance and to have an opportunity to express an opinion prior to implementation*'. Employees in the UK in enterprises with 50 or more employees have this right to ask for business-related consultation under the Information and Consultation of Employees Regulations 2004. Few know about it, but companies can establish consultative committees – union based, non-union or mixed – under the Regulations if they want to, without being asked by employees. Many do not. The Regulations have been 'a damp squib', as my colleague, Mark Hall (2006) put it.

There are, to my mind, three explanations for this lack of interest in voice. First, voice, defined in the way MacLeod and Clarke did, is too challenging for many managers because it is an alternative to managerial unilateralism. Managers do not like being challenged and senior managers find it hard to have to justify their decisions and share their plans with employees, although for those who do it is often seen as a valued activity, especially in managing change. Second, as Helen Francis and Martin Reddington (2012) complain, the active management of employee engagement tends to view employees in a passive role, with engagement something that is driven by the organisation, rather than something that is largely under the control of employees. Engagement, like discretionary behaviour, is given by employees, not something done to them. Finally, the engagement industry, including 'Engage for Success', has a fixation with the outcomes of engagement, admirably summarised by recently Bruce Rayton et al (2012), but little is done to look at why employees are engaged in the first place. What are the antecedents: where does engagement come from and what destroys it? We need yet again to 'unlock the Black Box' as I and colleagues from Bath University did ten years ago in looking for the connection between HR and performance (Purcell et al, 2003).

One of the earliest black box types of analysis of engagement was provided in 2004 by Dilys Robinson and her colleagues. From their research they identified 'the key driver' of engagement as 'a sense of feeling valued and involved'. This came from involvement in decision-making; the extent to which employees feel able to voice their views, and

managers valuing employees' contribution; the opportunities employees have to develop their jobs (*ie* voice in job design and development); and the extent to which the organisation is concerned for employees' health and well-being (and this means listening and responding). Recent results from the 2011 WERS huge national survey (Dix, 2013) show the connection between involvement and engagement. Around two-fifths of employees were satisfied with the amount of involvement they had in decision taking. Of those that were satisfied 85 per cent of them felt proud to work for their organisation. This is one of the standard tests for engagement and commitment. However, of those who were dissatisfied with their level of involvement in decision making, only around one-third were proud of their organisation. These differences are not trivial.

The best explanation for the link between employee attitudes and behaviour, and positive contributions to the job and the organisation, comes from social exchange theory with its identification of reciprocity as a form of social exchange. The key to this is employee perceptions of the organisational support they receive from management. One of the lead authorities on engagement in the USA, Saks, concluded in 2006 that perceptions of organisational support were the only significant predictors of both job and organisational engagement. While we can look for policy and practice actions which generate feelings of organisational support like those identified by Robinson et al and cited above, the underlying causes come from employee perceptions of fairness, justice and trust in management. Fairness is created not just by consistent, bias-free, and ethical procedures, but by allowing employees to express an opinion. What is really interesting is that even if employees think their opinions will not influence a decision, the fact that their opinions were asked is enough for perceptions of fairness to grow and persist. This is sometimes referred to as procedural justice, ensuring that decision-making, especially in employment and job related matters, is explained and understood with an opportunity to contribute, and seen to be fair. These days this is linked to interpersonal justice related to how decisions are communicated and explained by line managers in a way which treats employees with respect. This strongly shapes people's reactions to their personal experience and those of their colleagues.

At Bath University we did an analysis of the factors most strongly associated with organisational commitment, using the 2004 WERS data (Purcell et al, 2009). The results are interesting since they can be interpreted as a list of the classic building blocks of engagement. In descending rank order the seven strongest factors were:

1. employee trust in management
2. satisfaction with work and the job
3. involvement in decision-making at work

4. climate of relationships between management and employees
5. satisfaction with pay
6. job challenge
7. sense of achievement from work.

The most important, most influential factor, which applied to all types of employees, was trust in management. None of the other factors were quite so universal in their link to commitment for all occupational groups.

There are obvious policy conclusions. First, as is increasingly being recognised, line managers are the critical players in providing trust-worthy leadership, encouraging employee voice and allowing for meaningful involvement in job and team decisions. It looks, too, as though these managers are getting better. Not only is there clear evidence of the use of a wide range of communication methods reaching a level with over four-fifth of workplaces using briefing groups, work force meetings and other channels like social media, but positive employee judgements of their line manager are growing. In 2011 just under three-fifths of employees in the WERS survey agreed that their managers 'are sincere in attempting to understand their views'. As we have seen, far fewer were content with their involvement in decision-making. Ever since the Black Box research in 2003 I have argued that the key group of employees in generating commitment and engagement, and through these to performance, are line managers, what Dilys Robinson and Sue Hayday (2009) call 'the engaging manager'.

The problem is senior managers, and this is the second obvious policy area. Line managers can go so far but they are not responsible for high level, strategic decisions and cannot provide convincing explanations at briefing groups if they are as much in the dark as their team members. It is very clear that there is a low level of trust in senior managers, in the decisions they make, the way change is managed and in the opportunity provided for employees to contribute their views. This lack of trust and involvement in decision taking is consistently shown in CIPD (2011), NHS (2011) and Civil Service employee surveys (Bach and Kessler, 2012). The recently published fifth European Working Conditions Survey (Eurofound, 2013) showed that across the whole of the EU, most of the workforce is in organisations that provide very limited opportunities for employees to participate in decision-making. This is where another type of organisational justice comes into play. Informational justice, as it is called, relates to how perceptions of justice are shaped by accounts and explanations by organisational authorities about reasons why certain procedures were chosen and why outcomes were distributed in a certain way. Studies of consultation in staff councils, which we have recently completed, show that the employee contribution to the decision-making process is most often focused on the implementation of strategic

policies rather than on the decision itself. Once explanations are provided and knowledge that alternatives were considered, the debate is focused on how to proceed, and it is here that managers often identify the key contribution made by employees.

Inevitably, the involvement of employees with senior managers in contributing to decision-making involves the creation of social institutions. The most obvious means is through consultative committees since, in all but small companies, employees will need to select representatives. It is not possible for all employees to take part. These staff councils can be union-based (and unions are at long last showing interest in them) or they can be directly-elected representatives in non-union firms, or, as is quite often the case, a mixture of union and non-union people. My colleague, Mark Hall, and I have recently shown in our book *Consultation at Work: Regulation and Practice* (OUP, 2012) how this can best be done and have identified the supporting conditions required for consultation to be successful. At present collective consultation is profoundly unfashionable. Some firms are experimenting with focus groups and other forms of employee representation. The key requirement is to achieve dialogue where there is a genuine exchange of views.

The clear evidence is that where there is both active line manager action to promote voice and involvement, alongside effective top level consultative arrangements involving senior managers, with good connections between the two, the outcomes in terms of commitment and engagement are better than where there is only one of these forms of employee voice (Purcell and Geogiades, 2007). Building these and making them work is the best future agenda for employee engagement. This is also where government can make a contribution to fostering employee engagement, something that has been notably absent up to now, by revising the Regulations for Information and Consultation to make them much more effective, and in campaigning to persuade employers to adopt them. The Engage for Success movement needs to become much more assertive in pushing for employee voice.

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The future of engagement: Conversational practice

Martin Reddington

The evidence to support the achievement of higher levels of employee engagement in organisations has never been more compelling. Although arguments about what engagement 'is' still abound, ranging from something you can sense when entering a room to a highly sophisticated analysis of attitudinal and behavioural constructs, it has moved beyond buzz word status and now commands serious attention in both academia and practice.

An emerging view (HR Zone, 2013; Comms Lab, 2013) is that engagement needs to be characterised as transformational – with organisations spending 90 per cent of their engagement effort 'post-survey' and focusing on building an environment which truly engages people, inspires them to give of their best, and aligns their efforts with the needs of the business. The other ten per cent is attributed to 'transactional' engagement – the often sterile process of capturing survey-based evidence to support the transformational programme of engagement activities.

I would advocate that the whole process should be transformational. Why should not the capture of evidence – often seen as transactional – as well as the subsequent responses to it, truly engage people and exemplify the values of the organisation? This most certainly means moving away from a highly intensive statistics-based approach, strewn with tick-box paper copies to reach those remote, out of the way places. And it means delivering actionable insights fast and very cost-effectively. This is where technology can play a big part, to create a more natural and interactive experience for employees to engage with forging a more engaging culture. So the 'survey' gives everyone a voice, nourishes an engaging management style and brings the company's values to life.

Such an approach entails moving away from a reliance on the (often pseudo-scientific) statistical measurement of 'engagement', to one that views the employment relationship as a dynamic, social and economic exchange between employer and employee. To know that your 'engagement index or score' has risen two points may be interesting but

that kind of information is seldom actionable because it fails to identify important components of the *processes* by which performance through people is *produced*. Insights into these *performance recipes* are captured through conversational practices, which depict the 'relationship-in-action'.

Conversational practices enabled by social media can be seen as genuine opportunities for the surfacing of multiple perspectives and logics at the strategic, management and front line levels of an organisation (Reddington, 2012; Francis et al, 2013). The term *practice* draws attention to the dynamic interplay between action and language that tends to be ignored in management research and education.

Pulling these strands together, the organisation can be viewed as a 'conversational arena', shaped by various tensions (such as the quality of work being compromised by time pressures) and job pressure (the sense that a job holder is under constant, excessive pressure). Within this conversational arena, s*olutions-focused* conversations can be characterised as primarily concerned with creating ideas for action – the potential to get something done. *Performance-focused* conversations are primarily concerned with getting something done – converting the ideas into actions. In practice, of course, these conversational types are interwoven in nature. By viewing conversational practice as a 'pathway to performance', it creates new ways of defining transformational engagement and turns attention to ways in which conversations can be stimulated, captured and 'measured'.

Returning to my earlier point about making the process of data capture something that truly engages people and exemplifies the values of the organisation, it opens up the perfect opportunity to re-examine existing methodologies and explore opportunities for change. Here, the latest developments in social media technologies provide an array of possibilities, such as the adoption of 'bring your own device' that enables people without access to the company intranet – maybe because they are on the move or in remote locations – to have a simple and effective way to have a voice, by submitting their views via a 'free text' 'app'. Just by creating this opportunity, for people who were previously seen as difficult to reach, can also have a potent symbolic effect, showing that the organisation is prepared to embrace new technologies and is seeking to foster a more involving work climate.

Once captured, the very latest *natural language processing* technologies enable rapid and insightful analysis of this voice, adding richness and value to understanding the employment relationship. This is achieved through the *automated* production of a combined thematic *and* sentiment analysis, which distils the free text into an 'at-a-glance' overview of the main topics within the voice and ranks sentiment (attitudes and feelings) as positive, neutral or negative.

The process of 'acting' on the insights generated through employee voice should be similarly engaging. This means moving away from an often stilted governance regime, involving lots of detailed activities arranged within excel spreadsheets, to one which embraces voice as a prime source of *ideas generation* (solutions) and *action* (performance) and *measurement.* This means re-thinking the way in which employees are able to play a part in shaping and implementing change, and measuring progress through conversational practice – a new type of 'governance'. By sampling voice and applying the latest natural language processing technologies, 'progress' can be measured by comparing thematic and sentiment trends. These will reveal where things are going well and where tensions of various types are impeding progress (the 'solutions-performance gap').

Such approaches, which disrupt and challenge current assumptions and modes of thought, can be construed as *hacking.* In this spirit, the CIPD's partnership with Management Innovation Exchange to create the *Hackathon* is a direct attempt to stimulate this new mind-set, utilising engaged practitioners and an open technology platform. This work is an informing strand in educating HR professionals about challenging existing practices and exploring opportunities for re-thinking and re-directing HR management approaches – a mind-set that will become increasingly important as organisations seek to become more adaptable in the face of increasing competitive pressures and budget challenges.

Alongside this, emerging groups of practitioners from all disciplines in HR are coming together in various guises to take a collective responsibility for furthering the approach to new HR practices. One such is the #ConnectingHR body, who recently held a conference on 'Brave HR'. Brave HR was described as standing out, standing firm and disrupting the HR practice field for the better *in spite of* a lack of support, recognition and/or enablement from other stakeholders. Key behaviours identified with Brave HR include the willingness to experiment with new technologies, showing curiosity and desire to innovate, and directly challenging the 'elephant in the room' – explicitly surfacing tensions that disrupt organisational life and actively shaping solutions to them, rather than passively hiding behind processes that support the status quo.

This apparently divergent cluster of people, activities and approaches is converging on the creation of a new way for HR practitioners to operate, behave and improve. Added to this seemingly chaotic mix is the surge in social technologies and gaming approaches to learning and problem solving.

We also need Continuing Professional Development with a difference – a truly engaging way of providing continuous improvement activities to individual practitioners to ensure they are in line with those latest models, theories and practices and which can be evidenced using the novel approaches outlined.

With more organisations being differentiated **purely** by the attitudes and abilities of their people, engagement has probably never been more critical. Equally, engagement runs the risk of being misused and all the good intent negated through poor, tokenistic or ineffective use of approaches. Yet there remains persuasive evidence (Rayton et al, 2012) that the best performing organisations have the most engaged employees. So there is hope for the future of engagement if it is not overly mechanised and processed and builds on conversations that matter.

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The future of employee surveys

Gary Cattermole

> *'Simply doing a survey and publishing the results is not the same as an engagement strategy.'*

That is the stark conclusion drawn by David MacLeod and Nita Clarke in their influential 2009 report to Government, *Engaging for Success: enhancing employee performance through employee engagement.* It is also the reason why some businesses and organisations do not get the best value from their employee surveys. But we are seeing signs that this is changing – and that employee surveys have a healthy future ahead of them.

The key importance of surveys is that they allow you to measure many different aspects of employee engagement, broadly divided into three main areas. These are:

- **Blockers to engagement:** Problems faced by employees, such as inadequate IT systems, poor policies and procedures, or excessive workloads.
- **Drivers of engagement:** Motivating factors such as praise and recognition, good relationships with line managers, and opportunities to learn career-enhancing skills.
- **Outcomes of engagement:** Beneficial attitudes such as employees' pride in their work and organisation, willingness to recommend their employer, and desire to remain with the employer for the foreseeable future.

Currently, many organisations place too much emphasis on external benchmarking, rather than using surveys as tools to meet their specific business needs – good examples include organisations that use benchmarking data as positive 'PR' rather than to drive business critical organisational change.

Surveys such as these are transactional instead of transformational because they focus more on *procedure* than on *outcomes* (Wiley, 2012). Church et al (2012) reflect on how this can be potentially damaging in terms of organisational perceptions. Only by focusing

on outcomes can any employer integrate employee engagement surveys into their wider engagement strategy, shifting the focus from raw results to action that is aligned with the key business objectives.

When survey results deliver commercial benefits

Let us take an example. Jupiter Hotels not only decided to benchmark levels of engagement within its 1,900 strong workforce, but it also wanted to take a detailed look at the factors that engaged and disengaged its employees. A series of regular snapshot surveys revealed that there was room for improvement in three main areas: employee recognition, communications and training and development.

It was the action Jupiter Hotels quickly took that was important. They revamped staff facilities, invested in IT training and created a new staff uniform. A new Staff Award scheme allowed managers to make on-the-spot £25 cash rewards for outstanding effort, and to put forward individuals for employee of the month (or year) recognition. New training and development featured a 'Rising Star' programme to help talent rise through the ranks, while a new newsletter keeps staff informed about what colleagues have been doing. Employees now qualify for major discounts off products and services within the Accor group of hotels.

It is this outcomes-based approach to employee engagement that delivers commercial benefits. In the case of Jupiter Hotels, the work 'added great value to our business strategy, and helps us pinpoint areas of development for the organisation and individual hotels.'

A psychological contract with your workforce

Outcomes are also essential for employees taking part in the engagement process, whether it involves surveys, focus groups, gathering feedback from social media or any other technique. By introducing an employee engagement process, employers are essentially entering into a psychological contract with their workforce – the expectation is that action will follow. If this does not happen, there is a very real danger you can unwittingly demotivate large numbers of your staff. Longitudinal studies (Church et al, 2012) have shown that, for every increase in the percentage of respondents reporting that results were shared and actions taken, there was a corresponding increase in survey participation.

A lack of outcomes is set to become a more common problem as organisations turn to new technology to drive their employee engagement processes. Systems that provide 'always on' surveys to collect data in real time are now pitched as a replacement for the traditional engagement survey. The problem is that, while these systems collect lots of

data (which can be a nightmare for managers to sift through), you still need to consider how to translate those results into action – the real driver of your employee engagement strategy – or risk the pitfalls of a purely transactional survey.

Many companies simply will not reap benefits by adopting a 'one size fits all' approach. Recently, my company – The Survey Initiative – helped a company with over 16,000 employees in the Asia-Pacific region. Because many of those employees do not have access to computers in their work, the 'always on' survey can only ever gather the views of an unrepresentative section of their workforce.

Using the 'always on' approach in isolation also has significant flaws. Over surveying employees has been cited as a possible root cause of low response rates (Saari, 1998) and this may in turn 'diminish in the eyes of management and employees, the perceived credibility of the obtained data' (Rogelberg et al, 2000). Organisations will find it next to impossible to survey statistically representative samples of their employees – giving extra weight to the opinions of those who fill in the surveys most frequently (or 'shout the loudest'), which may not generalise to the original sample (Rogelberg & Luong, 1998).

The future: Transformational surveys

So what is the future for employee surveys?

In a nutshell, if organisations really want an engaged workforce that delivers major commercial benefits, the traditional employee survey will have a strong future. Flexible, adaptable and manageable, it is a key tool for assessing what blocks and drives engagement – and for demonstrating the impact of employees' attitudes on business outcomes (Saari & Judge, 2004), such as greater profitability, better management, lower employee turnover and improved absence rates.

And if you link survey data with key business metrics in this way, the humble survey may not become your engagement strategy – but it will certainly act as its pulse, giving you powerful insights into the outlook of your workforce and the health of your business.

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Social media and employee engagement

Michael Silverman

The Future of Employee Research

The field of employee research is shifting from giving feedback behind closed doors to providing feedback in an open forum. This crucial development is making organisations slowly acknowledge that static feedback mechanisms controlled by management are no longer in keeping with an increasingly social media savvy workforce. Developments in social and digital technologies are at the forefront of this, and while the widespread use of innovative technologies is prevalent in individual's personal lives, their uptake inside organisations is only really now on the turn. These developments are offering some truly pioneering ease of enhancing collaboration and generating feedback. Capturing people's interactions through social technology and applying the latest text analytics offers a new and rich source of insight.

Developments in social technologies, increased frustration with traditional survey methods and a general movement towards mass transparency reflect society's growing preferences in the digital age. People are connected to the things they care about more than ever before due to the power of the Internet. It has enabled the instant sharing of ideas, information and opinions across the globe. Given the relatively static nature of surveys, both the needs of organisations and employees for a real-time alternative are not being met. Social technologies allow the 'wisdom of the crowd' to be harnessed as it encourages multidirectional conversation between people and crowdsourcing of solutions. The mass-adoption of mobile computing goes hand in hand with such developments, ensuring we are always connected to our favourite online services. Lastly, we cannot ignore the power of data. Data is now being collected from all kinds of sources and if appropriately managed it can reveal deep insights into what employees think, feel and do.

How will employee research change in the next 15 years?

In light of these changes, Silverman Research conducted a study using a collaborative, online tool to assess how the public view the changing face of employee opinion

research – in particular how technology will change and shape the process of collecting employee opinion. Over 250 of the world's leading organisations contributed to the study, responding to the question 'How will employee research change over the next 15 years?' Responses were peer reviewed by participants with respect to levels of agreement and insightfulness. This makes it possible to crowd-source the suggestion that resonated most with the community as to what the future holds for employee research. The top three responses are as follows –

> *"The difference will be amazing. Today, we create hypotheses and then go collect data. Tomorrow, we'll be doing the inverse. The constant, steady state accumulation of data will enable us to look at the data before we form our questions. That means that we'll be getting answers to questions we didn't know to ask. We will be unthinking a whole bunch of things we assume to be facts."*

John Sumser, Editor, HRExaminer.com

> *"As the demographic of our workforce changes, and access to social media increases employee research will move away from the traditional annual employee survey to more frequent and interactive research. As people become more confident in using social media their confidence will grow in being open and honest around the way they feedback and comment on their employer..."*

Caroline MacDonald, Internal Communications Lead, Hewlett Packard

> *"Employees' behaviour will be increasingly traceable and measurable as more information about their activity is electronically captured. Organisations will be better at studying these patterns of behaviour - in the same way that consumer behaviour is studied - so rather than asking people questions which are subject to their mood and interpretation, organisations will be using objective metrics."*

Roland Burton, Senior Communications Manager, Marks and Spencer

In addition to crowd sourcing the top suggestions to the discussion question, text analysis was carried out on the qualitative data to reveal the key topics that participants were discussing. Categorisation of comments was done using a combination of automated theme detection and manual word categorisation. The top ten categories discussed in reference to the future of employee research are as follows:

1. Analytics: A more strategic approach to data and analysis. Using a broader range of data sources (workforce metrics, opinion data, unstructured text, performance data, psychometrics, social networking/relational data, aggregation data) coupled with an increased capability to identify, segment, model and predict meaningful patterns within it.

2. Surveys: An evolution in the traditional survey methodology – from the typically long, generic, annual questionnaire to more frequent, focused, qualitative, real-time/interactive methods. More sensitive approaches that can capture both meaningful information and more subtle shifts in attitudes/sentiment. Allowing employees to conduct polls themselves and using various question aggregators (ie crowd-sourcing the right questions to ask in the first place).

3. Social Media: The widespread adoption of technologies that allow people to connect and interact will increasingly be used to collect and aggregate employee opinion. The increasing use of internal social networks will give rise to a proliferation of unstructured text data and associated text analysis.

4. Collaboration: The importance of promoting multi-directional communication and interaction (as opposed to traditional one-way and two-way communication) to establish a more collaborative approach to research that can tap into the collective intelligence of employees.

5. Real-Time: Conducting employee research in an ongoing and automated fashion in order to gain real-time/current insights as opposed to focusing on the comparison of single response points often a year or more apart.

6. Devices: An enhanced capability to use mobile technology for data collection/delivery and the increased prominence of devices such as wearable technology. This will open up feedback channels to non-office based employees that have often been limited in their ability to participate in research.

7. Qualitative: A shift in focus from quantitative data and analysis to hybrid approaches encompassing unstructured text data and advanced text analysis to extract themes, emotion and sentiment. Moving away from the idea that qualitative data is too unwieldy to analyse properly towards a view that the best way to capture feedback from employees is to ask them for a written or spoken response.

8. Leadership: Senior leaders lacking awareness about advances in collaborative research technologies and being fearful of the potential loss of control that comes with giving employees a say in an open forum. The importance of top-down led changes in research and management playing a crucial role in instigating and leading change.

9. Transparency: An emphasis on the importance of openness and honesty between leadership and employees in order to promote trust and collaboration. A move from giving employees a say behind closed doors to giving employees a say in an open forum.

10. Action: Conducting research that produces tangible solutions as opposed to just diagnosing general problems. Committing to an approach wherein employee responses lead to changes in the organisation rather than leaving the employees feeling that they are not being listened to. A move away from primitive engagement targets to targets based on subsequent action.

These themes highlight the huge technological advancements that will be seen in the workplace over the next 15 years - largely the proliferation of digital devices, such as smart phones, tablets, smart watches and other wearable technology which not only facilitate the collection of data, but also make it more readily and easily digestible. Advances in digital technologies also align closely with the theme of real-time information. Mobile devices afford increased real-time data capture. Moreover, they also provide a more rapid and engaging means of presenting data and insight.

Many participants also commented on the characteristic lack of action that typically accompanies traditional employee surveys. A clear prediction for the future of employee research is not only the improved identification of problem areas, but also a greater focus on the formulation of solutions and actions. The output of traditional employee surveys can often struggle in this area. It is difficult to action plan off the back of largely numeric reports that contain unclear conclusions. In this way, the creation of tangible and actionable outcomes for all levels of the organisation was a recurring theme in this research: employee research in the future will be more about curing problems than purely identifying symptoms. An additional aspect to consider regarding actionability is that collecting employee feedback in an open, transparent and collaborative environment has enormous potential for participants to actually learn and share information during data collection. This can increase employees' readiness for change in that they are more aware of the issues at hand and are more likely to feel that their voices have been heard.

Conclusion

The main message to emerge from the study is that the field of employee research is likely to advance exponentially in the coming years. The interaction between enhanced functional specialisms, increasing technological capability and changing societal norms is fuelling fresh approaches to generating insight. We know that the materialisation of employee research as a discipline, of course, far predates the digital age. As a consequence, it would appear that organisations are stuck in pre-digital era thinking with regards to getting feedback from their people.

The problem is that the field of employee research is wide, yet the vast majority of it is comprised of surveys. Apart from transitioning to the Internet and some advances in analytical capabilities, the basic model of employee surveys has broadly stayed the

same since its inception. Surveys can have various modifications and have seen limited developments in recent years. However, the study reveals that until surveys become more conversational with aggregation devolved to participants, until they are mixed with relational data – they are limited. This is the case no matter how frequently data is collected.

As previously mentioned, the relentless advance of social and digital technologies means that the evolution of employee research is progressing rapidly. The study highlights that the greatest difference is the shifting patterns of communication that social technologies have caused – from one-way and two-way, to multi-directional communication. Consequently, this is moving employee research on from giving employees a say behind closed doors to giving them a say in an open forum.

Within organisations, openness and transparency will be the vital business characteristics that will make all the difference in the coming years. However, for many leaders, this appears not to have sunk in yet. It seems that many leaders are yet to be convinced of the potential value that an authentic employee voice, through social media, can deliver. This is because the perils associated with an open approach and the benefits of more traditional closed systems, are often overestimated. Nevertheless, the study demonstrates that whilst these changes may not yet be reality, they certainly are the forefront of practitioners' minds.

The full report and findings into the Future of Employee Research can be accessed here www.hrmagazine.co.uk/digital_assets/The_Future_of_Employee_Research_Report.pdf

3 A Critical Perspective

Our authors

Linda Holbeche is co-Director of The Holbeche Partnership and Visiting Professor at Cass, Bedfordshire, Imperial College and London Metropolitan Business Schools. A thought and practice leader in the fields of leadership, HRM, organisation design and development, Linda has a strong interest in helping organisations and individuals achieve sustainable high performance. An established author, consultant, coach and developer, Linda was previously Director of Research and Policy at the CIPD, of Leadership and Consultancy at the Work Foundation and of Research and Strategy at Roffey Park. Recent books include *Engaged* (with G. Matthews, 2012).

In this thought piece, Linda asks some searching questions about employee engagement and argues that changing contexts require both employers and employees to re-think the psychological contract, or fair treatment at work. She advocates a move towards a more genuinely and explicitly mutual employment relationship, breaking free of commonly accepted unitarist assumptions and, for some, renegotiating what has become a modern-day Taylorism.

Rob B Briner was appointed Professor of Organisational Psychology at the School of Management, University of Bath in September 2011 and previously worked at Birkbeck College, University of London for 19 years. His research has focused on several topics including well-being, emotions, stress, ethnicity, the psychological contract, absence from work, motivation, work-nonwork and everyday work behaviour. Rob is passionate about helping practitioners and organisations make better use of evidence, including research evidence, in decision-making as well as encouraging academics to make research more accessible.

In this thought piece, Rob presents his fundamental criticisms of how employee engagement has developed as both a concept and a practice. Arguing from the point of view that management should be more evidence-based, he challenges the field of employee engagement to be clearer on what it is and how it is distinct from related concepts and measurement. As it stands, Rob contends that measurements of 'employee engagement' do not sufficiently stand up to scrutiny.

Paul Sparrow is the Director of the Centre for Performance-led HR and Professor of International Human Resource Management at Lancaster University Management School. His research interests include cross-cultural and international HRM, HR strategy, performance-led HR and the employment relationship.

In this thought piece, Paul argues that it is now time to grapple with some hard questions about engagement. The people-performance link is complicated and hard to unpick; organisations should not assume that devoting a certain amount of effort to engaging the workforce will automatically result in a similar amount of increased engagement and productivity. There needs to be a recognition that people need to feel they are being treated fairly and that their work has meaning – implying that engagement is not only beneficial to the bottom line, but is the right thing to do.

Is it right to expect employees to be permanently engaged?

Linda Holbeche

Employee engagement has become something of a holy grail for employers in recent years. That is because high performance theory places employee engagement, or 'the intellectual and emotional attachment that an employee has for his or her work' (Heger, 2007), at the heart of performance, especially among knowledge workers. Employee engagement is also linked with notions of workplace happiness, employee voice and wellbeing – all good things to which employees themselves no doubt aspire.

But in today's climate is it reasonable to expect employees to be 'engaged' with their work – and more particularly their organisations – most of the time? In this paper I consider some of the underlying context challenges which may make employee engagement something of a chimera.

A global business scenario

The world today is highly interdependent, hyper-competitive and often unpredictable and, to be well plugged into the world economy, organisations need to be ready to respond quickly to shifts in global trends. How organisations choose to respond has implications for the people they employ. Only a few years back, the UK's knowledge and service economy seemed to be thriving, employment options for many people seemed reasonably plentiful, and the unitarist axiom that 'what is good for the business is good for the people, and vice versa', appeared plausible. The aspirations of many 'white collar' workers in particular, as reflected in employee engagement surveys, were for 'meaningful' work. At the time of writing, despite the UK's post-crisis economy slowly returning to growth and more buoyant levels of employment, instability and cost-cutting continue to apply to workplaces in many sectors and in parts of the public sector in particular, significant cuts are under way, to both services and to employee jobs and pensions.

In such a context, many employees have found that their individual 'psychological contract' – or what they expect from their employment relationship with their employer

– has been breached in recent years. Indeed, it could be argued that the balance of power and benefit in the employment relationship has shifted to the advantage of employers at the expense of employees. Given that implicit in psychological contract theory is the notion of reciprocation, how likely is it then that employees will remain engaged with their organisations? And to paraphrase Stephen Overall (2008), are notions of 'employee engagement' and 'meaningful work' simply fey issues, a luxury residue of the previous times of growth?

The often negative effects on employees of today's context challenges are all too evident in various workplace and labour market surveys. For instance, the CIPD's quarterly UK Employee Outlook survey (McCartney and Willmott, 2010), which charts (white collar) employee perspectives about what is happening to them, their work and their organisation, finds that on average only a third of UK employees are 'engaged' at any one time. Similarly, the latest Skills and Employment Survey (2013), conducted every six years by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has found that, over the last six years, public sector employees have become more concerned about losing their employment than those in the private sector and that people in workplaces that have downsized or reorganised are the most likely to feel these concerns. Moreover, a deteriorating quality of working life is highlighted with half of the 3,000 workers interviewed for the survey concerned about a loss in their job status, including pay reductions, followed by a loss of say over things affecting their role. The research also found that work intensification is rife; people are working harder and both the speed of work and pressures of working to tight deadlines have risen to record highs. Not surprisingly, job stress has gone up and job related well-being has gone down in the six years since the previous survey.

Given that Geoff Matthews and I concluded from our research for our book *Engaged* (Holbeche and Matthews, 2012), that connection, employee voice, support and scope were vital elements of engagement, such survey findings make grim reading. They highlight core issues in the employment relationship – of trust, exchange and control – that are driven by people's feelings which cannot easily be measured in fixed terms. Indeed it might be argued that 'employee engagement' survey findings have become a barometer of the health of the employment relationship since they are symptomatic of not only what is happening to an individual's psychological contract, but also of the state of the broader economy and the evolving social contract around work.

Let us consider some of the underlying context drivers that make engagement something of a chimera.

Since the neo-liberal free market transformation of the UK and US economies in the 1980s, the UK's economy has gradually become more knowledge and services-driven. Whilst in theory therefore the truism 'people are our greatest asset' should underpin

organisational life, in practice the dominant pursuit of shareholder value has tended to produce short-termist business strategies and work and employment practices have followed suit. Employers have pursued labour flexibility as a means to drive down cost and achieve competitive advantage in the global marketplace. Thanks to the advent of new technology, work can now be done anywhere by anyone, from outsourced vendors to contingent workers, leading to unique challenges in managing a diverse and distributed workforce. Similarly, as work is increasingly carried out across time, place and organisational boundaries, even the notions of 'leisure', 'employment' and 'workplace' as well as 'employee engagement' become open to new interpretations.

Allied to this, with respect to white collar work in particular, the psychological contract has grown in complexity. Largely gone are the 'old' psychological contracts that were stereotypically founded on notions of mutuality of interest, reciprocity and trust between employers and employees and whose features reflected expectations of long-term job security and gradual career progression up a hierarchy in exchange for loyalty and hard work. These have been supplanted by 'new deal' (Herriot and Pemberton, 1995), expectations which are often reflected in actual contracts of employment - of flexibility, performance, 'employability' and individual career self-management. Thus the final salary pension schemes, long service awards and annual pay increases of yesteryear are increasingly replaced by variations on short term contracts, including zero hours, downgraded pension arrangements and performance-related pay. It could be argued then that the mutuality implicit in the 'old' psychological contracts has been largely swept to one side. As long as the economy was in growth mode, the unitarist assumptions behind the 'new deal' – that 'what is good for the business is good for the people' seemingly held true. Now that the economy is flat-lining at best, these assumptions have proved faulty.

In many organisations responsibility for employee engagement strategies typically falls to HR and/or Internal Communications functions. Yet within the UK's political economy of work over the last three decades, HRM has played a key part in supporting business ambitions by installing what Sennett calls a 'new work culture of capitalism' (Sennett, 2006), which aligns to business strategy. Yesterday's collective employee relations, based on union representation, have largely been replaced by individualised, HR-based, employee engagement approaches. Similarly, HR has been proactive in transforming the employment relationship and reforging individual psychological contract expectations. The emphasis on performance, rather than length of service, has afforded employers greater discrimination in the ways employees are recruited, managed and rewarded, with increasing polarisation of treatment between those deemed to be 'talent' – who receive significantly greater opportunities – and those who are viewed of lesser potential or value. Market forces arguments have been used to justify extremes of pay for individuals in some sectors while workers in other sectors struggle to achieve a living wage.

The dismantling of the 'old' psychological contract has been used by managements in ways that FW Taylor, a significant early proponent of 'scientific management' practices, might have dreamed of: to secure control over, and produce greater output from, what is arguably an insecure, over-worked, over-managed and alienated workforce. 'Taylorism' originally applied to blue-collar work and involved the separation of the conception of work from its execution. Thus work could be broken down into manageable routine 'chunks' which require less skill to execute and allow only management to control the overall work process as well as the workforce. Brown et al (2010) argue that the use of technology today is affecting white collar work in a similar way. What they describe as 'Digital Taylorism' is enabling employers to convert not only clerical work into outsourceable chunks but also to transform the professional and technical know-how of individuals into easily accessible 'working knowledge' that can render anyone expendable. Technology has not only led to work intensification, it has also enabled closer monitoring of the work of employees. Performance management systems expose individual performances to scrutiny and remind people that they are only as secure as their last performance (and as long as their skills are needed). In today's uncertain context, all the risk in the employment relationship is with employees.

Owing to the pressure to do more with less, the seemingly never-ending flow of work and reduced individual autonomy, loss of job security and job satisfaction, work can be undignified, degraded and damaging to worker wellbeing. Far from widespread employer concern about such issues, as Professor Cary Cooper (January 2013) points out: '*…we now have a much more abrasive, bureaucratic and autocratic management style as a result of this recession, which is disappointing given this is supposed to be the HR era of engagement!*' Indeed, some employers might be encouraged to make ever greater demands and induce employees to comply even more, to become 'willing slaves' (Bunting, 2004), who continuously 'go the extra mile' in order to survive and thrive - until they 'burn out'. Do people then profess to be 'engaged' in order to keep their jobs? In such a context the notions of social justice, fair treatment and employee engagement are compromised and mutuality of interest in the employment relationship exposed as a myth.

In *The Corrosion of Character*, Sennett (1998) argues that, with the degradation of work, pride among workers has dissipated and people do not look 'long-term'. In today's workplace he proposes, one must be very flexible, therefore loyalty and commitment are not part of a fast-paced, 'short-term' society. Workers know that they are simply a tool that can be replaced with the twist of a wrench. Consequently, Sennett argues, people's interests are with themselves; they don't look at what they can offer, but instead at what they want to receive. In such a context, Sennett argues, people struggle to sustain a life narrative that comes out of their work and as a result, personal character is corroded. Yet various previous studies have highlighted the desire of many

white collar workers for greater fulfilment from work, since it now occupies so much space in their lives, and for better work-life balance (eg Roffey Park, 2004 to 2013).

In today's uncertain context, will employees continue to seek identity and self-actualisation (in Maslowian terms) through work, or will more basic concerns such as safety and job security take precedence? Is it up to employees to adjust their expectations about work or should employers be taking a lead in developing a more sustainable approach to employing and managing people?

I would argue that both are necessary. There are currently significant societal changes under way specifically involving attitudes to traditional corporations, markets and governance which will increasingly challenge the employment practices characteristic of the era of market fundamentalism we have lived through in recent decades. The apparent widespread public revulsion at the initial causes and ongoing consequences of the banking crisis and subsequent recession, and at the disparity between the 'rewards for failure', by which bankers continue to award themselves huge bonuses, leaving the rest of society to pay the price for their actions, suggests that continuing with the neo-liberal status quo is likely to lead to growing protest. At the very least, there are likely to be increased demands for genuine accountability and a new form of social justice, without which it could be envisaged that, at least over the medium term, social unrest will grow, as we have already seen with student protests over university tuition fees and industrial action over changes to public sector pensions, a visible manifestation of the erosion of the 'traditional' psychological contract.

Similarly, pressure on employers for a more ethical and win-win approach to the employment relationship with employees is likely to increase as time goes by. Social connectivity and technological empowerment pose a real threat to old-style corporate models of organisation. Besides changing workforce demographics, as employment patterns shift from lifetime employment to lifetime employability, employers now must interface with an emerging generation of younger workers, whose attitudes, demands and expectations of employers may be very different from those only a generation ago. Younger generations have seen the free market model fail, and fail young people in particular. Unless something changes, employer and employee interests may be on a collision course.

So will a new form of capitalism and related employment practice emerge that takes into account the needs of different stakeholders and has a longer-term perspective? Pink (2009) suggests that, despite successive economic downturns in the past 60 years, the broad trend in western societies has been towards 'less materialist values'. Examples of extremely potent 'community' driven enterprises are already in evidence. Zuboff (2010) argues that potential clashes inherent in this transition include those between the interests of worker and organisation; between the shared duties of professional ethics and the personal values of individuals; between down-to-earth

industrial relations issues and a more psychological emphasis on self-realisation. As Budd (2004) points out, organisations cannot be run with efficiency as the only goal and it is also incumbent upon individuals to look further than their own direct personal interests. Moreover, as Brown et al propose (2010, p.160):

> *'Social justice is also about giving people a sense of dignity and recognition for their contribution to society regardless of whether they are an all-out winner in the global auction. This part of a new bargain challenges the winner-takes-all society based on neo-liberal assumptions about talent, contribution, and rewards.'*

If these writers are correct, the employment relationship must, by definition, have multiple objectives. In such a context, what then will employee engagement involve?

Employers will need to rethink their mode of operation since central to engagement is the notion of meaningful work which Sennett (2008) argues management has not paid enough attention to in the past two decades. Meaningful work has concrete characteristics: people must feel there is procedural justice in work; that is, when they do something right that they are rewarded and if they are maltreated that there is some way in which they can find redress. Other vital elements include autonomy, not being treated just as a commodity, being recognised for doing something distinctive, and craftsmanship – when people feel they can build a skill that can help them take real satisfaction out of their work.

Isles (2010), too, argues that employers must ensure that workers have ownership of what they do – both financial and intellectual – in the craft tradition, ensuring that workers enjoy the interdependent and inter-related sovereignties of task, time and place. Then employers should identify what reduces employee motivation within the organisation system and redesign, simplify, or remove processes that get in the way, such as performance management systems which appear more geared to penalising poor performance than recognising and celebrating good performance. As a result, Isles argues, people will feel they own their own destiny and will want to give of their best. In such a context, employee engagement is likely to be sustainable.

Given that the world of work will continue to change, so too will the concept of the psychological contract, in its definitions, significance and complexity, with employee engagement acting as a useful gauge of its current state. Like Sparrow and Cooper (2003), I recognise its dynamic quality, social and emotional factors. It has been argued that the notion of psychological contract needs extending to give greater weight to context and to what is described as the *state* of the psychological contract, incorporating issues of fairness and trust that lie at the heart of employment relations (Guest, 2004). The basic principle – that people seek fair treatment at work – is simple. Complexities and dynamics come to life as soon as the principle is applied in practice. For true

employee engagement to exist, reflecting a positive psychological contract within a healthy employment relationship, honesty and clarity about mutual expectations will be vital.

To date, it seems that employees and arguably society at large have largely borne the brunt of free market fundamentalism and related employment practices. So will a more genuinely mutual employment relationship emerge phoenix-like from the ashes of economic crisis? Perhaps – if the pressure on businesses to behave ethically and to become more humane institutions continues to grow and becomes a new 'norm' by which organisational success is judged. Then corporate reputation will no longer be just a public relations exercise; it will be grounded in people's lived experience. And as long as employers require particular sorts of skills and talent, labour power may force improvements in the employment relationship. In such a context I believe that the concept of employee engagement will be a useful yardstick by which progress towards a more genuinely fair and sustainably and mutually beneficial employment relationship can be measured.

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What is employee engagement and does it matter? An evidence-based approach

Rob B. Briner

'The purpose of this invited (by Engage for Success) paper is to stimulate deeper and more critical thinking about employee engagement from an evidence-based practice perspective. Five key challenges facing the field are considered:

1. *Defining engagement*
2. *Measuring engagement*
3. *Engagement is nothing new or different*
4. *There is almost no good quality evidence with which to answer the most important questions about engagement*
5. *Over-claiming and mis-claiming the importance and role of engagement. I argue that in order to find out what employee engagement is and whether it matters each of these challenges needs to be tackled.'*

Imagine this, I approach a senior HR manager of a large organisation and ask if we can arrange a meeting to discuss a wonderful new and proven idea about how they can motivate and retain their employees. They are very busy, but agree. I start the meeting with a more truthful account of this idea. I tell them that in reality it has no agreed upon definition and that there is no evidence about whether it can be measured in a valid or reliable way. I then tell them that the idea is actually quite similar to if not precisely the same as a lot of other ideas that have been around for about 50 years. Finally, I let them know that there is at the present time absolutely no good quality evidence that shows that if you implement this idea it will produce the desired results – though there are plenty of people and organisations with vested interests who will happily tell you their neat anecdotes and 'success stories'. Very soon that HR manager will get pretty annoyed with me for wasting their time on this not-so-new and pretty unhelpful idea and quite rightly show me the door. Wouldn't you do the same?

The idea of employee engagement[1] (henceforth just engagement) shares exactly the same characteristics as the idea described above. However, rather than showing engagement the door, many HR practitioners (and some HR academics) have invited it in, sat it down, given it a nice cup of tea, asked it to stay for as long as it wants and given it a prominent role. What's going on? Whatever your personal views about engagement my goals here are simple: To stimulate a more balanced, deeper, more critical and more evidence-based approach to how we think about and use engagement in organisations.

Problem 1: Defining engagement

The one thing everyone knows about engagement is that nobody agrees what it is. For example, McLeod and Clarke (2009) stated: '*There is no one agreed definition of employee engagement – during the course of this review we have come across more than 50 definitions*'. Not only are definitions numerous but, more importantly, they are very different (see Robertson-Smith and Marwick, 2009). Some definitions focus on employee behaviour (eg, discretionary effort), some on employee attitudes (eg, commitment), some on employee feelings (eg, enthusiasm), some on the conditions of work and what the organisation does (eg, provides support), some on various combinations of these, and yet others define engagement as a situation in which one of these things, such as attitudes, causes another, such as behaviour. In other words, when it comes to defining engagement it appears that almost anything goes.

From a practical (and academic) perspective the absence of agreement about what something means – and an absence of concern about that lack of agreement – is not funny or weird or cute or unfortunate or inconvenient. It's a confused, confusing and chaotic mess that is almost bound to lead to messy and undesired outcomes. It means that whenever we talk about or think about or try to measure 'engagement' we are almost certainly saying different things, understanding different things, measuring different things and doing different things but believing quite incorrectly they are all the same.

[1] The terms 'employee engagement' and 'engagement' as used in this article refer to the popular HR practitioner conceptualisation of engagement and not the very *different* psychological concept of 'work engagement' developed by Schaufeli, Bakker and colleagues (see for example Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010).

David Guest got it pretty much right when he said: *'…the concept of employee engagement needs to be more clearly defined (…) or it needs to be abandoned'* (McLeod and Clarke, 2009). Since that time, far from increased definitional clarity this definitional chaos has continued and perhaps even worsened. Several observers share this concern.

> *'This lack of continuity [in definition] contributes to a deep misconception of the complexities around the concept.'*
>
> Shuck and Wollard, 2010
>
> *'…if the meaning of engagement ''bleeds'' into so many other more developed constructs, then engagement just becomes an umbrella term for whatever one wants it to be.'*
>
> Saks, 2008
>
> *'The existence of different definitions makes the state of knowledge of employee engagement difficult to determine as each study examines employee engagement under a different protocol. In addition, unless employee engagement can be universally defined and measured, it cannot be managed, nor can it be known if efforts to improve it are working.'*
>
> Kular et al, 2008
>
> *'Over the last decade, engagement has become the most frequently used term to describe how employees relate to their work. Unfortunately, adding this term to our vocabulary when we talk about attitudes and behaviour has done more to confuse than to clarify.'*
>
> Lawler, 2013

This mess should profoundly trouble all of us. Without a clear and agreed definition of engagement we *literally* do not know or understand what we're talking about or what we're doing.

Problem 2: Measuring engagement

In any area of practice or research if there is no agreement about the nature of a phenomenon and if it's various definitions overlap with other existing phenomena the chances of developing valid, reliable and meaningful measures are slim. And this is exactly the case for engagement. Although many measures exist the available evidence does not suggest these measures are of much value.

> *'…the most common way to measure engagement is by a group of survey items that include measures of satisfaction, effort, and commitment to the organisation; in other*

words, a potpourri of items looking at different types of attitudes that have different relationships to performance.'

Lawler, 2013

Not surprisingly such potpourri measures appear to correlate very strongly indeed with existing measures of other constructs. One of the most popular measures, Gallup's Q12, has been found to correlate .91 (the smallest correlation possible is zero and the largest 1) with a standard existing measure of job satisfaction at the unit (eg, office, factory, organisation) level (Harter et al, 2002) which means it is 'virtually identical with overall job satisfaction' (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010). The measure also correlates .8 with a standard existing measure of organisational commitment (Le, et al, 2007). The obvious question therefore is whether measures of engagement measure anything new or different? If they do not the measures are pointless and redundant.

One study (note – just *one* study to date) has found that measures of engagement to be somewhat related to (but not to *predict*) performance over and above traditional attitudes such as satisfaction and commitment (Christian et al, 2011). It should be noted that this meta-analysis mostly used data from the UWES work engagement measure which is not the same as employee engagement (the focus of this article see Footnote 1) and that most studies included were not capable of demonstrating cause and effect.

As a consequence of confused definition and overlap with other existing ideas there is currently little evidence that engagement measures are particularly valid or reliable. There is one crucial form of validity – predictive validity – for which there seems to be almost *no* evidence at all. This form of validity is essential as it explores whether measures, in this case of engagement, actually predict anything important in the future. At the present time therefore we do not have enough good quality evidence to allow us to draw even tentative conclusions about whether or how engagement can be measured in a valid and reliable way though this may change in the future.

'How can a concept so underdeveloped and still emerging in scholarly research have so little agreed-upon definition and have so few validated measures yet so widely accepted in application and practice as to be named the keystone to business success?'

Shuck and Reio, 2011

Problem 3: Engagement is nothing new or different

For any new idea for which big claims are made we not only need to examine the accuracy of those claims through examining the best available evidence (see later) but also to ask whether the idea adds anything to our existing toolbox of ideas. As discussed above, definitions of engagement are confused, they overlap considerably

with definitions of other constructs and there is little evidence that *measures* of engagement tell us much more than measures of existing ideas: But what about the idea itself?

There is considerable debate about whether the engagement concept actually adds value.

> *'The employee engagement concept does not constitute new content but rather offers a particular blend of older, familiar constructs.'*
>
> *'We agree…that state engagement constitutes a "new blend of old wines," but we disagree that the blend has ''distinct characteristics and feel''. Indeed, the themes of employee vigor/energy, dedication, and absorption are veritable classics within organisation science, and a relabeling of reshuffled items does not necessarily add conceptual or phenomenological clarity.'*
>
> Newman and Harrison, 2008
>
> *'There is nothing new with respect to how attitudes and performance are related. Article after article puts old wine in new bottles, in many cases this does more to confuse than clarify.'*
>
> Lawler, 2013
>
> *'…if the engagement concept is unique, it requires a distinct meaning…failure to make these distinctions and to continue to define and measure engagement in terms of older constructs is likely to muddy the engagement water even more and to perpetuate the belief that engagement is nothing more than old wine in a new bottle.'*
>
> Saks, 2008

Looking carefully across the many and various definitions and descriptions of engagement it is difficult if not impossible to identify how in any important sense it is new or different. Existing accounts of engagement describe it in terms of a whole range of very well-known and in some cases historic ideas including organisational commitment, job satisfaction, motivation, organisational identification, discretionary effort, citizenship behaviours, positive moods, emotions and job involvement.

Compared to these previous ideas, engagement does not seem new or different as it deploys the same terms, expressions, ideas, concepts, and linkages found in existing research on employee attitudes and employee performance. There are two simple possibilities.

- **Engagement is *not* a new and different idea:** If this is the case then the term and idea should be immediately discontinued because using a new term to describe existing concepts is confusing and unhelpful.

- **Engagement *is* a new and different idea:** If this is the case then there is a huge amount of work to be done first to *define* engagement in a way that shows precisely how it is new and different and second to gather good quality evidence to show that *measures* of engagement are measuring something new and different.

Proponents of engagement certainly *do* appear to strongly believe that it is something new and different. However, much work needs to be done to demonstrate that this is the case.

Problem 4: There is almost no good quality evidence with which to answer the most important questions about engagement

Given the strong claims made about engagement what do we really need to know first before we can decide whether or not engagement is something worth pursuing? While there are many interesting though less essential questions it is these two small, simple yet fundamental questions that lie at the heart of everything written, said and done in the name of engagement:

- ***Fundamental Question 1:*** *'Do increases in engagement cause increases in performance?'*
- ***Fundamental Question 2:*** *'Do engagement interventions cause increases levels of engagement and subsequent increases in performance?'*

In other words, does engagement do anything and, if so, can organisations do anything about engagement? Each of these questions is clearly about cause and effect. In the field of engagement, and elsewhere in HR, there seems to be some uncertainty about what causality means. Correlational or cross-sectional or concurrent studies where everything is measured just at one point in time tell us nothing at all about cause and effect. To repeat, *correlational studies shed no light whatsoever on whether one thing causes another*. The results from such studies therefore provide no useful information with which to answer the two ***Fundamental Questions*** above.

But what does it mean to establish cause and effect? To show that changes in one thing actually causes changes in another? What types of studies allow us to infer causality with some degree of confidence? Generally speaking studies have to be designed to collect data that will meet these three conditions:

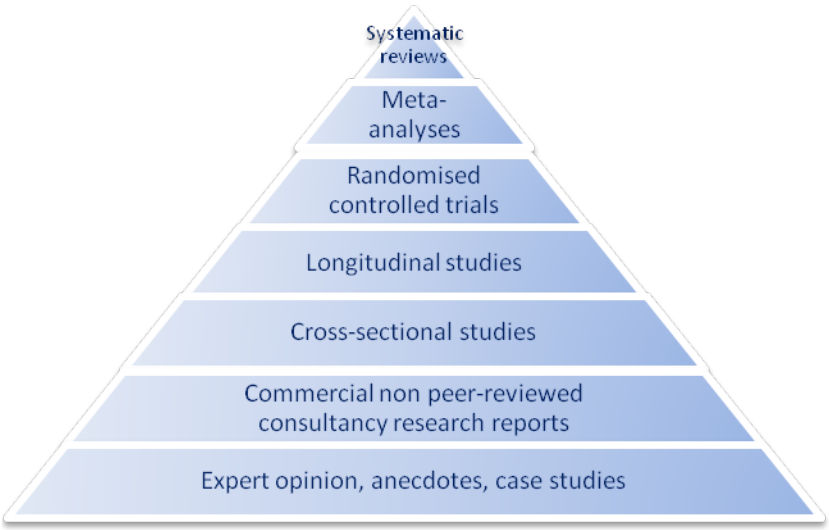
1. That the cause occurs before effect – in this case that increases in engagement happen *before* increases in performance.

2. That there is co-variation of cause and effect – in this case this means that as engagement goes up performance goes up *and* as engagement comes down performance goes down.

3. That there are no plausible alternative explanations such as reverse causality (that performance increases engagement) or other factors which might be the causes of changes in both engagement and performance.

At the present time and to the best of my knowledge – *there are almost no publically available studies of engagement that meet the conditions for establishing cause and effect* – but more of this later. In other words there is virtually no published evidence that is capable of answering our two ***Fundamental Questions***. So what kinds of evidence *do* we have about engagement in relation to the two questions? Within evidence-based practice in many fields including management (eg, Briner et al, 2009; Center for Evidence-Based Management, 2013) there has been much thought about how the *quality* of evidence can be judged in relation to the types of question being asked. This is because in order for evidence to be used effectively in decision-making it is essential to use the best available evidence – not just any evidence. To identify and use the best available evidence means that we also need to make clear judgements about the quality of the available evidence. Having a lot of evidence is not the same as having good quality and relevant evidence.

Figure 1: Evidence hierarchy



This hierarchy represents the different types of evidence that might be used to answer our two *Fundamental Questions* about engagement. Evidence higher up in the hierarchy represents better quality evidence to answer these particular types of questions.

The poorest quality evidence is the opinion of experts, anecdotes and case studies while the best quality evidence is obtained from systematic reviews of all the available evidence relevant to the questions[2]. So what evidence do we have? I have not conducted a systematic review (see later) though it is still possible to provide a reasonable overview of the better quality evidence that does exist simply because there is so little. As a reminder, here are the two fundamental questions about engagement

- ***Fundamental Question 1:*** *'Do increases in engagement cause increases in performance?'*
- ***Fundamental Question 2:*** *'Do engagement interventions cause increases levels of engagement and subsequent increases in performance?'*

Expert opinion, anecdotes, case studies (quality level 1/7)

Starting at the lowest level of quality there is a very large quantity of opinions, anecdotes and cases studies. In relation to our two questions this is the *weakest* or lowest quality evidence it is possible to have and therefore largely if not completely inadmissible. What experts or observers think or believe to be the case is possibly interesting and may be useful of other purposes but is not relevant to these questions. Individuals and organisations who are engagement advocates or who have undertaken engagement interventions are also naturally likely to be biased and have vested interests. What is important is what the *evidence itself tells us* not people's opinions or experiences.

Commercial non peer-reviewed consultancy research reports (quality level 2/7)

There is also a very large quantity of commercial and non-peer reviewed research evidence. Again, this is considered to be of low quality as it is more likely to be biased and has usually not been made publically available or subject to external or objective scrutiny. As Schaufeli and Bakker (2010) put it: *'Instead of presenting scientific* ***evidence*** *it is merely* ***stated*** *in (consultancy) reports that a positive relationship between employee engagement and company's profitability has been established'.*

[2] Note that it is only possible to judge the quality of evidence in relation to the question being asked. This hierarchy is *only* relevant for the types of question addressed here.

In other words, it is impossible to independently establish the validity of this type of research and, as in any field of practice, the claims commercial organisations make about their products and services need to be externally checked and verified otherwise they cannot to be trusted.

Cross-sectional studies (quality level 3/7)

One more level up, there are quite a few published peer reviewed cross-sectional studies which because they collect all the data at one point in time are not, as discussed above, capable of identifying cause and effect and do not therefore provide evidence relevant to our two questions. It is worth noting here that one of the few published studies examining links between engagement and performance, the Rich et al (2010) research on fire-fighters, is also not capable of addressing cause and effect nor answering our Question 1. As the authors themselves put it, *'…our research was cross-sectional, and so any inferences regarding causality are limited'*. In other words, this study does not provide any evidence that increases in engagement *cause* increases in performance.

Longitudinal studies (quality level 4/7)

Further up the hierarchy of evidence quality, there are to the best of my knowledge, there are *no* longitudinal studies of employee engagement that would answer the two questions. That is, there are no studies that measure engagement over time and performance over time or changes in engagement and performance before and after interventions.

Randomised controlled trials or experiments or interventions (quality level 5/7)

Again, to the best of my knowledge there are *no* randomised controlled trials of engagement though this would be very useful particularly in relation to the ***Fundamental Question 2*** about whether engagement interventions increase engagement and in turn performance. In a randomised controlled trial or experiment or intervention, individuals or teams or different departments could be selected for an engagement intervention while other would not receive the intervention. Any changes in levels of engagement and performance and possible differences in the intervention and no-intervention groups could be observed.

Meta-analyses (quality level 6/7)

A meta-analysis is a way of combining the results of multiple studies to provide a better overall picture of the links between variables. There are several meta-analyses relevant

to engagement though most of these are actually about work engagement not employee engagement, the focus of this article. They are however still worth mentioning because research on work engagement is generally methodologically stronger than research on employee engagement (the focus of this article).

While meta-analyses are useful they can only ever be as good, in terms of the quality of evidence they provide, as the quality of each study they include. As discussed earlier, almost all studies of engagement are cross-sectional and, therefore, these meta-analyses do not tell us anything about causality and cannot therefore answer our two ***Fundamental Questions***. These are taken from the limitations sections of the three main meta-analyses of engagement:

- In this article, there has been no discussion regarding possible causal relationships (Harter et al, 2002).
- I cannot infer causality between engagement and the variables studied (Halbesleben, 2010).
- ...the vast majority of the studies that we found assessed variables using concurrent methods (Christian et al, 2011).

So although there are some meta-analyses, which are useful in that they pull together existing data about correlations, they of course exhibit the 'garbage in-garbage out' principle in that even a very large quantity of data from cross-sectional studies will still tell us nothing about causal relationships and thus not be relevant to our two ***Fundamental Questions***.

Systematic reviews (quality level 7/7)

To the best of my knowledge there are currently no systematic reviews of engagement research. Systematic reviews pull together in a systematic and objective way *all* the best quality available evidence relevant to a given problem or question (eg, Briner and Denyer, 2012). They are now commonly used in many fields including medicine, policy-making, policing, education and, to much a lesser extent, in management. Such reviews allow us clearly identify what is known, what the gaps are, the quantity and the quality of the available evidence. This is important as it makes the basis of our claims explicit and verifiable. A systematic review conducted on our ***Fundamental Question 1*** about whether increases in engagement cause increases in performance would *exclude* cross-sectional studies as these cannot answer and are therefore not relevant to this question. It would also *exclude* most if not all evidence of lower quality in the hierarchy – particularly expert opinion, anecdotes and case studies. It would however *include* longitudinal studies and rate them in terms of their quality. This process would produce a review that would allow us to identify exactly how many appropriately

designed studies had addressed this question and what the results indicated. So, for example, it may show that there are eight well-conducted studies, five of which found a positive though weak causal relationship between engagement and performance and three of which found no relationship. Such a review would do much to clarify the confusion that so clearly exists around what we know and do not know about engagement.

> *'Although seemingly voluminous, most of the existing literature is opinion, rather than evidence-based scholarship.'*
>
> Shuck and Wollard, 2010

In general, then, it appears that at the current time there is a large quantity of poor quality evidence and very little or no good quality or high quality evidence with which to answer the two basic questions: Does engagement *do* anything and, if so, can organisations do anything about engagement?

Problem 5: Over-claiming and mis-claiming the importance and role of engagement

The four challenges discussed above, defining engagement, measuring engagement, establishing whether engagement is anything new, and the lack of good quality evidence are each fairly serious. Taken together, they raise questions about the potential value of engagement to practitioners. However, there is one further significant challenge which is, in part, a natural consequence of the previous four: That the proponents, supporters and advocates of engagement both *over*-claim by exaggerating the quantity and quality of evidence and *mis*-claim by making statements about engagement that, on closer inspection, seem to be about something else.

Such over- and mis-claiming can be found in many places – particularly in popular management and consultancy writing. Here I will focus, *as an example*, on some of the claims made by *Engage for Success* partly because this article was commissioned by *Engage for Success* and also because the *Engage for Success* movement is a prominent advocate for engagement and thus makes many claims such as the following.

> *'Despite there being some debate about the precise meaning of employee engagement there are three things we know about it: it is measurable; it can be correlated with performance; and it varies from poor to great. Most importantly employers can do a great deal to impact on people's level of engagement. That is what makes it so important, as a tool for business success.'*
>
> Engage for Success, 2013

Such statements are fairly typical of the claims made by *Engage for Success* and others. But what do these claims mean? The first claim made is that engagement measurable. It's true that engagement, like anything else, can be measured. However, the point, as discussed above, is whether such measures are valid and reliable and of any practical value. There is little publically available good quality evidence to suggest that this is the case. While there is some evidence for the second claim, that engagement is correlated with performance, correlations do not, as discussed earlier, provide valuable information in this context as what we need to know are the answers to cause-effect questions. I am unable to examine the third claim that 'it varies from poor to great' as I do not know what this means. Scores on any measure tend to vary from high to low. Again, the question is, do higher or lower scores matter? The final claim made here is that it is possible to intervene to increase engagement. This is ***Fundamental Question 2*** about engagement identified earlier. As discussed, while there is much unverifiable anecdotal evidence and expert opinion to support this there is no good quality evidence.

Apart from making these rather vague claims, *Engage for Success* has gone further by publishing a report produced by the '*Nailing the Evidence*' workgroup of the *Engage for Success* Task Force (Rayton, Dodge and D'Analese, 2012) which aims to present *'the evidence for the effectiveness of employee engagement in raising performance and productivity'*, p i). This report reviews many different forms of evidence ranging from expert opinions to meta-analyses and considers evidence for several aspects of engagement. It claims to: *'provide an evidence base that places the performance benefits of employee engagement, as broadly defined by its usage by practitioners, beyond reasonable doubt'*. (p 2)

And further states that: *'The evidence in this document supports a strong link between employee engagement and performance'*. (p 4)

It is not possible to verify the claims made in this report that are based on expert opinions, anecdotes and case studies – which is part of the reason why, from an evidence-based practice perspective, such evidence is generally considered to be low quality. As discussed, we need to be able to examine evidence and critically appraise it to understand the extent to which it is good quality evidence and how much it can be trusted. However, this report also makes much use of public domain peer-reviewed evidence in supporting some of its claims. Such claims are therefore relatively easy to verify.

Rather than consider all the claims made in the report and all the public domain peer-reviewed evidence used to support them I have focused on one of the most important sections of the report headed 'Engagement Precedes Performance'. This claim directly addresses ***Fundamental Question 1:*** *'Do increases in engagement cause increases in*

performance'? It is also describes exactly one of the conditions for causality discussed earlier – that the cause must precede the effect.

What types of research can in principle produce evidence that is relevant to the claim made in the section heading and other seven more specific claims made in this section and described below? What qualities or properties should this research have? First, any evidence presented here should be capable of demonstrating that engagement is a *cause* of performance or that *increases* in engagement lead to *increases* in performance. In other words, to be relevant, all the evidence presented here therefore needs to be longitudinal not cross-sectional. Second, in order to be relevant all the evidence presented here also needs to be about employee engagement and not about something different. As stated above, the report focuses on 'employee engagement, as broadly defined by its usage by practitioners' (p 2). But when practitioners use the term 'employee engagement' how *do* they define it? The short answer is that we don't know. However, it does seem clear that practitioners do not define it in terms of work engagement (see Footnote 1) as this idea is relatively unknown amongst practitioners. It also seems reasonable to assume that practitioners do wish to define employee engagement as something new and different. After all, if practitioners want to refer to existing ideas such as job satisfaction or the psychological contract or organisational commitment it seems very likely they would use those existing terms and not employee engagement. Or, to put it another way, if employee engagement is *not* defined by practitioners as something new and different then why are they attracted by the concept?

To summarise, we would expect all the evidence presented in this section headed 'Engagement Precedes Performance' to meet two criteria: That it is taken from studies with (i) longitudinal designs that are (ii) specifically about employee engagement.

In order to examine whether or not all the public domain peer-reviewed evidence used in this section has these characteristics each of the seven claims presented in this section are directly repeated below.

1. Several recent academic studies have investigated exactly this issue, providing a large amount of evidence of the links between engagement and performance at the level of the individual employee, and exciting new evidence of these relationships at business unit and organisational levels.

2. The combined weight of academic meta-analytic evidence supports the view that employee engagement is linked to a wide variety of individual performance measures.

3. The meta-analysis of Michael Riketta of Aston University on the links between the engagement and performance at the individual level identified a robust significant link from engagement to performance, but not the other way around.

4. Analysis of data from the retail branch networks of one Irish and three UK banking organisations showed that increases in the average level of employee engagement generated increases in customer satisfaction.

5. Research on service profit chains in other sectors has also demonstrated a longitudinal linkage between engagement and performance.

6. …engagement and performance are mutually reinforcing, leading to the opportunity to initiate synergistic feedback over time between employee engagement and performance.

7. …employee engagement predicted subsequent business unit performance over a three-year horizon and that business unit performance predicted engagement only over a single year.

What, in general, are the characteristics of the studies used? Eleven studies are cited to support these seven claims[3]. None of them meet the two criteria described above. While seven of the 11 cited studies are longitudinal none of the cited studies is specifically about employee engagement and most do not even use the term 'employee engagement' anywhere in the article. It is certainly the case that each study provides evidence about *something* but apparently not evidence relevant to the general claim made in the section that 'Engagement precedes performance' or the seven more specific claims.

For example, Claim 2 above is that 'The combined weight of academic meta-analytic evidence supports the view that employee engagement is linked to a wide variety of individual performance measures.' Four studies are cited to support this claim. Only one of these studies is longitudinal and this particular study does not measure or discuss employee or any other form of engagement and the terms engagement or employee engagement do not appear in the article. In other words, no specific causal evidence about links between employee engagement and performance is provided.

[3] For space reasons only the *general* nature of the cited evidence can be discussed here. As most practitioners cannot get access to the original articles a supporting document containing detailed descriptions of each of the studies cited in this section is available from the author (r.b.briner@bath.ac.uk).

As another example, Claim 3 above states that the Riketta meta-analysis 'identified a robust significant link from engagement to performance' yet this meta-analysis does not measure or discuss employee or any other form of engagement. The terms *engagement* or *employee engagement* do not appear in the article. The meta-analysis is not about engagement but about job satisfaction.

Of course, if we choose to define employee engagement as being exactly the same as older pre-existing job attitudes such as organisational commitment or job satisfaction then the approach adopted here – to cite studies which do not mention or measure employee engagement to support the claim that 'engagement precedes performance' – makes sense up to a point. However, this raises many questions. If employee engagement *is exactly the same* as these older pre-existing concepts what value is it adding? Why is there so much interest in it? What is the *Engage for Success* movement about if it isn't about a new idea?

It addition, it is very important to note that although the report cites a few studies which do demonstrate links between job attitudes (eg, commitment and satisfaction) and performance taken a whole the body of available evidence does not show strong or important links between, for example, job satisfaction and performance:

> *'The search for a relationship between job satisfaction and job performance has been referred to as the 'Holy Grail' of organisational behaviour research…The relationship (or lack thereof) has fascinated organisational scholars for decades…study after study failed to produce the expected strong relationship.'*
>
> Fisher, 2003
>
> *'…the satisfaction-performance relationship is largely spurious…'*
>
> Bowling, 2007
>
> *'Organisational psychologists conducted many studies that correlated job satisfaction with performance. The results consistently showed low or no correlation between the two. In some cases, there was low correlation only because performing well made employees more satisfied, not because employees worked harder because they were satisfied.'*
>
> Lawler, 2012

What appears to be the over- and mis-claiming found in the *Engage for Success* report is, as discussed earlier, an example of a characteristic found more widely in the literature produced by engagement advocates that has also been identified by other commentators.

'The relationships among potential antecedents and consequences of engagement…have not been rigorously conceptualized, much less studied.'

Macy and Schneider, 2008

'Without empirical research to rigorously test the assumptions and implications of employee engagement, and to differentiate it from related concepts, practitioners are especially vulnerable to positive-sounding repackaging of workplace issues from burnout to retention to commitment and loyalty.'

Shuck and Wollard, 2010

'Although researchers have argued that engagement, as a motivational variable, should lead to high levels of job performance…we know little about engagement's uniqueness as a predictor of job performance.'

Christian et al, 2011

In general then, many of the claims made by proponents of employee engagement appear to be exaggerated and use supporting evidence which seems to be about something else.

Where does this leave us and what should we do next?

At the present time we simply do not have enough good quality evidence to allow us to answer to the two ***Fundamental Questions*** about employee engagement we need to answer.

Although this is not a systematic review it is fairly clear from the analysis above that there is little high quality evidence but plenty of low quality evidence about the effects of employee engagement and employee engagement interventions.

Table 1: Quality of evidence

Type of evidence	Quality of this type of evidence low(1) to high(7)	Quantity of this type of evidence
Expert opinion, anecdotes, case studies	1	A vast quantity
Commercial non peer-reviewed consultancy research reports	2	A very large number
Cross-sectional studies	3	Some
Longitudinal studies	4	Perhaps one or two
Randomised controlled trials or experiments or interventions	5	None
Meta-analyses	6	Three (but do not show causality)
Systematic reviews	7	None

Source: Briner, 2014

And, of course, an absence of evidence for an effect is not the same as having evidence for the absence of an effect. It may well be that in the future good quality evidence will be produced which shows that increasing employee engagement *does* have important effects on performance *and* it is possible to increase engagement which in turn increases performance.

So what should we do next? One place to start is to think through your personal or organisational responses to the five problems identified here.

Problem 1: Defining engagement

Definitional problems are serious not trivial. It is not nit-picking or being pedantic to be as clear as possible about what we mean. So what, exactly, do *you* mean by employee engagement? Can it be defined precisely? Is there a single 'it' or does it mean many different things? Is your definition clear or vague? Does it sound like lots of other things thrown together? Does your definition confused cause and effect? Can employee engagement ever be 'bad'? How does using the term 'employee engagement' help? Do we need it? Saying 'you know it when you see it' or 'we all know what it means' is not enough.

Problem 2: Measuring engagement

Measures of employee engagement also seem to be a mess. They often consist of items from different and pre-existing surveys thrown together to form something apparently 'new'. But how valid and reliable are our measures of employee engagement? How valid and reliable are *your* measures and how do you know? In particular, do they have *discriminant validity*? In other words do they measure in any meaningful way anything different from existing measures of, say, satisfaction and commitment? Also, do your measures have *predictive validity*? That is, do scores on these measures predict something important and meaningful in the future? If engagement is a clear, unique and distinct construct then a goal may be to develop a standard measure.

Problem 3: Engagement is nothing new or different

Definitions, models and measures of employee engagement are remarkably similar to, if not exactly the same as, pre-existing concepts. So it's crucial we ask and try to answer this question: Exactly how and in what ways is employee engagement something new or different? I do not recall reading or hearing an even semi-plausible answer to this question whether from practitioners, consultants or academics. What do we lose and

what do we gain by inventing and getting enthused about apparently new and different ideas that turn out to be not so new and not so different? It may be the case that in the future it *is* possible to show clearly and convincingly that employee engagement is new and different. But why aren't we doing it? It is now time to decide. If employee engagement is new and different then we need to clearly demonstrate this using good quality evidence. If the evidence shows it is not new and different then it is only counter-productive and confusing to continue to use the term.

Problem 4: There is almost no good quality evidence with which to answer the most important questions about engagement

When we think about the body of evidence about employee engagement or indeed the body for anything it is absolutely essential we distinguish between and have ways of judging the quantity and quality of evidence. In the case of employee engagement there is a huge quantity of lower quality evidence. Opinions, anecdotes and case studies do have their place but they simply cannot provide reliable or valid evidence about the two ***Fundamental Questions*:** Is there a causal link between employee engagement and can you intervene to increase employee engagement and subsequent performance? How much evidence do you have? How would you rate its quality? What do you believe it is reasonable to conclude on the basis of that evidence?

Problem 5: Over-claiming and mis-claiming the importance and role of engagement

This is a common problem found in both practitioner and academic contexts. Lower quality evidence about employee engagement is used to make very strong general claims. And evidence which is about something else which in some way might be possibly related to employee engagement is reported as support for employee engagement. Are the claims you make about employee engagement exaggerated? Are they accurate?

Conclusion

From an evidence-based practice perspective there is something odd going on. Employee engagement proponents hold strong views and offer definitive practical suggestions which do not appear to be informed by a reasonable quantity of good quality relevant evidence. But why? My best guess is that because proponents and advocates of any cause want to change things for the better and to do it fast, they prioritise getting things done over doing things in an evidence-based way. The question is whether in the longer-term this approach changes things for the better in a sustainable way. My guess is that it does not.

In the end we need to make a choice. Do we want to take employee engagement seriously or not? There are two contrasting approaches. The first is to closely examine definitions, check out the validity of measures, question whether it is new and different, carefully identify the quality of the available evidence and what it is capable of telling us, and to be accurate and explicit about what we know and do not know about the importance and role of employee engagement. The second approach is to be relaxed about definitions, not get too involved in considering the validity of measures of employee engagement, claim it's something new and different without really backing it up, ignore the fact that there is at the present time little good quality evidence, and over- and mis-claim the importance of employee engagement. What's your choice?

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Are we now mature enough to ask the harder questions, the 'engage with what?' challenge

Paul Sparrow

The engagement movement, and the direction that it takes in the near future, is at a critical juncture. Over the last few years both academic and practitioner effort has helped us develop some useful insight into the importance of engagement and its link to performance. However, this picture is more nuanced than many might wish, and requires that we tone down some of our performance claims, but strengthen others.

In writing about employee engagement, because of the ideological attachment that some might have to it, or the debates about its exact meaning or measurement, it is necessary always to lay out your starting assumptions. Here are mine. If you disagree with the diagnosis, you might not agree with the prognosis!

I believe that engagement can have important performance benefits for organisations, but I also believe that organisations should pursue engagement whether it improves bottom line performance or not (for reasons I shall outline later, but broadly because there are ethical arguments that are as important as the utilitarian ones, and also because I think the public mood is changing).

I believe that you can show some linkage between engagement and bottom-line measures of performance, but I do not believe that showing linkage only is enough, nor do I believe that if you started with the desired end performance, you would automatically always point to engagement as your starting point. There are complex recipes needed to create organisational performance and engagement, though important, is but one part of the mix (not just in business terms but also in terms of HR focus and strategy).

I believe that you can measure engagement amongst individuals in some useful ways, and that through more directed measurement engagement can be more than just a process of substituting new words for old constructs. But then I do not believe that the

state of engagement within an individual should be the sole focus of an HR strategy, nor that what you have to do to engage individuals has too much to do with what organisations actually do in practice under the umbrella label of an 'engagement strategy'.

I believe that HR professionals can say a lot about the nature of engagement, but I also believe that other professions, such as operations, corporate communications and marketing, have some interesting insights into it as well. So, the existing decision that organisations have made about who runs their engagement strategy – HR, Comms, or a combination; and if it is the HR function, where those people are located within the HR structure – are having a strong impact on the future direction of engagement.

Finally, I believe that engagement can be managed at an individual level, but I am also convinced that in many performance contexts engagement only really works at a collective level, and that the skills and interventions it takes to turn on an individual are not the same as the ones that create a sense of collective belief. So we need to shift the level of measurement.

In short, part of my expectation and hope for the future of engagement is that the field will become a little less ideological – 'you're either with me or against me' – and a bit more nuanced. And that engagement analytics will be seen only in the context of other HR analytics if they are to form a basis of interventions.

Let us start with the performance problem. The reason why the movement feels obliged to make performance claims is essentially a political (with a small 'p') issue. The argument is made for political and tactical reasons. There is a group of non-believers that the believers feel would be better served by understanding how important engagement is. Most of the believers are already on board, so it is the 'sceptics' or the 'don't cares' who remain to be persuaded; this could be described as a 'Why don't they just get it?' strategy. One risk for the future of the engagement movement is that it becomes a bit like other movements – such as quality management or lean – and evolves into a battle between zealots and the indifferent.

A second risk is that we devalue the currency of our arguments. We live in a culture where one has to put some pound signs against any call that asks people to change practice, in order to get someone's attention. Every day we hear that we would save billions of pounds if only we did this, or that. If we add up all the billions of pounds we will save by doing the right things, then apparently we have an economy ten times as big as it is! But politically we are tempted to suggest big figures to get people's attention. Never mind if it is logical. Rather like some infamous Irish bankers, you need a figure, so I give you one.

Asking that we become a bit more circumspect in our performance claims is not just academics being picky, or impractical. It is actually very practical, and consequential, especially for the future of HR functions that seem to have increasingly little sympathy and legitimacy amongst line managers.

Here are some practicalities. Where measurement begins, insight must now follow. Whilst still supporting the proposition that engagement can contribute usefully to performance, HR Directors need to be much more realistic about the way they argue such a link can be engineered. Engagement is not a panacea, and the clearly supportable view that engagement can be correlated (politely called 'linkage studies') with useful performance outcomes (which it can be) needs to be supplemented with far more business-relevant explanations of why engagement is useful.

Does engagement *cause* performance? This is the 'bet your mortgage' question (Sparrow, 2013). Even if you want to believe engagement is central, would you really bet your own mortgage on a simple yes or no answer to the question? Not just 'non-believers', but also more 'business-savvy' line managers (or Operations Directors, or Capability Directors, or CEOs) use their pragmatic insight into organisational effectiveness to argue why the answer to questions of causation must be that 'it depends'.

These insights tell us that the 'recipe' linking engagement to organisational performance cannot be blandly copied across sectors. It requires unique solutions across different service (industry) models, and indeed across sectors such as manufacturing, engineering, or public sector. For example, the things you have to do to get managers and employees to engage with if there is a strategic focus on innovation, look quite different to the activities they must engage with if lean management is a central strategic drive.

Even within a single sector, organisations in practice build complex service models that attempt to bring together a range performance factors. These include, for example, internal service quality, customer expectations, organisational image or brand, perceived product or service quality, external service value, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and customer advocacy.

From a strategic perspective, engagement is a rather sterile concept unless we know what it is that employees are expected to engage *with*. The role that engagement plays in fostering, for example, innovation at the organisational level, is different to the role it plays, and the things that have to be done, if the requirement is lean and efficient management, or to globalise delivery, or to create a more customer-centric experience.

The HR profession has now to de-layer the concept of engagement (Sparrow and Balain, 2010) and then 'reverse engineer' the sort of performance that is required by

their organisation's particular business model, and understand the logic that suggests why a particular range of employee attributes (along with engagement) serves a central purpose in delivering that type of performance. HR functions need to articulate whatever it is that they want their employees to engage with, and then ask the harder questions – do employees believe in the strategy and the assumptions that the organisation is making about the necessary performance? Given these beliefs, what do employees think are the probabilities of success?

Given the variety and uniqueness of business models, the performance model itself, and the organisational capabilities on which performance is based, are different, then making generic claims about engagement as a cause of performance across different organisational settings is neither realistic, nor a strategy that will win HR many friends.

In future we need engagement studies to help answer four unanswered questions.

First, does engagement cause performance, is it the other way round, or does it work in both directions? There are competing views about whether job attitudes cause performance, the extent of reverse causation, or the presence of bi-directional influences (Schneider, Hanges, Smith and Salvaggio, 2003; Riketta, 2008; Harter, Schmidt, Asplund, Killham and Agrawal, 2010; Winkler, König and Kleinmann, 2012), but the balance of evidence suggests bi-directional pathways. Hence the problem that linkage studies – however well-intentioned – over-inflate the performance effects of high levels of engagement.

Second, why do we assume that engagement has a linear impact on performance *ie* if you make employees a bit more engaged, you get some more performance, and a bit more engaged beyond that gets some more performance? The idea that employees are either engaged or not, and that once engaged, the impact on performance is linear, seems overly simple. Sometimes – in certain jobs, certain segments of employee, certain business scenarios – performance effects may only really begin at very extreme levels of high engagement. Other times just a little engagement might do the trick! In the same way that the fairness literature has shown that there are different levels of 'equity sensitivity' (some people respond to fairness as predicted, others do not) it will not be long before we hear people talking about 'engagement sensitivity'. The sensitivity of performance to changes in engagement may vary over people and over time and context within people. As an asset, engagement might sometimes be a rather blunt instrument. But in other contexts and at other levels of intensity, it may have a very powerful leveraging effect and value.

Third, building on the argument that engagement does not always follow the same 'recipe' from one organisation to another, we need to accept there are three different and increasingly more complex performance outcomes that might be created (bearing in mind that the chain gets more complex as you make each connection, and the chance

that the chain gets broken at each link is also high) so it is not the engagement causing the performance, but the ability to connect each link! Think about it. Engagement might be shown to be important in creating what are called *proximal* performance outcomes, eg task performance, contextual performance, commitment, satisfaction, turnover intentions. Then, we assume that these things, alongside engagement, flow into *intermediate* performance outcomes that capture the delivery of a strategy, eg customer service or value proposition, innovative behaviour, understanding of a broader business model and performance context. Then, we assume that, unbroken, engagement continues to flow into more *distal,* or organisational performance, outcomes, eg measures of quality or financial performance. The reality is that it only takes one or two events outside the control or influence of HR, or the employee, to break the whole chain. Organisational effectiveness is only achieved if a whole collection of performance promises coincide – the engagement promise needs to be supported by the brand promise and by the organisational capability promise. So, good work by HR can soon get dissipated.

Fourth, another shift that will need to happen is to move our study of engagement away from looking at and measuring individual engagement, and thinking instead much more about collective engagement. Sometimes engagement may only work when it creates a collective capability – employees as a team display certain behaviours and emotions and understand how to correct their unit's performance. One unhappy person amongst a group of happy people can destroy unit performance, so average engagement benchmarks are problematic. An engagement strategy, in trying to create multi-level outcomes that range from individual engagement through to much more collective conditions, in reality may have to cope with the fact that there may be different antecedents to the creation of individual engagement as compared with collective engagement. Much work in organisations is delivered through teams and units – situations where the whole team needs to be switched on if effective performance is to be delivered. This is not to say that individual engagement is the wrong level of measurement – of course we need insight into how individuals are feeling and thinking and knowing this can provide an early warning system that there are some in the team who have issues at work. But engagement needs more than a group of individual 'switched ons' – it needs all in the team to understand what it is they are engaging with, and it needs all in the team to have a collective sense of belief in their ability to deliver on their mission. Indeed, a group of people who are individually 'switched on' might not be engaging with what the team has to do, or may feel all is fine personally for them, but have little belief that their colleagues are truly engaged with what is important. Is the type of leadership needed to 'make sense' and 'give sense' to a team – an important pre-cursor of the team knowing what to engage with – different to the sort of positive emotional contagion that might switch an individual on? It might be. So, we should expect in the future that researchers and practitioners will start to measure the 'we' more than the 'I' when it comes to engagement.

So whilst I totally understand the motive, and have in my own research made efforts to show there are organisational benefits to engagement, this to me is the wrong starting point for the engagement movement to base its future advances on. First, the arguments, though sustainable to a degree, will be outgunned by other performance factors. Second, it is a bit of a one-sided argument, which misses the zeitgeist of the times we live in.

It is to this last challenge – is engagement aligned with the zeitgeist of the times? – that I now turn. Here, we have to get a bit more contentious, and also speculative. We do not really know how employees honestly think about these issues.

But if you take an employee down to the pub, rather than ask them official survey questions, the one over-arching, future direction for engagement they will expect HR to address is the 'engage me because you should, and not because you must' argument. We are, within the timescale of one more generation, fundamentally re-designing the relationship – and the risks that get transferred – between individuals, work, organisations, markets and society. An employee, or a manager exhorted to engage others, might ask 'so you base your argument that I should be engaged because *my* engagement makes *you* more money'? I wonder if that message has any potency any more. Being engaged is not people's world problem right now. The problem vexing most people – especially in an age of austerity and decades-long re-balancing of an economy – is distribution of what is already on the table across generations, or geographies, or gender; and I do not mean just money, but all sorts of other useful resources such as social mobility, access to quality work and careers, and so forth. Will the drivers of engagement be the same?

People are seeking something more meaningful and sustainable than engaging with a corporate strategy. Many employees want to engage with social missions beyond the organisation – so in the future we should start to gather the evidence that links the creation of organisational engagement to the delivery also of more inspiring futures than those currently on offer.

Employees will also need to be persuaded that engagement has something in it for them – so we need to show more clearly that engagement also improves individual health, stress and well-being. Individuals want their employers to do good things and make work more meaningful because they think that is only fair, not just because it is profitable. Will it start to disengage employees if they think HR are only 'doing' engagement to impress other line functions, marketed as part of a performance-driven 'strategy'? In psychological terms, will engagement become a 'relative perception' – *ie* relative to the times we live in? This is why more and more research evidence is showing – and will show even more so in the future – that the drivers of engagement are already returning to the fundamentals: immediate supervisors and leaders who can

do the basic interpersonal tasks with a degree of civility – and beyond that my sense of *your* trustworthiness, *my* voice, and *our* vision?

Perhaps this is another reason not to get too fancy or wedded to today's predictive modelling.

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4 Engagement Research

Our author

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In this thought piece, Katie explores the differences in the way that academics and practitioners conceptualise and approach engagement – differences that do not seem to be lessening over time. She poses seven key areas that are ripe for future engagement research, starting with the fundamental question, 'what is engagement?'. Employee engagement is a fascinating area for both quantitative and qualitative research, and it will be interesting to see if there will be greater convergence between academics and practitioners in the future.

The future of research in employee engagement

Katie Truss

Research on engagement: The background

As recently as 2006, when we were first commissioned by the CIPD to undertake research on employee engagement levels in the UK (Truss et al, 2006), we could not find any evidence of other substantive research studies being undertaken on the topic in Business Schools in the UK. At the time, all the major research on engagement was being conducted in the USA or the Netherlands, with the Utrecht Group, led by Professor Wilmar Schaufeli, being the most prominent in the field. Furthermore, the bulk of the research was not being carried out by management or HRM academics (with the important exception of Dr Brad Shuck of Louisville University and his colleagues), but rather by psychologists.

Engagement as a topic area grew out of the 'positive psychology' movement which, in turn, emerged from a growing disenchantment with the 'deficit model' of psychology and its focus on illness and psychopathy in the clinical psychology field, and issues such as stress and burnout in occupational psychology. Calls for a shift towards a more strengths-based approach that would enable a better understanding of how to lead a flourishing life and achieve high levels of work performance led to the emergence of a more positive focus (Youssef-Morgan and Bockorny, 2013).

William Kahn has widely been regarded as the 'founding father' of the field with his extensively-cited paper on personal engagement published in the *Academy of Management Journal* in 1990. Kahn saw engagement as arising when 'people bring in ... their personal selves during work-role performances' (p. 702) in terms of their cognitive, emotional and physical expression, and argued that disengagement involved the 'uncoupling' of people's authentic selves from their work experiences. Thus, engagement is associated with the 'needs-satisfying' approach to motivation.

Other researchers have viewed engagement differently, for instance, as the opposite of burnout; as an extension of work satisfaction; or in a multi-dimensional framework in terms of the locus of engagement (Shuck, 2011). A wide range of different scales have been developed to measure engagement (Fletcher and Robinson, 2013) and confusion remains over what, exactly, engagement is. Christian et al (2011, pp. 89-90) conclude: 'engagement research has been plagued by inconsistent construct definitions and operationalizations'.

Practitioners and those concerned with managing engagement in organisational settings have approached the whole engagement question from a very different angle. MacLeod and Clarke (2009) famously uncovered at least 50 different definitions of engagement whilst researching for their report, *Engaging for Success*. Their chosen definition was that engagement is 'a workplace approach designed to ensure that employees are committed to their organisation's goals and values, motivated to contribute to organisational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well-being' (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009, p. 9). Thus, from this perspective, engagement is an approach taken by organisations to managing their workforce, rather than a psychological state experienced by employees in the performance of their work; 'doing' engagement, rather than 'being' engaged (Truss et al, 2012).

These differing perspectives sadly mean that, often, academics and practitioners have not been involved in a meaningful dialogue about engagement. Generalising to make a point, academics have been wary of practitioners' focus on engagement strategies and actions and perceived lack of interest in theory, definitions, and countervailing arguments, whilst practitioners have tended to regard academics' emphasis on precise definitions and the intricacies of complex attitudinal measures as less relevant than the question of what can be done, in practice, to foster high levels of engagement. These diverse viewpoints gave rise to some lively discussions during the recent seminar series funded by the Economic and Social Research Council that brought academics and practitioners together to debate the topic.[4]

[4] (http://www.kent.ac.uk/kbs/ecg/news-events/esrc-general.html). The debates are explored further in the book *Employee Engagement in Theory and Practice* (Truss et al, 2013a) and the special issue of the *International Journal of HRM* (Truss et al, 2013b) linked to the series.

Where next for engagement research?

But now that these views have been aired and explored, where next for research on engagement? What are the critical research gaps that we are likely to see addressed over coming years, and what are the key questions that researchers are likely to face? Drawing on the contributions to both our recently-published book *Employee Engagement in Theory and Practice* (Truss et al, 2013a) and the special issue of the *International Journal of HRM* (Truss et al, 2013), at least seven overarching questions can be identified. It is likely that these questions will be explored using a greater range of methodologies and approaches, including longitudinal study designs, multi-level datasets, mixed methods, and discourse and conversational analysis, and this methodological plurality will undoubtedly enrich and diversify the field.

What is engagement?

Since there is no current agreed definition or measure of engagement, researchers are likely to continue to address this question for years to come. The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, or UWES (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003) is now well-established as the most widely-used academic measure of engagement around the world, and will certainly continue to be adopted in many studies of engagement. However, the UWES is built around a particular understanding of what engagement means, *ie* that it comprises three states: vigour, dedication and absorption. Other current measures, such as the intellectual-social-affective engagement scale (ISA; Soane et al, 2012) and the scales used by researchers such as Rich et al (2010) are predicated on slightly different assumptions about engagement's constituent states (Fletcher and Robinson, 2013). As the field grows, and more research is conducted within the business/HRM fields, alternate ways of conceptualising engagement are likely to emerge that start to bring together the concerns of practitioners with those of psychologists. These are likely to include further studies that explore whether the locus of engagement is, in fact, the work we do, or whether it is the organisations that employ us (Reissner and Pagan, 2013).

What is the link between engagement and human resource management (HRM)/human resource development (HRD)?

Up until recently, there had been very little research linking concerns within the HRM or HRD fields with engagement (Shuck and Rocco, 2013). This area is therefore both very promising and significant for the development of research on engagement (Sparrow, 2013). For example, we know very little about how engagement relates to

collectivist forms of representation (Townsend et al, 2013; Arrowsmith and Parker, 2013). Engagement is normally positioned at the individualist end of the employment relationship spectrum and so understanding how this relates to more established, collectivist forms is likely to receive some further attention from scholars. Other areas of interest to be explored include how opportunities for personal development affect levels of engagement; the association between high-performance work practices and other forms of HRM with engagement (Alfes et al, 2012; 2013); and 'soft' versus 'hard' approaches to HRM and engagement (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2013).

How can employee engagement workplace strategies be evaluated?

As interest in engagement grows amongst HRM scholars, there are likely to be more studies that focus on a question of central interest to engagement practitioners: what engagement strategies are most effective, and why? Several papers in our special issue of the *International Journal of HRM* focus on just this question using a variety of methodologies (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2013; Arrowsmith and Parker, 2013; Francis et al, 2013; Reissner and Pagan, 2013), and reveal the complexity and ambiguity of major organisational engagement programmes from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders.

How is engagement related to its wider internal and external context?

As most research on engagement to date has been conducted within the psychological paradigm, the focus of interest has been on the link between various psychological states, or between engagement and processes such as leadership, perceived supervisory support, or job design. However, there is now an emergent interest from a more sociological angle in engagement as it relates to organisational culture, structure, and power relations, as well as broader societal concerns, such as the current economic crisis (Arrowsmith and Parker, 2013; Francis et al, 2013) and cross-national differences (Kelliher et al, 2013; Rothmann et al, 2013). There are many interesting questions in this area that remain unexplored, and this is likely to be a fruitful avenue of enquiry.

How does engagement 'work' at the group or team level?

Given the wealth of psychological studies, we now know a great deal about how engagement is experienced at the level of the individual. However, little is known about engagement at the level of the group or team. For example, is engagement 'contagious' within groups and, if so, how does this work, and how can this be addressed by organisations? There is significant scope for further research in this area, building on the notion of the 'relational context' identified by Kahn and Heaphy (2013).

How does engagement interact with diversity?

Within the literature on engagement there has been some limited attention to issues such as work-life balance and the potential for engagement to lead to excessive working hours, but there has been a general tendency to date to assume a diversity-neutral stance within engagement, *ie* issues of gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, and class have very rarely been discussed. There is clear and important potential for further research that explores these issues. Purcell (2013) notes that, 'since engagement is associated with the notion of exceptional personal investment in work, it will inevitably remain a minority activity'. What are the implications of this from a diversity perspective?

How engagement is understood within the context of critical management studies?

Critical approaches have a rich history within the HRM literature, and pose a series of challenges to the notion that engagement is unproblematically positive. For instance, it has been argued that engagement has unitarist underpinnings that do not take account of other, more pluralistic perspectives on power and organisational functioning, and risks relegating workers to a passive, reactive role (Keenoy, 2013; Purcell, 2013). Engagement can also constitute the acceptable veneer within the current economic climate for a set of practices aimed at work intensification and the undermining of workers' rights (Keenoy, 2013; Purcell, 2013). As yet, there has been little research conducted within this more critical paradigm that could challenge the notion of engagement as mutually beneficial for employees and employers.

Conclusions

In summary, this is an era rich in potential for scholarship and research on engagement. A considerable body of knowledge has been accumulated over the past two decades on engagement and, of course, for many decades prior to that on related topics within the management sphere such as employee voice and strategic human resource management. In this article, I have identified seven questions that seem ripe for further research, but others will undoubtedly add to these with further important areas for exploration. We are already witnessing a significant surge in interest in researching engagement amongst business school scholars, and the fruits of these studies are likely to be published over the next few years, adding substantially to our knowledge of this fascinating yet challenging topic.

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